
All new translation by j-novel club
Riku Misora
Illust. Won
5
Chivalry of a Failed Knight


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Prologue: Festival Fanfare

Prime Minister Tsukikage's announcement had shocked the world. He had established a new Blazer school, Akatsuki Academy, and declared its intent to participate in the Seven Stars Battle Festival. It was a huge slap in the face to the International Mage-Knight Federation, which was supposed to be in charge of training its member nations' Blazers. After all, Tsukikage had effectively declared that Japan would be training its own Blazers at a nationally run school from now on.

Public opinion within Japan was split over whether the prime minister had done the right thing. Those who objected pointed out that Japan had enjoyed over half a century of peace because it had chosen to join the Federation. They also took umbrage with the fact that the prime minister had turned the Seven Stars Battle Festival, an event where student knights were meant to shine, into a political stunt. Not only that, but he'd also nearly destroyed Hagun Academy just to make his point.

On the other hand, those who approved of the prime minister's actions firmly believed that it didn't make sense to let a foreign organization train Japan's Blazers. They wanted the country's Blazers to be trained by the country itself, and in their eyes, Tsukikage was finally rectifying the mistakes of the past. They believed that Japan deserved to be a powerful international player the way Russia and America were, and that only weak nations joined the Federation.

What Tsukikage had done was so controversial that even those who normally stayed away from politics had an opinion on the matter.

"Tsukikage is being too rash. He's going to turn the international community against us."

"Don't believe the fake news. Hagun Academy wasn't actually attacked. The Akatsuki students even fought with their Devices in phantom form! That proves they weren't trying to harm anyone!"

"I don't want my children to be sent off to fight other countries' wars! Leaving the Federation is the only way to ensure Japan

remains peaceful."

"Japan doesn't have enough national might or influence to remain independent. We should stay in the Federation."

"I've heard Tsukikage teamed up with the terrorist group Rebellion for this plot. There's no way we can trust him."

"It was a mistake to have ever joined the Federation in the first place."

People were discussing the topic everywhere. On the streets, in bars, at home—no matter where you were, someone had something to say about it. Many people had organized protests and rallies both in favor of and in opposition to Tsukikage's actions.

The times were changing, and it was hard to predict if Japan would remain a member of the Federation or if Prime Minister Tsukikage would, in fact, try to make Japan independent. Of course, the outcome of the Seven Stars Battle Festival would play a huge role in that decision. If Akatsuki Academy managed to prove that it was as strong as Tsukikage said and claim victory, people would start to believe that Japan could survive on its own. Conversely, if Akatsuki was defeated, the public would lose trust in Tsukikage.

For the first time in history, the Seven Stars Battle Festival had become a political event. As a result, there were more people interested in it than ever.

Chapter 1: The Top Knights

A line of empty buildings dotted the reclaimed land along the bay on the outskirts of Osaka. Back when the city was undergoing rapid development, as many apartments as possible had been built on whatever land had been available. Unfortunately, when all was said and done, supply had outstripped demand, and all of the brand-new buildings had sat unused.

Today, however, this normally abandoned part of the town was bustling with activity. Stalls lined the streets, and people from all over Japan crowded the district. The reason this area had become so busy was that in two days, the Seven Stars Battle Festival would be held in the large Bay Dome that had been built in this ghost town of a district.

The Seven Stars Battle Festival was easily the most popular event in Japan, surpassing even professional King of Knights league tournaments in popularity. Tickets had sold out instantly, and all of the inns and hotels in the city hosting the event found themselves with no vacancies. And this year, the Seven Stars Battle Festival was garnering even more attention than normal thanks to the Akatsuki Academy incident. Tons of people had flocked to Osaka early in the hopes of getting hotel rooms before they were all booked up.

It wasn't just the fans who'd arrived in Osaka early, of course. All of the Blazers who'd be participating had also gathered and were resting in the athlete dorms the city had provided them. Naturally, that included Kurogane Ikki, Hagun's team captain and the man who'd been entrusted with the school flag.

"Hmm, this really doesn't suit me," Ikki muttered as he looked at himself in the antique full-length mirror in his luxuriously furnished hotel room. He wasn't wearing his usual school uniform. Instead, he was wearing a navy blue tailcoat, a similarly navy blue bowtie, brand-new leather boots, and dress pants.

Needless to say, this wasn't the type of outfit he'd be wearing if he didn't have to. The Seven Stars Battle Festival Management Committee was holding a dinner party for the Blazers who'd be

participating in the tournament, and Ikki had picked this out as his attire for the event. Thankfully, the Management Committee had given him an entire closet of formal clothes to choose from. Putting those clothes on had been quite a hassle, though.

But this is supposed to be a formal event, so it's not like I can go in my uniform.

Even so, he couldn't get used to wearing something so fancy, and it felt off on him.

This doesn't match my style at all, huh? Oh, wait. I should fix up my hair too.

Ikki ran his fingers through his hair, trying to make his usually spiky hair lie flat. Once he was done, he looked at himself in the mirror again.

"Well, this looks a *bit* better, at—"

Before he could finish his sentence, his hair sprang back up. It clearly wasn't interested in cooperating.

"My hair's as stubborn as I am," he muttered, smiling to himself. Then, sighing, he took off the tailcoat. *Yeah, I don't think this is gonna work.*

He'd picked a tailcoat because he figured that was the most formal one could get, but it suited him so badly that he just couldn't bring himself to keep wearing it. After looking over a few different outfits, he finally settled on one.

"This is probably my best bet..." he said, picking up a light gray three-piece suit. It was the most bland choice possible, but he didn't have the fashion sense to bring out his individuality anyway. Also, there wasn't much time left until the party started.

As he briskly changed into the suit, he heard a knock on his door.

"Onii-sama, can I come in?"

It was his little sister, Kurogane Shizuku. She'd probably come to check on him because he was taking so long.

I can't believe I'm taking even longer to get ready than the girls.

Ikki checked himself over in the mirror, making sure he was at least presentable enough to let Shizuku in. He hadn't finished buttoning up his white shirt yet, so his chest and abs were visible, but he'd at least gotten his pants on right. Enough of his body was exposed that he would've been embarrassed to let most girls in, but considering Shizuku was his sister, he figured it'd be fine.

“Yeah, go ahead. Sorry, I’m almost done getting ready,” he said.

“Excuse me,” Shizuku said softly, opening the door and walking into the room. “Onii-sama, we’re all ready to go, so…”

When she looked at Ikki, she trailed off and came to a halt. Her jade-green eyes were open wide in surprise. Ikki cocked his head to one side, wondering what had gotten into Shizuku, but then he got a good look at her clothes, and that occupied his thoughts instead.

She looks amazing…

Shizuku had opted to wear a jet-black dress for the party. The bustier was lined with intricate lace arrayed in flower patterns. The dress also had a deep neckline, revealing Shizuku’s shoulders. Her porcelain skin contrasted beautifully with the black cloth.

Normally, such a mature dress wouldn’t have fit Shizuku’s more childlike appearance, but she’d applied subtle makeup to make her appear more adult. Ikki had no doubt that it was Alisuin Nagi who’d chosen this outfit and done Shizuku’s makeup. He was stunned by how much his little sister now looked like an elegant, refined lady.

“You look great, Shizuku. Sorry I can’t think of a more poetic way of complimenting you.”

“Hawawa.”

Shizuku blushed to the tips of her ears and fell backward, blood spurting from her nostrils.

“Sh-Shizuku?!”

“Oh my!”

Alisuin, who’d been waiting outside the room, rushed forward and grabbed Shizuku before she hit the ground. She then took a handkerchief out of her pocket and dabbed away Shizuku’s nosebleed before the blood could ruin her dress.

“Wh-What’s wrong, Shizuku?! Are you all right?!”

Ikki ran over to her, but that proved to be a mistake.

“Awawawawa!”

As he got closer, Shizuku’s face got redder, and Alisuin’s handkerchief got bloodier. Shizuku was in love with her brother romantically, so this reaction was hardly surprising. After all, Ikki had complimented her looks while half naked, and everyone, man or woman, looked the hottest in that state. Unfortunately, Ikki had failed to realize the effect his appearance was having on Shizuku.

“Get back, Ikki! Close up your shirt!”

Alisuin, on the other hand, had immediately figured out what was going on, and she held out a hand to hold Ikki back.

“Huh? Why?!”

“Just do it! Or Shizuku’s dress will end up covered in blood!”

“O-Okay!”

Ikki still didn’t get what he’d done wrong, but he nevertheless hurriedly buttoned up his shirt. Once he was fully covered, Shizuku managed to calm down a little.

“Hah, hah… My apologies for showing you such an unseemly sight, Onii-sama. But it’s partly your fault for looking so sexy earlier…”

“I-I’m not sure I get what you mean, but sorry. I was having trouble figuring out what I should wear.”

“Do you not like your current outfit? I think it looks wonderful, personally.”

“R-Really? I feel like a kid trying to look more mature than I really am.”

“Don’t worry, you look great. Thanks to your toned body and wide shoulders, even a basic suit looks splendid on you,” Alisuin said with a smile.

For her part, Alisuin looked like a cabaret club host in her perfectly tailored suit.

Not that I’ve ever seen one, but I bet that’s what they look like. It helps that Alice is so tall too. In truth, Ikki didn’t feel convinced by Alisuin’s praise after seeing how well she wore a suit. *Actually, how come you’re so tall when you’re a year younger than me? Although I guess if all of the info you gave Hagun was fake, maybe you’re actually older than me?*

Ikki pointed at Alisuin’s suit and asked, “Are you going to the party too, Alice?”

“No,” Alisuin answered, shaking her head. “I’m no longer taking part in the Seven Stars Battle Festival. But I *am* going with Kagamin to the other party that’s open to the press.”

“You’ve practically become Kusakabe-san’s assistant at this point,” Shizuku pointed out.

“I owe her more than I can hope to repay. This is the least I can do,” Alisuin replied with a shrug of her shoulders.

Back when she’d been working as Akatsuki’s spy, she’d knocked

Kagami out and locked her up at the training camp. In an attempt to make amends, she was helping Kagami out with her newspaper club work—though Ikki was certain Kagami had asked Alisuin to be her assistant as a show of kindness rather than because she actually wanted Alisuin to atone.

During the assault on Hagun, the members of Akatsuki had kept their Devices in phantom form. Prime Minister Tsukikage Bakuga hadn't wanted to harm fellow citizens of Japan, but even if the students who'd been defeated hadn't been physically hurt, the attack had still traumatized many of them. The Hagure sisters had lost the will to fight and dropped out of the tournament, while Toudou Touka and Misogi Utakata were still comatose after having been hit by the Gale Emperor's attacks. They were in comas brought on by extreme exhaustion, so they'd wake up eventually, but Alisuin still felt responsible for what had happened to them.

And so, to keep her friend from brooding too much, Kagami had ordered Alisuin to help her with her reporting. Alisuin was perceptive enough to understand that Kagami was doing this out of concern rather than a desire to see her make amends, of course, but she was pretending not to notice to make Kagami feel better as well.

Kagami's one of the few people Alice feels comfortable relying on right now, Ikki thought to himself. *It'd be nice if we could go back to how we used to be too.*

Just then, the grandfather clock sitting in the corner of Ikki's room let out a loud series of gongs, signaling that it was 6 p.m. That was the time the party was meant to start.

"Oh no, we're going to be late. Come on, Shizuku, let's go."

"Coming, Onii-sama."

"Ah, wait up a moment, you two," Alisuin said. Ikki and Shizuku stopped, and she pulled out her student handbook and snapped a photo of them. "May as well take a photo to commemorate. It's not often the two of you get all dressed up." She deftly tapped a few commands on her student handbook and sent the picture to Ikki and Shizuku.

"Wow… Thank you so much, Alice!" Shizuku beamed, blushing slightly as she looked at the picture. "I'll treasure this forever!"

Is it really that special? Ikki still didn't feel like these formal clothes suited him, thus he wasn't particularly excited by the

picture. If anything, he felt out of place standing next to Shizuku, who looked perfect. *Maybe I'll feel differently about it when I'm older.*

Grimacing slightly, Ikki looked down at the message Alisuin had sent along with the photo: "I don't think Akatsuki will show up at the party, but be on your guard all the same."

"Thank you for the picture. And for the warning," he said, then walked over to the elevator.

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The dinner party was being held in the hotel's reception room on the top floor. The building was too tall for it to be worth taking the stairs, so Ikki and Shizuku took the elevator. The whole time, Shizuku stared happily at the picture Alisuin had sent her.

"Hee hee hee."

"Do you really like it that much?"

"Yes. I already made it my wallpaper."

"Oh..."

Next time I get invited to an event like this, I'm going in my uniform. No matter what. I'm done wearing formal clothes.

"I can't wait to brag about this to Stella-san."

Scratch that. Stella's probably going to force me to wear them again.

"Don't pick on her too much, okay?"

"I'm afraid I can't make any promises. Besides, it's her fault she's not here to see you in formal clothes."

Ikki didn't respond. Indeed, Stella had yet to arrive in Osaka. All of Hagun's representatives were supposed to be here by now, but Stella had asked Director Kurono to be allowed to keep training with Saikyou Nene until the very last minute.

When Akatsuki had attacked Hagun, Stella had lost to Gale Emperor Kurogane Ouma in a contest of pure power. She'd lost confidence in her abilities as a result, and right now, she was training desperately with the Demon Princess in order to improve her skills and regain that confidence. Though Nene had claimed that she wouldn't teach anything to Stella, Stella still believed she might find the key to getting stronger through Nene's harsh training.

"Onii-sama, do you think Stella will be able to get stronger from this kind of training?" Shizuku asked, a hint of worry in her voice. "There's only two days left until the Seven Stars Battle Festival.

Everyone else is spending this time resting up for the tournament. I can't imagine last-minute training like this will help. I understand why she's in a rush to get stronger, but…I fear this will have the opposite effect."

It was more than just a hint; Shizuku wasn't even trying to hide how worried she was. She was afraid Stella would run herself ragged before the tournament and end up too exhausted to fight at her best.

"You really are kind, Shizuku."

"Wha—" Shizuku blushed to the tips of her ears and looked away. "I-It's not like I'm worried about her or anything. But I know you're looking forward to fighting her. I just don't want her to give you a subpar fight, that's all."

Ikki could tell she was just trying to hide her embarrassment. He knew that though they were constantly at each other's throats, Stella and Shizuku were good friends. But Shizuku would deny it if Ikki said as much, so he decided to answer her question instead.

"You want to know if this last-minute training will help her at all?" He'd actually given this question a lot of thought already. "If you ask me, it's unlikely. There just isn't enough time. There's a good chance that all she does is tire herself out before the tournament."

Ikki had the same view as Shizuku. There were situations where a short burst of concentrated training made someone significantly stronger, but that only applied to people who lacked experience and training. To him, trying to master a discipline was like attempting to climb a mountain. The first stretch was a simple, gentle slope. Something you could sprint if you wanted to. Those who'd just started up it could make massive gains in a short time.

The farther up the mountain you got, however, the more difficult the climb became. As you neared the summit, the slope became exceedingly steep, and even taking another step took tremendous effort. Getting stronger was the same. Each step made you only one step stronger, but each successive step was harder and harder to take. That's just what it meant to try and master a discipline.

"And Stella is far from inexperienced."

Therefore, it would take a lot of time and effort for Stella to become appreciably stronger. At least, that was what Ikki believed.

A week's worth of training wasn't nearly enough to give her a significant power boost.

"So you think so too…" Shizuku's eyebrows drooped. She'd already thought it was reckless, and hearing Ikki agree with her made her even more worried. With a shake of her head, she muttered, "Good grief. Just what is she thinking?"

"But that logic only applies to normal people," Ikki added. There was more to his analysis, it seemed.

"Huh?!"

Ikki truly did find Stella's decision reckless. It wasn't a choice he would have made. It wasn't one he *could* have made. So in that sense, he agreed with Shizuku.

"Considering how much potential the famous Crimson Princess Stella Vermillion has, it's possible she's still at the foot of the mountain."

"What?!"

Ikki knew better than anyone just how unfairly blessings were doled out. There was a huge difference in total potential between people. And Stella had more potential than anyone. The mountain she could climb was leagues bigger than everyone else. So big that Ikki couldn't even begin to measure it.

"Which is why she might still be able to make progress in this one week." Because Ikki had spent more time with Stella than anyone else, he could say that for certain. He wasn't just blinded by love either. His assessment was rational. Knowing her, she'd come back twice as strong after this week of training. "And I think she'll prove that to all of us two days from now."

"I sure hope that's the case. I… I want to have a serious match against her too. It'd be a shame if she lost in the first round because she pushed herself too hard," Shizuku said, seeming reassured by Ikki's words.

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As they approached the doors to the reception hall, two waiters greeted them with charming smiles.

"Welcome, Kurogane Ikki, Kurogane Shizuku. Please enjoy the party."

"Thank you."

Ikki and Shizuku walked down the red carpet leading to the double doors. The sounds of talking and laughter could be heard

from the other side; it appeared the party had already started.

All the other schools' representatives are behind this door...

Ikki gulped, his nerves tingling with excitement.

"You look happy, Onii-sama."

"Last year, I could only dream of standing on this stage. And now, I'm here."

Ikki was looking forward to his duel with Stella, of course, but that wasn't all. The people standing behind these doors were the strongest student knights in the country. Strictly in terms of Blazer ability, they were far stronger than the Rank F Ikki. They would be the perfect opponents for him to test his skills against, and the thought of clashing swords with them left him trembling with anticipation. This was why he'd gone through all the trouble of putting on a suit and attending this party. Attendance wasn't mandatory, but he'd wanted to catch a glimpse of the people he'd be fighting in the near future.

"Though I bet a Rank F like me is completely beneath their notice," he said with a small smile. After all, two Rank A Blazers would be participating this year: Stella and Ouma.

Honestly, though, Ikki preferred being underestimated. He was up against the country's top Blazers. They were vastly more powerful than him. The only way he could win would be to use his piddling talent to outwit and outmaneuver those far stronger than him, in which case being underestimated worked in his favor. It narrowed the gap between him and his adversaries.

Taking a deep breath, Ikki pushed open the double doors and stepped inside. And at that instant, he realized that he'd made a grave miscalculation. The moment he'd opened the doors, the entire room had fallen silent, and everyone had turned to look at him.

"Wha—"

The weight of everyone's stares bore down on him. After a moment of silence, everyone started muttering to one another.

"So he's the guy who took down the Thunderbolt—the Worst One."

"He certainly carries himself like a master swordsman. I can feel his sharp aura all the way from here."

"He's definitely top-tier. I can see why he was chosen as a representative."

“How stupid was Hagun’s last director if they made this guy repeat a year? Anyone can tell with one look that he’s crazy strong.”

Ikki could tell from everyone’s conversations that they had already sized him up accurately.

“Oho. I guess at least the top Blazers can tell you’re strong at a glance, Onii-sama,” Shizuku said with a smile, glad to see Ikki finally getting the recognition he deserved.

I guess I *was the one underestimating* them*,* Ikki thought with a wry smile.

It had been foolish of him to think his opposition would underestimate him. The people in this room were all elite Blazers, confident enough in their skills that the threat of Akatsuki hadn’t even fazed them. They weren’t stupid enough to judge someone based on their rank. No, they could accurately gauge a person’s strength with a single glance. They were in a completely different league from most of the people Ikki had fought during his qualifying matches.

I’ve finally made it. To the stage where the top student knight in Japan will be crowned. Ikki was certain he’d be able to push himself to his limits against these foes.

Just then, Shizuku tugged on his sleeve and said in a startled voice, “O-Onii-sama!”

“What’s wrong?”

“L-Look over there!”

Ikki looked over at the buffet table Shizuku was pointing at. There was a girl there, glancing around as if looking for someone.

Wait, isn’t she…

Ikki realized why Shizuku was so surprised now. The girl had dirty blonde hair that was matted with paint splotches of all colors. Furthermore, she wasn’t wearing a shirt, just a paint-stained apron to cover her torso. Ikki immediately recognized her as one of the students who’d attacked Hagun.

“That’s the Bloody da Vinci, Sara Bloodlily-san!”

“I didn’t think they would come to this party after the stir they caused,” Shizuku said, surprised.

Most of Akatsuki’s students also belonged to the terrorist organization Rebellion. Thanks to the prime minister’s cover-up, the general public didn’t know that, but even then, everyone knew

they'd attacked Hagun. It was incredibly bold of them to show up at this party.

The attack on Hagun had been a shock to all of the other schools as well, and many of their representatives had also dropped out. Because of that, most of the other schools had a negative impression of Akatsuki as well. That much was made clear by the fact that all the other representatives were trying their best to avoid Sara. Not even Ikki had thought Akatsuki would dare to attend.

I can't tell if they're fearless or if they just don't care.

Just then, Ikki's and Sara's eyes met. Without hesitation, Sara started walking over to him.

"Huh?"

It seemed he was who she'd been looking for. She stopped inches away from him and stared at him.

"Hmm…"

Wh-What's with her?!

"Um, did you need something?" Ikki asked, confused. Sara was clearly looking at him and only him. But he hadn't so much as spoken to her before, so he had no idea what she might want with him.

After a few more seconds of staring, Sara said, "I like you."

Then, with no change in her expression whatsoever, she started patting down Ikki's shoulders and chest as if she were examining a statue.

"Whoa! B-Bloodlily-san?!"

"Hey! What do you think you're doing?!" Shizuku shouted.

"Shut up. I'm trying to concentrate," Sara said, running a finger down Ikki's torso.

Ikki knew it was dangerous to let a terrorist—one who'd attacked his school, no less—freely feel him up, but he didn't sense any ill will or malice from her.

What intense focus…

If anything, he felt like it would be rude to interrupt her. Thus, rather than pull her off him, he decided it would be better to ask what she was doing. But just as he opened his mouth, Sara ripped open the shirt under his suit.

"Whaaat?!"

"O-Onii-sama?!"

That was a bit too much even for Ikki, and he hurriedly jumped back and covered his torso with his suit jacket.

“What was that for?!” he shouted.

“You pass with flying colors,” Sara muttered, blushing slightly.

“‘P-Pass’?! What do you mean, ‘pass’?! I have no idea what you’re talking about!”

“When I saw you that day, it was love at first sight. I could see the beauty and kindness in your eyes, but also an unyielding strength. The way you stood with your back ramrod straight spoke to an unshakable determination. And most importantly, your muscles are perfectly toned, with absolutely no extra bulge. Everything about you is perfect. You are, without a doubt, my ideal man.”

“H-Huh?!” Ikki was flabbergasted by the sudden deluge of praise. *What the heck is this? Is she asking me out? What do I even say?*

He was too taken aback to respond. He already had a girlfriend, so the answer here was obvious, but Sara was looking at him so earnestly that he felt uncomfortable rejecting her outright. Even if she was ostensibly a terrorist, she appeared completely sincere. But then, Sara threw another curveball at him.

“You’ll make for the perfect nude model. Congratulations.”

Never mind. I think I can reject her.

“All right, come with me to my room and strip.”

“Excuse me?! No, I refuse! I don’t even *want* to be a nude model!”

“I reject your refusal.”

“Well, too bad!”

“If you won’t agree to strip for me, I’ll strip you by force.”

Mana surged through Sara’s body, and she summoned her Device, a paintbrush and palette.

H-Holy shit! She’s serious!

She was so determined to strip him that she’d brought her Device out in the middle of a party. Ikki didn’t want to start a fight here, so he wasn’t sure how to respond.

“Get away from Onii-sama, you pervert!”

“Gwah!”

Shizuku drop-kicked Sara, knocking her away.

“Onii-sama, are you all right?!”

She stood protectively in front of Ikki and glared Sara down. She'd put all of her weight behind that dropkick, though, and Sara had been thrown pretty far.

Glad to have such a reliable ally on his side, Ikki nodded and said, "Yeah. I'm fine. I lost a few of my shirt buttons, but that's all."

"Tch! She'll pay for that..." Shizuku snarled upon hearing his response.

"Sh-Shizuku?"

"I wanted to be the first person to seductively rip Onii-sama's shirt off!" she shouted, summoning her own Device. It turned out that Ikki's reliable ally wasn't on his side after all. "I'll kill you!"

"Whoa, wait up a sec, Shizuku! You can't bring your Device out here!" This was no time for hesitation. Ikki leaped forward, grabbed Shizuku's arms, and pinned them behind her back. Thankfully, Shizuku was too physically weak to break free from his grasp. *But now everyone's staring at us!*

Considering how much of a ruckus they'd made, it was hardly surprising.

I should probably go back and change. I can't stay at the party with a ripped shirt.

Just then, someone spoke in an exaggerated, high-pitched tone.

"Ku ku ku. I was wondering what the commotion was. I see you've caused another scene, Bloody da Vinci."

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Ikki turned around to see a young girl in a crimson dress with an eye patch, and a sharply dressed maid standing behind her. He recognized both of them as well. Like Sara, they were members of Akatsuki Academy.


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“You’re Kazamatsuri-san, formerly from Rentei Academy, right?”

The girl nodded.

“Ku ku ku, I suppose you could say that’s correct. This is merely a false name and identity I have taken up to evade the interdimensional regulatory agency’s eyes…though my true name is impossible for mere humans to pronounce regardless.”

“What my mistress means is ‘That’s right. It’s nice to meet you.’ My apologies for not introducing myself last time. I am milady’s personal maid, Charlotte Corday. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“Uh, nice to meet you too.”

Charlotte hadn’t left much of an impression during Akatsuki’s attack, but considering the group she’d been with, that was hardly surprising. All of Akatsuki’s other students had been chosen as representatives of the schools they’d infiltrated, so Ikki had seen their pictures in the data Kagami had shown him. Meanwhile, Charlotte was just Kazamatsuri’s maid. She wasn’t even a Blazer.

“My apologies for my sworn companion’s rude behavior, Worst One. She tends to go berserk when the inspiration of the muses strikes her. Do forgive her, though. She meant you no harm. Please sheathe your blade as well, Lorelei. The battle is already over.”

“What do you mean?” Ikki and Shizuku turned toward where Sara had been sent flying. She was sprawled face up on the red carpet, unmoving. “Wait, is she unconscious?”

“Char, please take Bloody da Vinci to the nearest restoration coffin.”

“As you wish, milady. Are you all right, Sara-sama? Fear not, I’ll have you in a capsule soon.”

“Mmm…”

Sara let out a small moan as Charlotte lifted her up, but she didn’t regain consciousness. Though Shizuku had gotten her with a dropkick, she was likely the lightest and physically weakest Blazer in the room. It was hard to believe a single kick had been enough to knock out one of the criminal underworld’s finest.

Ikki and Shizuku were stunned by how weak Sara seemed to be. Seeing their shock, Kazamatsuri explained, “Bloody da Vinci is an artist, not a warrior. She is much weaker than most of you here. Even during her journey here, a specter of the dead arose from the earth and gravely injured her. We had to summon a white-

robed angel to carry her here."

"What my mistress means is 'On the way to Osaka, Sara-san tripped on the sidewalk and broke her leg, so we had to call an ambulance for her.'"

"So she's an airhead?!"

"That is why she is known as 'Bloody da Vinci.'"

"Wait, that's about her being covered in her *own* blood?!" Ikki exclaimed. "And here I thought it was a cool nickname!"

"Is Rebellion short on personnel or something?" Shizuku asked.

Yeah, I'm starting to wonder if they have the manpower to spare for helping the prime minister out with his ambitions, Ikki thought.

"Ku ku ku. You appear to be misunderstanding something here," Kazamatsuri said with an affected snicker. "It is true that Bloody da Vinci is quite weak in a fight. However, the reason she was chosen to be part of this project is that her unique power more than makes up for that weakness."

"Huh..."

"All that falls under the category called 'art' is nothing more than replicas—facsimiles of the reality created by the accursed God. Though there may be differences in precision or perspective, ultimately, art can only imitate real life. But Bloody da Vinci's art is different. Her art supersedes reality. Before her masterpieces, even God's creations appear second-rate. Underestimate her at your own peril."

Ikki and Shizuku thought back to the dolls Sara had created when Akatsuki had attacked Hagun. Those puppets had felt so real that even Ikki, with his superhuman perception, had been fooled. Kazamatsuri's statement that Sara's art surpassed reality was not an exaggeration.

Kazamatsuri-san's right, we shouldn't underestimate her. Ikki had no idea how she could use that artistic talent in battle, but that was precisely what made her such a dangerous variable. *I'll need to be on my guard. Especially since Bloodlily-san is in the same block as me.*

If they both kept winning, they'd face off against each other in the third round. Though Ikki had been surprised by her physical frailty, it would be foolish to underestimate her because of that.

"Though I must say, Bloody da Vinci has good taste. Now that I've gotten a closer look at you, you are quite the beautiful

specimen, Worst One."

Kazamatsuri stepped closer to Ikki and looked him up and down.

"Huh?"

"I appreciate how nonchalantly you carry yourself despite the strength you hide within. Would you like to become my family's butler following your graduation? I can promise a high salary for you."

"Tch! So you're after Onii-sama as well?! Well, you'll have to get through me first!"

"Even if you had approved, I'm not particularly interested in working for a terrorist…"

"I would not require you to join Rebellion. All I ask is that you take care of my every need when I am home at the family manor."

"Don't be fooled by her, Onii-sama! It's clear the real reason she wants you to be her butler is so that she can order you to do lewd acts with her! That's what I would do!"

Oh no, my sister's becoming even more dangerous than a terrorist.

Ikki shook his head, then looked back at Kazamatsuri.

"Thank you for the offer, but I'm afraid I have to decline. I'm not a fan of suits," he said with a small bow. He didn't want to join a terrorist group either. Neither of those was the main reason he'd refused.

"Mrr… But I have heard your grades are flagging, Worst One. If you join our camp, you will never want for food or other necessities."

"Milady, it's not good to be too pushy. You'll start annoying Ikki-sama."

Charlotte, who had gently given her mistress that advice, was the biggest factor behind Ikki turning down the proposition. When Kazamatsuri had invited Ikki to be her butler, Charlotte had shot him a look of pure hatred and jealousy.

If I'd said yes, she would've killed me in my sleep. No matter how much Kazamatsuri offered to pay him, Ikki had no intention of working somewhere he had to fear for his life.

"Mrr. Very well," Kazamatsuri pouted, reluctant to give up on Ikki so quickly. "But if you ever change your mind, feel free to contact me. We would gladly welcome someone of your skill level into our fold, Worst One."

She held a business card out to Ikki. He had no intention of becoming her butler, but he didn't want to be rude, so he took it and thanked her. Kazamatsuri then said her farewells and followed Charlotte, who was carrying Sara, out of the party hall.

Once they'd left, Ikki looked down at the business card he'd been handed. It had Kazamatsuri's full name, phone number, email, and even home address listed.

"Never thought I'd see the day a terrorist hands me her business card."

"They certainly seem to be an eclectic group. They showed up at this party even though they're known criminals, and then they started trying to strip you or hire you. I wonder if everyone in Rebellion is as strange as them."

"Alice is pretty weird too, so maybe."

At the very least, none of the Akatsuki members Ikki had met thus far fit his mental image of an underworld assassin. He knew better than to judge based on first impressions, of course, but considering how much damage they'd done to Hagun, he'd expected them to be more bloodthirsty. In that sense, he was surprised by how peaceful the encounter had been on the whole.

"Don't lump the rest of us together with those two," a disgruntled voice said from behind Ikki. He turned to see a girl with long black hair and a rather ridiculous opera mask glaring at him.

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"I can't believe those buffoons are still clowning around. Don't they realize they're supposed to be hard-boiled criminals?" the girl muttered, adjusting her opera mask. Shizuku didn't recognize her immediately, but Ikki did.

"Are you Tatara Yui-san?" he asked politely.

"Oh, the girl who was wearing that thick jacket even though it was the middle of summer," Shizuku said, finally realizing who the newcomer was. The copious winter gear Tatara had been wearing when they'd first met had made it hard for Shizuku to make out her features.

"Just saying, that's not like a weird hobby of mine or anything. It's just dumb as shit to reveal your face to the world when you're a goddamned assassin."

Wait, that actually makes sense! Shizuku thought, surprised to

hear sound logic for once. It seemed as though Tatara was a proper, sensible assassin.

"But wait, is it all right to admit that you're an assassin? I thought you guys were trying to pretend you're a normal school," Shizuku said, realizing that Tatara's words weren't quite as sensible as they seemed.

"Geh heh heh. You guys have already heard all about us from the Black Hand, haven't you? Too bad Tsukikage's got a lock on this country's media outlets. We can tell you whatever we want and it'll never become public."

There was nothing Shizuku could say in response to that. It was true. Kurono had already told the Federation and various other organizations that Akatsuki's students were mercenaries Tsukikage had hired from Rebellion, but that truth still hadn't made its way to the public. Part of that was because of Tsukikage's information lockdown, but another big reason was that no one was willing to believe that their prime minister, of all people, was working with terrorists. The only people who believed that Akatsuki's students were members of Rebellion were Ikki and the others, as they'd seen everything firsthand. It was galling to Shizuku since it meant that there was nothing they could do to stop the enemy's plot. Tatara could openly talk to them about being from Rebellion at this party and there wasn't a single thing they could do.

"Geh heh, my bad," Tatara said upon seeing Shizuku's angry glare. "No need to get so riled up, Kurogane Shizuku. I'm not here to pick a fight with you. Let's just take it easy and enjoy the party, 'kay?"

Tatara grabbed a plate, piled it high with food, and held it out to Shizuku. Though she'd kept her tone civil, it was clear from her expression that she was patronizing Shizuku and Ikki. Naturally, that enraged Shizuku even more, but she knew that rising to Tatara's taunts would just be playing into her hands, so she instead decided to accept Tatara's peace offering.

"Thank you very—" But before she could take the plate, Ikki knocked it out of Tatara's hands. Food spilled all over the fancy marble floor, and the plate shattered. "O-Onii-sama?"

"Phew."

Shizuku—and everyone else at the party—turned to Ikki in

surprise. He ignored all of them and instead glared coldly at Tatara. He'd been polite when it had come to Sara and Kazamatsuri, but he was showing naked hostility to Tatara. Wondering why that might be, Shizuku looked down at the food on the floor.

"Oh!"

She realized immediately why Ikki had taken such drastic action. The chicken Tatara had put on the plate she'd offered Shizuku had a razor blade sticking out of it. It had likely been hidden inside the meat and come out when the drumstick had hit the floor. There was no way it had ended up there accidentally when the chef had been cooking it. The only reasonable explanation was that the terrorist standing in front of her had sneaked it in before handing her the plate. Ikki had knocked the plate away because he'd noticed that.

"That's a rather spicy topping you've added to my sister's food, Tatara-san."

"Geh heh heh, what a shame. I even mixed an alkaloid strong enough to kill an elephant into that." Tatara seemed wholly unfazed by Ikki's sharp glare. "And I was so sure no one saw me slip it in. I guess you're even sharper than your sister, huh?"

"Considering how much bloodlust you were radiating, it would have been harder *not* to notice," Ikki said coldly. Though Shizuku hadn't caught on, Ikki had known from the moment he'd laid eyes on her that Tatara Yui wasn't like the other three Akatsuki girls they'd seen thus far. Though Sara, Kazamatsuri, and Charlotte had all been strange in one way or another, he'd sensed no malice from them. Tatara Yui was different, however. In fact, the *only* emotion Ikki could feel from Tatara was malice. And when she'd started making a plate for Shizuku, she'd casually turned her body so that her hands were hidden from view. Ikki knew there had to have been a reason for that, which was why he'd knocked the food away.

"I thought you weren't here to pick a fight."

"Geh heh heh. I'm not. Honest. I just figured I'd kill one of you to de-stress is all. I almost had her too." Tatara clicked her tongue, annoyed that her murder had been foiled. "God, I can't believe I got stuck with this boring-ass job. Attack a school but make sure not to kill anyone? Give me a break. I'm not like those other idiots.

I've been killing since I was in diapers. What kind of moron gives a pro assassin a job where you don't kill anyone? I'm sick and fucking tired of playing nice! I can't wait another two days! I need to kill someone!"

Tatara gave Ikki a feral grin and started gathering mana in her right hand. Baring her teeth, which looked like a shark's, she summoned her chainsaw Device.

"H-Hey, that girl's serious!"

"Is she really gonna start a fight in the middle of a hotel?!"

The other students started whispering frantically to each other. Ikki said nothing; he just stepped protectively in front of Shizuku. He could tell that Tatara wasn't someone who could be reasoned with. Besides, he wasn't enough of a saint to remain calm after someone tried to poison his little sister. But just as he summoned Intetsu, someone called out to him.

"It's not worth it, Another One."

"Ah!"

Ikki stopped. Or rather, the voice stopped him. It hadn't been a particularly angry voice, but there had been a commanding tone to it that had made Ikki feel compelled to obey. It carried immense weight. Furthermore, it was one Ikki recognized. This was his first time hearing it in person, but he'd heard it plenty of times on TV.

"You didn't fight your way up here to take part in these small-time brawls, did you?"

"Moroboshi-san!"

Indeed, the owner of the voice was none other than Ikki's first opponent in the Seven Stars Battle Festival and the winner of the previous tournament: Bukyoku Academy third-year Moroboshi Yuudai.

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His sharp eyes had a predatory glint to them, and like Alisuin, he was well over 180 centimeters tall. He had a muscular build and was wearing a bandana that suited him oddly well. With a single sentence, he, the top-ranking student knight, had managed to silence the entire room.

Looking closer, Ikki saw that he hadn't approached them alone. Behind him were two other students, and like Moroboshi, they were wearing the Bukyoku Academy school uniform instead of formal wear. Of course, Ikki had heard of them as well. The boy in

glasses who was wearing his uniform as properly as possible, even having buttoned up his collar, was Jougasaki Byakuya, a third-year. Next to him was a girl with a bandage on her cheek. Her eyes twinkled with mischief, and she gave off a tomboyish air. Her name was Asagi Momiji, and she, too, was a third-year. The two of them had placed second and third in the prior year’s Seven Stars Battle Festival. These were three Blazers who’d gotten to stand on the podium last time.


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I see… No wonder I stiffened up.

All three of them exuded a powerful aura. Just standing next to them made the reception hall feel like it had suddenly gotten smaller. Ikki was too skilled a fighter to be able to ignore such imposing auras.

"But I gotta say, you sure seem dangerous, miss. It's right before the tournament, so I can see why you'd be excited, but maybe you should calm down a little. No more talk of killing," Moroboshi said, giving Tatara a condescending look. It was clear he'd been watching the commotion for a while.

"Good grief. What kind of boor summons their Device at a party? Although I suppose such an unsightly Device is fitting for someone as unsightly as you," Jougasaki added, frowning at Tatara. She didn't seem the least bit intimidated, though.

"No one cares about how pretty your weapon is in a fight, four-eyes. Want me to show you just how unsightly this thing can get?" Tatara revved her chainsaw's engine and pointed it at Moroboshi.

"The more you bark, the more you look like a weakling," he replied, his look of contempt growing.

"Tch!" Tatara had had enough of Moroboshi's condescending attitude. Grinning at him, she said, "Geh heh heh. Now you've done it, you asshole. Let's see which one of us is *really* the weakling here!"

She stepped forward, ready to fight.

"Huh?!"

Suddenly, she stopped three meters in front of Moroboshi. It almost seemed like she'd been electrocuted.

"Oho…" Moroboshi muttered, impressed. "I guess you *do* have some bite to match that bark. That's right, that's the limit of my reach. Step into range…and I'll knock your lights out with this."

A long, thin spear appeared in Moroboshi's hands. There was a decorative pattern that resembled a tiger's pelt at the base of the spear's blade. This was the Seven Stars Sovereign's Device, Tiger King.

"When'd you pull that out?!" Tatara shouted, jumping a few steps back.

Ikki was just as surprised as she was.

Amazing… Even he hadn't been able to pinpoint the moment Moroboshi had summoned his Device. *He doesn't have a single*

opening either!

Even though he was just holding his spear lazily at his side, Moroboshi wasn't showing a single blind spot. Ikki could tell that any attack thrown at him would be repelled, no matter what angle it came from.

So this is the Seven Stars Sovereign's famous Perfect Guard... This is my first time seeing it in the flesh.

His control over the space around him was so great that even the famous Thunderbolt hadn't been able to close in on him. It felt like no matter where you were, Moroboshi was looking at you. That was why Tatara had hesitated to charge in. Moroboshi had proved definitively that he'd been the strongest student knight in Japan last year. Challenging him in his territory was a bad idea.

"Gah ha ha ha ha! These first-years sure are lively! Very nice!"

It seemed more than just Bukyoku's students had come over after seeing the commotion. A man more than two meters tall and one meter wide came over, casting a shadow over Ikki and the others. His voice was loud enough to echo throughout the entire room, and unlike most students, he had a full beard. This was Kaga Renji, a third-year from Hokkaido's famous Rokuzon Academy. He was also known by the nickname "Panzer Grizzly," and he had made it to the top eight last year.

"But you shouldn't waste food, y'know," Kaga continued. "Us farmers worked our asses off to raise those chickens so that people could eat 'em. If you can't enjoy the food, that's like spitting in our faces."

Kaga was famous for having developed a hundred hectares of land—the size of twenty Tokyo Domes—back when he was still in elementary school. He picked the poisoned chicken drumstick, razor blade and all, up off the floor and brought it to his mouth.

"Wait, that chicken—"

Before Ikki could finish, Kaga had started chewing on it. His powerful jaw minced not just the chicken's bones but also the razor blade that Tatara had stuck in it.

"Gah ha ha! Looks like enough to kill an elephant still ain't enough to kill me, Akatsuki!"

"A-Are you even human?!" Tatara exclaimed, amazed and horrified that Kaga was perfectly fine after swallowing that toxin-laden blade. The surprises didn't stop there either.

“Phoo.”

“Gh?!”

She suddenly felt someone blowing air into her ear, and a second later, she realized that she was being held by a woman in a white lab coat she hadn’t noticed sneaking up on her.

“All right, be a good girl and stay still while I examine you.”


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“Gaaah!” Tatara quickly swung her arms around and shook off the woman hugging her, but that didn’t stop her from being shocked. She was one of Rebellion’s more famous young assassins. She knew her skills were top-notch. Yet she’d still been taken by surprise. Panic was the natural response. “Wh-What do you—”

“Hee hee, what a lively patient you are.” The woman smiled gently at Tatara. “However, it seems your blood pressure is a little high. My, look how rough your skin is. And how tiny your body is. You must not be getting enough to eat. Let me see your hands.”

“What the hell are you— What?!”

Against her will, Tatara dropped her chainsaw and held out her palms for the woman to examine.

“I see you’re lacking in calcium, vitamin C, and collagen. You also appear to be lacking in sleep. Here, take some of my special incense. Burn it before going to bed and it will help you sleep soundly.”

The woman started dropping supplements into Tatara’s hands, as well as a small box neatly wrapped with a ribbon. Obviously, Tatara didn’t want any of this stuff. But when she tried to throw it all away, she realized something horrifying.

M-My arms won’t move!

“What the hell did you do to me?!”

“Hmm? Hee hee, why do you look so surprised? It’s only natural that I can control my patients as I wish,” the woman said with a friendly smile.

As he watched the scene play out Ikki turned to Shizuku and asked, “Shizuku, do you know who she is?”

“Yes, of course,” Shizuku replied, nodding. She wasn’t particularly interested in researching her opponents ahead of time, to the point that she didn’t know the names of most of the students at this party, but even so, she knew who this woman was. After all, despite being a student, this woman was the best doctor in Japan. She was also one of Japan’s top Blazers, and the only water user Shizuku considered more skilled than herself. “Yakushi Kiriko, a third-year at Rentei Academy. Also known as the Doctor Knight. She didn’t participate in the Seven Stars Battle Festival last year or the year before that, so I didn’t think she would enter this year either.”

“Yeah. By the way, was that skill she used when she approached Tatara-san—”

“Yes, it’s exactly what you think it is, Onii-sama. She was able to do the exact same thing my Azure Reincarnation does. She even managed to vaporize her clothes and reform them. I can’t do that yet.”

Furthermore, Shizuku couldn’t figure out what Kiriko was doing to keep Tatara from moving. Was she controlling her opponent’s blood in some way? That seemed like the only reasonable explanation, but Shizuku couldn’t fathom how one would go about doing that.

I can’t believe she’s in D block with me.

They were both water-based Blazers, and they both prided themselves on their finesse. That meant the person with greater control over their mana would be the victor if they fought. Shizuku was honestly hoping that Kiriko would lose before the third match so she wouldn’t have to face her. Also, among the group of people that had come over due to the commotion was one person Ikki recognized.

“Hey, bitch. Who said you could lay a hand on my prey, huh?”

A blond-haired boy walked over to Tatara and lifted her up by the collar of her dress. He was none other than Sword Eater Kurashiki Kuraudo, whom Ikki had fought on Ayatsuji Ayase’s behalf. Ikki still remembered how much trouble Kuraudo’s Marginal Counter had given him.

“Long time no see, Kurashiki-kun.”

“Hmph. I figured you’d show up at this tournament. You better not lose before you fight me. We’ve got a score to settle,” Kuraudo replied to Ikki. He then turned back to Tatara. “I’m not the only one who wants a piece of him either. Everyone here’s dying to test themselves against that guy, so you better not mess with him. Not unless you want a piece of all of us.”

All of the other students glared at Tatara, nodding in response to Kuraudo’s words. Even Tatara wasn’t willing to fight over half of the nation’s top eight at once.

“Tch, fine! Let me go already!”

She kicked Kuraudo away since her arms still weren’t working and stalked off, her face twisted in a rictus of rage and frustration. She’d admit defeat—for now.

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Once Tatara was gone, Ikki turned to the people who'd come to his aid.

"Thank you, everyone. If you hadn't stepped in, I might have actually fallen for her taunts," he said with a bow.

"Don't mention it. I'd lose my cool too if my sister was about to be poisoned," Moroboshi replied, his menacing look quickly changing into a bright smile. "Honestly, I'm impressed you held yourself back for that long. I woulda cut her down before she even drew her weapon if she pulled a stunt like that."

"That's not something you should say so proudly, Yuu," Jougasaki sighed. "You're supposed to be a role model for the others. That's what it means to be the Seven Stars Sovereign. You can't go causing a scene everywhere."

"Aha ha. Our Hoshi's a real siscon, after all."

"Who're you calling a siscon?! I'm just doing what any older brother would, all right?! Also, this is the second time they've picked a fight with us regular students. They say even the Buddha runs out of mercy after the third chance, so why can't humans like us run out after two huh? You think so too, right, Kurogane?"

"Ha ha ha... Well, I can't deny that Akatsuki's caused us a whole lot of trouble," Ikki said with a nod. "Though I don't really have a grudge against them."

"Hmm? Whaddya mean?"

"Sure, their attack on Hagun was underhanded, and I can't say I like any of them, but...since they're taking part in the tournament, it means we have the opportunity to cross swords with Blazers we'd normally never fight. So in that sense, I'm grateful to them."

It was only during this Seven Stars Battle Festival that Ikki would have the chance to fight the strongest Blazers from not just among the seven schools but also the criminal underworld. In other words, this was the Seven Stars Battle Festival that would truly decide who was the strongest Blazer of the new generation. That was why Ikki was glad they'd shown up the same year he was participating.

"Aha ha ha ha ha!" Moroboshi let out a loud laugh. "You look like you wouldn't hurt a fly, but you sure say some dangerous things. But y'know, I was thinking the exact same thing."

Indeed, just like Ikki, Moroboshi was looking forward to

crossing swords with the famed assassins of the criminal underworld. He was more excited about this Seven Stars Battle Festival than he had been about any of the others. In fact, he had been longing for the opportunity to pit himself against the Gale Emperor. He was grateful to Akatsuki for bringing Ouma out into the open.

"I can't believe there's someone out there as bloodthirsty as me though," Moroboshi added. It was doubly impressive to hear that from a Hagun student, what with how badly Hagun had been ravaged during Akatsuki's attack. *But if he's saying that, that means this guy really gets it.*

"Crossing swords with opponents we'd normally never get to fight, huh? I suppose that means the rumors that Akatsuki's members are all criminal mercenaries were true," Jougasaki mused.

"That girl earlier wasn't normal, that's for sure. God, Akatsuki's making a mess of things," Asagi said, frowning.

"Who cares about that," Moroboshi said flatly. "It doesn't matter who they are or where they're from. Ain't that right, Kurogane?" He glanced back over at Ikki.

Ikki nodded and replied, "That's right. We're knights. You can't expect your opponents to always fight fairly." He gave Moroboshi a small smile.

That was the answer Moroboshi had been hoping for. As he'd suspected, Ikki was someone who understood what it meant to be a student knight. Student knights weren't athletes, they were warriors who would eventually be tasked with defending their country. It was foolish for a warrior to complain about their enemies being dishonorable. Until you realized that, it didn't matter how strong you were, you were no different than a regular athlete. No one like that would ever be able to beat a real knight.

"Your enemies won't fight fairly. The concept of 'fair' doesn't apply to battles to begin with. And those are the kinds of battles us student knights will eventually be fighting. That's why it doesn't matter who Akatsuki really is or what underhanded tricks they used to get into the tournament. It's the Management Committee's job to deal with those sorts of political problems. Our only job is to defeat the enemy before us and advance to the next round," Ikki said simply.

Even when Ayatsuji Ayase had resorted to cheating, he hadn't thought of her as a coward. While it had pained him as her friend to see her bend her principles, he hadn't taken any issue with her methods themselves, hence he'd told Oreki not to disqualify her. He personally didn't like underhanded tactics or fighting unfairly, but he wasn't stupid enough to think all of his enemies would be just as principled. He wasn't an athlete; he was a knight.

Over the course of their conversation, Moroboshi Yuudai had come to realize that Ikki understood what it truly meant to be a knight. He respected Ikki immensely for it.

"Heh. When I heard the Thunderbolt lost to some no-name who was repeating a year, I was disappointed. I'd been planning on beating her ultimate technique head-on this year, you know. But it looks like we've got a super interesting guy coming in her place."

He was also certain that Ikki would make for a worthy opponent, causing his eyes to burn with fighting spirit. "I'm looking forward to fighting you in two days."

"I promise to give that battle everything I have," Ikki responded, matching Moroboshi's gaze.

Each fighter had sized up the other over the course of their conversation, and they'd both come to the same conclusion: this would be one of the fiercest battles they had ever been in. They were nervous, but also genuinely excited.

As they stared each other down, Moroboshi suddenly pointed at Ikki and said, "Oh yeah. Don't you think you should go back and change now? We can see your nipples, dude."

"Bwah?!"

It was only then that Ikki remembered that Sara had ripped open his shirt and he was looking rather indecent.

"Or are you just trying to show off your muscles to us? You an exhibitionist?"

"N-No, I'm not!"

Ikki hurriedly covered his chest with his arms and looked away, blushing. Everyone laughed good-naturedly at his reaction. The tense atmosphere that Tatara had created had all but vanished, and everyone was having fun again.

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In the smoking room next to the reception room, an older man watched the commotion Tatara was causing through the window.

He had silvery-gray hair and was wearing a dark red suit and tinted glasses.

"You have some rather unruly students in your school, Tsukikage-sensei," a voice called out to the old man.

Indeed, he was none other than Tsukikage Bakuga, Japan's prime minister and the director of Akatsuki Academy. He turned around and smiled at the newcomer.

"Well, well, if it isn't Takizawa-kun. Long time no see."

The person Tsukikage had called "Takizawa-kun" was Shinguuji Kurono, the current director of Hagun Academy. She shivered a little; the way Tsukikage had cordially called her by her old surname made it seem like he hadn't changed at all from his time as a teacher—one she'd looked up to.

In an attempt to calm her nerves, Kurono pulled out a cigarette and lit it.

"It's Shinguuji now, Sensei," she said.

"Oh, yes, I forgot. We haven't seen each other since your wedding. How've you been doing?"

"Well, thank you. I have a kid now too."

"That's wonderful news, truly."

Tsukikage smiled, looking genuinely happy for Kurono. He had more wrinkles on his face now, but otherwise, he was the exact same Tsukikage she remembered. But that only served to confuse her further.

Sensei really hasn't changed at all.

He had the same gentle voice. The same warm smile. He was, without a doubt, the Tsukikage Bakuga she'd admired. It pissed her off. If anything, this would have been easier if he'd become a different person. If he'd been openly hostile toward her, she would have known where he stood. Then she wouldn't be tormented by the question of why.

Why are you doing this, Tsukikage-sensei?

Doing her best not to let her emotions show, Kurono said, "I...am not happy that I have to meet you again under these circumstances, Sensei."


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She glared at Tsukikage, deciding that if he wasn't going to show any hostility, she would. Right now, she was his student no longer. She was Hagun Academy's director. And since he'd harmed her students, he was an enemy. She couldn't afford to show him any kindness. Nothing he said could change that, so there was no point in playing nice and making small talk. As things were, what mattered was finding out why he was doing this. Kurono understood that, and she decided to act accordingly. While she didn't know where Tsukikage stood on this issue, she knew where she did, and she was making that clear.

"Heh. I suppose I can't blame you for being angry. I did make a mess of your school, after all," Tsukikage said, accepting her accusatory glare. He was admitting that what he'd done was an act of aggression against her.

Kurono stepped forward, closing the gap between them.

"Why did you do it?" she asked.

"Like I said during the press conference, Blazers are the linchpin of a nation's defense. But right now, Japan entrusts the training of those Blazers to an outside organization. The Federation is also what decides which Blazers are allowed to be knights and which aren't. Not only can we not issue knight licenses ourselves, we can't even strip people of them. That's not a position an independent nation can afford to be in. I'm simply taking action to fix this state of affairs. It's my responsibility as the nation's leader."

Tsukikage simply repeated what he'd told the world earlier.

"I don't believe that's the whole story. You're hiding something, Sensei."

"I'm not. Really. Hmm... I was hoping that since you had the foresight to adopt Bukyoku's drastic policies for deciding who gets to participate in the Seven Stars Battle Festival, you'd perhaps understand that I need to take drastic measures as well. To bring about a similar revolution."

"Unfortunately, your current actions are well beyond my understanding. Yes, Director Makunouchi has implemented a number of groundbreaking policies since taking charge of Bukyoku. And yes, those policies go against Federation guidelines but have still been hugely successful. Makunouchi is certainly rebelling against the Federation, and they're not happy with that. But the director's rebellion is still within the bounds of common

sense. That's very different from what you've done, Sensei. You've gone so far as to break the law and even hire terrorists for your plans."

"Terrorists? I'm afraid my current position demands that I say I have no idea what you're talking about." Tsukikage smiled wryly, and Kurono came to the conclusion that it would be pointless to question him any further. But then, Tsukikage added in an extremely cold voice, "But you know, I don't think there's anything wrong with breaking the law. Not when it's the law itself that's mistaken."

"Oh..."

That told Kurono everything she needed to know. When she'd come here, she'd had assumptions about what had been driving Tsukikage. She'd spent a lot of time mulling over his actions and thinking about what might have driven him to this.

"I see..." she said. "I thought that might be it."

Those few words from Tsukikage were enough. Kurono now understood what his true goal was, as well as why he'd chosen to purposely break the law. Unfortunately, of all the outcomes she'd considered, this was the worst possible one.

"What do you mean by that?" Tsukikage inquired.

"I thought it was strange. If all you really wanted was for Japan to reclaim the right to train its own Blazers, setting up a government-run school, hiring Rebellion terrorists to be its students, and having them win the Seven Stars Battle Festival to prove the superiority of the national system is far too roundabout a method for achieving that goal."

Considering Japan's position within the Federation, it wouldn't actually have been that difficult for Japan to reclaim Blazer training rights. It was the third-largest economy in the world and was tolerant enough of different religions that it served as a good mediator between nations with strong religious leanings. The Federation needed Japan to maintain its cohesiveness and influence. Had Tsukikage formally started negotiations with the Federation to reclaim Blazer training rights, he likely would have been able to get them. After all, it would be worse for the Federation if Japan left.

"Blazer training rights are something you could gain easily enough through negotiation," Kurono continued. "They're not

worth the leader of a country hiring terrorists and causing a huge domestic incident. Your actions were too extreme for the reward you claimed to be seeking. That was what struck me as unnatural. But thanks to what you said earlier, I understand now. I was thinking about things backward. You didn't break the law to try and win Blazer training rights for Japan, you're using Blazer training rights as an excuse for you to break the law."

"What makes you think I would do something like that?"

"I don't know what your personal motivations are. I don't have enough information to figure that out. But there's only one goal you and whoever you're working with can have in mind. You don't want the Federation to come to the negotiating table. If they do and you win the Blazer training rights that you're asking for, that'll send a signal to the world that Japan intends to stay in the Mage-Knight Federation. And if that happens, you won't be able to achieve your true goal of creating an irreparable rift between Japan and the Federation!"

Kurono was certain that was what Tsukikage was after, though she didn't know why. She had, of course, already told both Japan's branch office and the main branch of the Federation that Tsukikage was working with Rebellion. That meant negotiations were completely out of the question, as a willingness to negotiate with terrorists would compromise the Federation's authority. Tsukikage had known as much, which was why he'd been hoping someone would sniff out his connection to Rebellion and report it. That would help break down relations between Japan and the Federation even faster.

"Heh heh heh. Impressive, Takizawa-kun. You've always been a bright one." To Kurono's surprise, Tsukikage readily admitted it. His smile turned cruel, and he suddenly looked like a completely different person. "If you've figured this much out, it's pointless to try and hide anything. You're right on the money. My ultimate goal is to sever the connection between the Mage-Knight Federation and Japan."

"But why?! Surely someone of your character wouldn't be bribed so easily, right?!"

"As if I would ever sell out my country. This is all for the sake of Japan. We are powerful, so we don't belong in the gathering of weak nations that is the Mage-Knight Federation. We have the

economic, cultural, and military strength to stand independently. If we stay in the Federation, we'll have to waste our resources dealing with other countries' petty problems instead of using them to improve our own."

Kurono's expression turned grim. What Tsukikage was saying was the truth. The Mage-Knight Federation was effectively a cooperative body made up of sovereign nations. There was a treaty that all member nations would provide military and material aid in the event that any of them were invaded. It functioned the same way medical insurance did. Until someone got sick—or in this case, invaded—they didn't actually see the benefits of paying into the system. Their resources simply went into the communal pool.

Over the past half century, Japan had never once gone to war with another nation. It had, however, been forced to send its soldiers and supplies to other wars across the world, such as in Vietnam, Iraq, and Israel. That had taxed the country's economy. Many citizens also felt that Japan was getting the short end of the stick in that regard, hence Tsukikage's party, which championed exiting the Federation, had gotten so much support in recent years.

Kurono could absolutely see where Tsukikage was coming from. But that didn't mean she agreed with him.

"Are you out of your mind?! We're a small island nation with limited natural resources! Do you honestly believe we can match up to the three great powers that are China, America, and Russia on our own?!"

Kurono didn't think that was possible. Staying in the Federation was indeed costing Japan. And Japan was indeed giving more to the Federation than it was getting in return. Even so, it was undeniable that Japan had avoided being at war for the past fifty years specifically because it had been part of the Federation.

There was no telling what would happen if Japan left. It wasn't guaranteed that Japan would get invaded, of course, but it wasn't guaranteed that it wouldn't either. Kurono was afraid precisely because the future would become unpredictable if Tsukikage succeeded and radically changed the world order. Tsukikage, however, didn't seem concerned in the slightest.

"I do. I will reclaim both Japan's former glory and the territory

that rightfully belongs to us."

In fact, he seemed convinced that Japan would be fine.

"And you're willing to do whatever it takes to make that happen?"

"That's right. That's what Akatsuki Academy is for. We'll sweep the tournament, and the public will no longer wish for the Federation's rule. There's no stopping my plan now."

Kurono didn't respond.

"Heh. I see you don't agree. But that's fine. I'm not looking for your understanding or your acceptance. After all, freedom of expression is a right all citizens enjoy. Criticize me if you wish. I won't blame you if you've lost faith in me either. But for now, I am this nation's prime minister. It is up to me to decide what direction this country goes in. I won't let anyone get in my way," Tsukikage said firmly. He then tapped out his cigarette on a nearby ashtray and started walking toward the door. As he passed Kurono, he added in a stern voice, "This isn't something a mere educator should be sticking her neck into. Know your place."

In that instant, Kurono realized that the two of them were walking down wildly different paths. Tsukikage had no intention of stopping. He didn't look back even once as headed to the door and opened it. Kurono also knew she didn't have the authority or influence to stop him.

"You're right. A mere educator like myself can't do anything to stop you," Kurono muttered, her back still turned to Tsukikage. Then, her quiet voice filled with conviction. "But your plan will only succeed if Akatsuki wins this tournament. In that case, I don't even need to do anything to destroy your plans. My students will take care of that for me."

"I'm looking forward to seeing just how much a fight they can put up against Akatsuki," Tsukikage replied after stopping at the doorway. He then left the room.

Though Kurono had been able to ascertain Tsukikage's true goal, she didn't bother telling Ikki and the others. Telling them would mean burdening them with the fate of this nation. Besides, all of these political machinations were effectively the same as betting on the outcome of a sports match.

They don't need to know what kind of dirty schemes are going on behind the scenes. It'll only tarnish the purity of their fights.

Kurono wanted her students to fight for themselves and what they believed in. And she was certain that if they did, they'd win. As someone who'd fought in the finals of the Seven Stars Battle Festival herself, she knew that regardless of how strong the members of Akatsuki were, they were lacking one critical component: passion. Without the burning drive to claim the throne for themselves, there was no way they'd be able to win. Maybe they would have in any other situation, but because they didn't have that passion, victory in the Seven Stars Battle Festival would be beyond them.

Chapter 2: Naniwa’s Star

The day after the party, Ikki, Shizuku, and Alisuin headed down to the hotel lobby together. They’d decided to go out to dinner for their final meal before the Seven Stars Battle Festival began.

The reason they were forgoing hotel food had to do with a conversation they’d had the night before. The party had continued for another hour or so after Ikki had changed out of his torn dress clothes. Right as it had been ending, Moroboshi had called out to him and Shizuku.

“Hey, Kurogane. Have you decided where you’re getting dinner tomorrow?”

“I didn’t have anywhere particular in mind, so I was just gonna eat at the hotel restaurant.”

Moroboshi had frowned upon hearing that.

“That’s no good, dude. Since you came all the way to Osaka, you gotta try the local food!”

“You’ve got a point. But what’s Osaka even known for?”

“Fried food, mostly. Stuff like takoyaki, though that’s more of a snack than a meal. If you want a full meal, I recommend okonomiyaki.”

“But Onii-sama, we have an okonomiyaki place back home in Tokyo too. You know, Langetsu. We’ve eaten there before.”

“Fool! That’s like saying you’ve tried Nagasaki’s champon just because you got some at Rinker Hut! The taste of Osaka’s okonomiyaki is totally different from the crap you get in Tokyo. All right, that does it. You’re coming with me for dinner tomorrow. I’ll take you to Osaka’s best okonomiyaki place!”

“Um…”

“Meet me outside the hotel lobby at five!”

And just like that, Ikki and Shizuku had made dinner plans for the next day.

“He’s such a pushy guy. Is everyone from Osaka like that?” Shizuku muttered.

“I don’t think so…” Ikki replied.

“I’m glad he invited us, though,” Alisuin chimed in. “I’ve never

had okonomiyaki before. I was hoping to get the chance to since we are in Osaka and all."

"Really? You should have just said so."

"I felt bad for inviting you two out when you have matches tomorrow."

Alisuin's hesitation was understandable. The Seven Stars Battle Festival was a single-elimination tournament. One loss and you were out. You had to be in top form for every last match or you wouldn't make it to the end. For that reason, most entrants were spending the night before the tournament honing their focus. Normally, you wouldn't invite someone out for a casual meal.

"I never thought the guy I'd be fighting tomorrow would invite me to eat with him like this," Ikki said. It was especially surprising because Moroboshi was the current Seven Stars Sovereign. He had to be under immense pressure to win for a second consecutive year.

"He certainly has no manners, at least. Does he simply never get nervous?"

"If he did, he wouldn't have invited us out like this."

"Well, I'm not someone who ever gets nervous either, so I don't mind, but will you be all right, Onii-sama? I know you're too kind to say no, but if you don't want to go, I can simply tell him you're not interested."

Shizuku gave Ikki a worried look. She remembered how frayed his nerves had been before his first selection match, against the Hunter. Personally, she wanted to let Ikki spend the whole day alone so he could concentrate solely on his upcoming fight. That was why she kept speaking so harshly of Moroboshi.

"I'm fine. He did basically just invite us without waiting for a response, but if I really didn't want to go, I would have said so." Ikki was accepting this invitation of his own free will. "Moroboshi-san's right. We came all the way to Osaka, so it would be a shame not to try their food. Besides..."

"Besides, what?"

"Eating with the Seven Stars Sovereign sounds like a lot more fun than sitting in my room meditating."

Ikki was genuinely curious about what kind of person the Seven Stars Sovereign, Moroboshi Yuudai, was. There were more efficient ways to gauge his strength and fighting style, but Ikki wanted a

chance to learn more about him as a person. He wanted to know what path Moroboshi was walking and what drove him, and he'd chosen to prioritize that over honing his focus.

"I guess in that sense, our friend here is just as cheeky as Moroboshi-san," Alisuin said with a sigh.

Indeed, Ikki didn't feel at all awkward about having dinner with the guy he'd be fighting the next day. As they exited the hotel lobby, they spotted Moroboshi waiting for them in front of the fountain.

"Over here, guys!" he shouted with a wave.

"Sorry we're late. Did you wait long?" Ikki said, jogging over to Moroboshi.

He shook his head and replied, "Nah, you're right on time. I'm just impatient, so I got here early. Don't worry about it." Moroboshi then turned to Alisuin. "Hmm? Who's the cool-looking dude over here?"

Since Alisuin had originally been part of Hagun's team, his picture had been publicly posted, but it seemed Moroboshi didn't remember seeing it. And of course, Alisuin hadn't been at the party the night before.

"This is Alisuin Nagi. A friend of mine from Hagun Academy," Shizuku answered, stepping forward.

Alisuin smiled and asked, "You didn't specify just the two of them, so I thought I'd tag along. Am I not welcome?"

"Nah, I don't mind at all. The more the merrier," Moroboshi replied with a grin. "You probably already know who I am, but I'll introduce myself anyway. Moroboshi, from Bukyoku Academy." He held out his hand for a handshake.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Alisuin." Alisuin took Moroboshi's hand and shook it firmly. Then, she narrowed her eyes and said, "Heh. Despite your crass speech, you're quite the gentleman, I see. Guys like you are my type."

"What?!" Moroboshi shivered under Alisuin's passionate gaze. Most guys would be shaken hearing that from someone they'd just met, especially if the other person also looked like a guy. "Um, sorry, is that supposed to be a joke or something?"

"Not at all. I'm simply a woman trapped in a man's body."

"O-Oh, I see. Sounds rough..."

"Heh heh, you have very strong hands, Seven Stars Sovereign."

“Bwaaah!”

Alisuin ran her thumb over the back of Moroboshi’s hand, and he hurriedly jumped back.

“Aha ha, what an innocent reaction. How cute.”

“Alice, don’t tease him too much.”

“Heh heh, my apologies. Don’t worry, Moroboshi-san, that was just a little joke.”

“A-Aha ha. Gotcha. It was just a joke. Sorry, it’s my first time meeting a gay guy, so…”

“I’m not interested in straight men.”

“Okay, so you *are* gay, then…”

This reminds me of the time I first met Alice. Ikki had had the exact same reaction when he’d first met Alisuin a few months ago. *I’m used to her antics now, but they gave me a shock the first time too.*

However, Moroboshi proved even more adaptable than Ikki. He cleared his throat and said, “Well, who cares what kind of people you’re into. You wanna eat good food like everyone else, right?” He then turned back to Ikki and added, “By the way, I haven’t seen the Crimson Princess anywhere. Is she not in Osaka yet?”

“She’s not. She might be planning on arriving the day of the tournament.”

“I see. That’s a shame,” Moroboshi said with a sigh.

Ikki could understand why he was disappointed. In the same way that Ikki had attended the party to size up the people he’d be fighting, Moroboshi was interested in getting a good look at the Crimson Princess. There was no way the Seven Stars Sovereign didn’t want to fight her.

“I heard she’s a big eater, so I was hoping she’d order a bunch and help our finances out,” Moroboshi muttered to himself.

“Huh? What did you just say, Moroboshi-san?”

“A-Aha ha! It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

“Hmm?” Ikki cocked his head, confused by Moroboshi’s sudden change in attitude. *What did he mutter to himself there?*

Before Ikki could think about it any further, Moroboshi said, “We’re burning time. C’mon, let’s go. Osaka’s not as packed as Tokyo, but we still get big crowds around this time, so stick close to me.”

With that, he started walking off, and Ikki and the others had no choice but to follow.

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The four of them took the train for about ten minutes, after which they got off and headed into a shopping district. Along the way, tons of people greeted Moroboshi.

“Yo, Moroboshi!”

“Wow, it’s really you, Moroboshi! What’re you doing here?! Don’t you got a match today?!”

“Don’t be stupid, kid! His match is tomorrow!”

“Hoshi-chan! I’m rooting for you!”

“I couldn’t get a ticket, so I won’t be in the stands, but I’ll be watching the broadcast! You’ve got this, Moroboshi!”

“Ha ha ha ha! Don’t worry, guys! I’ve got this!”

“Yuu-chan, wanna join me and Taku-san for some mahjong?”

“Sorry, but I can’t. I’m showing around some guests from Tokyo. Next time, though!”

“Hoshi! If you win this year too, I’ll treat you to some of my prized fatty tuna!”

“Seriously?! You better be ready, gramps, ’cause I’m coming for that tuna!”

“But if you lose, you gotta inhale a whole tube of wasabi!”

People of all ages and genders called out to him. Some of them cheered him on, others teased him, and yet others asked him to hang out. It was clear that he was close to all of them.

“I see Moroboshi-san’s quite popular,” Shizuku said quietly, taken aback by just how many people were coming up to him. “Even Stella-san doesn’t garner this much attention when she’s walking around on the street.”

“Stella’s definitely popular, but she’s a transfer student. Meanwhile, this is the Seven Stars Sovereign’s hometown,” Ikki explained. The Seven Stars Battle Festival was a hugely popular tournament that was broadcast nationwide, so there were plenty of fans of notable student knights throughout the country. Naturally, the reigning Seven Stars Sovereign tended to be the most popular of them all. “Plus, Moroboshi-san might become the first person to ever win back-to-back Seven Stars Battle Festivals. He’s a local hero, and he’s one tournament away from making history.”

“Heh. The most impressive thing is that he doesn’t seem to be feeling the pressure of those expectations whatsoever,” Alisuin

said.

Ikki nodded in agreement.

“He really is an amazing person. Even after what happened to him, he’s come this far, and he’s living up to everyone’s expectations.”

“Hmm? What happened to him, Onii-sama?”

“Oh, y-you don’t know…”

Realizing he’d slipped up, Ikki frowned. In fairness, it was a pretty famous event, so it wasn’t as if there was any reason to hide that part of Moroboshi’s past. Judging by Alisuin’s reaction, she was aware of it too. However, Shizuku was wholly uninterested in other people, with only a few exceptions, so it made sense that she didn’t know. In fact, it was entirely possible that she’d read a news article about it at some point and had just forgotten.

Hmm, what should I do?

Ikki wasn’t sure if it was appropriate to talk about it right in front of Moroboshi. The whole thing might still have been a bitter memory for him. Fortunately, it seemed Moroboshi was busy speaking with his fans, so Ikki whispered, “The truth is, when he was in elementary school, Moroboshi-san temporarily retired from being a knight.”

That was when he’d been in sixth grade. Back then, he’d been hailed as Naniwa’s Star and was famous throughout the country as one of its most promising young knights. But right before his final tournament in the little leagues, he’d gotten into a train accident and been gravely injured.

“His injuries were so bad that even a capsule couldn’t fully heal him. The doctors said he might never be able to walk again.” Since Blazers could protect themselves with a veil of mana, they were more resilient than regular people. There was a limit to that resilience, however. A train derailment was a big enough incident that even a mana barrier could only do so much. “He couldn’t fight in that shape, of course, and so Naniwa’s Star had to forfeit his final tournament and leave the world of Mage-Knights behind.”

“I see… But he’s walking and fighting like normal now, isn’t he?”

“Yep. He sure is.” Moroboshi’s gait was steady, and he didn’t look at all like he was coping with a crippling injury. And of course, his movements had been perfectly smooth during the previous year’s tournament. “He went through some extremely grueling

rehabilitation and made a miraculous comeback that no one thought was possible."

Moroboshi Yuudai's path to glory had been marred by some surprising setbacks. He wasn't someone who'd only ever known victory. It had taken four long years of recovery before he'd come back to take the title of Seven Stars Sovereign. It was a thorny road he'd walked.

"It's not normal, what he accomplished," Ikki went on. "No normal person could hope to manage that."

"You have a point. Recovering from an injury even capsules couldn't heal is far from normal."

"There's that too, but that's not all, Shizuku."

"Hmm?"

While it was certainly impressive that he'd managed to recover from such serious injuries, there was more to his story than that.

"The truly amazing thing about Moroboshi-san is what you're seeing right now."

Ikki looked over at the people chatting happily with Moroboshi.

"No one here thinks he's going to lose. Not a single person is asking him, 'How are you holding up?' or anything of the sort. They have absolute faith in him." Everyone believed from the bottom of their hearts that Naniwa's Star had made a full comeback. Moroboshi had inspired that unshakable trust. "If you ask me, that's way harder than just making it to the top."

Ikki had always wanted to ask Moroboshi what had driven him to come this far. He wanted to know what burning motivations were pushing him onward. What convictions lay at the core of his being. He had a feeling that was the secret to Moroboshi's strength.

Seeing Ikki get excited again, Shizuku let out a long sigh.

"Haaah... And that's who your first opponent is going to be? You really do have abysmal luck, Onii-sama. Did you commit some heinous sin in your past life or something?"

"Maybe I just used up all my luck on getting the perfect sister and the cutest girlfriend."

"I suppose I can't fault you for using your luck for— Hmm?"

Confused, Shizuku turned to Ikki, who'd come to a sudden halt. He'd sensed someone glaring at him, which was why he'd stopped. But by the time he turned around, the presence was already gone,

having blended in with the busy crowd.

"Is something wrong, Onii-sama?" she asked.

"It's nothing..." Ikki replied, hurrying to catch up with the others. He knew it hadn't been his imagination, but since he had no means of tracking who'd been glaring at him, it was pointless for him to worry about it.

Not long after that, Moroboshi stopped in front of a store.

"All right, we're here!" he declared. "This is the best okonomiyaki restaurant in Osaka—no, in all of Japan! Welcome to First Star!"

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First Star sat right at the end of the shopping district. It was an old, two-story building. From the looks of it, it had probably been built before Ikki and the others had even been born. The dark, wooden walls had an air of wizened dignity to them.

"This place certainly has a unique atmosphere."

"Gah ha ha! You can call it shabby, I don't mind. This place has been around since the Taisho Era, after all. Though back then, it was a sukiyaki shop instead of an okonomiyaki one."

"Personally, I'm a fan of old Japanese buildings. There's something nostalgic about them."

"But you're not even Japanese, Alice!"

"I-I probably have some Japanese ancestry in me, so it's fine! Oh? What's that?"

Alisuin turned to stare at something.

"Hmm? What're you looking at, Alice?"

Ikki followed Alisuin's gaze and saw a rusted mailbox and nameplate next to the door. The nameplate read "Moroboshi."

"Wait, does that mean...this is your family's restaurant, Moroboshi-san?" Ikki asked, and Moroboshi let out a long sigh.

"Dang. Found me out, huh? I was hoping to surprise you once we were inside. But, well, what can you do? That's right, this is my house."

"Did you just invite us to dinner so you could get some sales? Y-You're a crafty one!" Alisuin exclaimed.

"Gah ha ha. The denizens of Naniwa *are* all businessmen." Moroboshi laughed, and Ikki could only admire his mercantile spirit. "But I wasn't lying when I said our okonomiyaki's the best in Japan. I'd never let guests who've come from so far away eat bad food. You guys get to eat your fill of yummy okonomiyaki, and I

get to make some money, so everyone's happy. It's a win-win, right?"

"Hey, can we really trust someone whose primary incentive is money? Maybe we should look for another restaurant," Shizuku muttered suspiciously.

Ikki could see why she had some misgivings, but he said, "It's not like we have any other ideas for where to eat. May as well eat here."

"If that's what you want, Onii-sama, then it's fine with me."

"There's a delicious smell coming from inside. I've gotten quite hungry too, so I'll gladly eat here," Alisuin said.

"Guess that's that, then," Moroboshi said, and he opened the rather rickety door to the restaurant and ushered everyone inside.

"Oh..."

"Wow..."

As they stepped inside, Ikki and Shizuku noticed the delectable smell that Alisuin had been referring to. Even Shizuku, who normally didn't care much about what she ate, could feel her mouth start to water.

"It really does smell delicious..." she muttered.

"They seem to be doing pretty good business even without our help," Alisuin said, looking around at the packed tables.

The restaurant was nearly full despite it being a bit early for dinner. Even if Moroboshi had been exaggerating a little when he'd called it Osaka's best, it was clear this restaurant was highly acclaimed.

"Heeey, Mom!" Moroboshi shouted while Ikki and the others were taking in the aroma. When he did, a middle-aged woman who was flipping okonomiyaki on a hot plate turned and glared at him.

"What're ya doing here? Weren't you gonna stay at the hotel till the tournament was over?" she asked.

"I came to see my beloved mother's face!"

"Blegh! Stop trying to act cute! You're giving me goose bumps!"

"Excuse me?! Who says that to their own son?! And here I was gonna look after you when you retired!"

"Don't worry, I plan on staying healthy well into old age, so you won't need to do anything for me. I'd be a disgrace of a mother if I needed the brat I squeezed out to take care of me!"

“Stop phrasing that in such a gross way! We run a restaurant, remember?!”

“It’s your fault for being such a snot. Isn’t that right, guys?” She turned to the customers, who all laughed. The atmosphere of the place fit Osaka’s stereotype to a T. “So, what’re you *actually* here for?”

“I’m showing some guys from Tokyo around. I met them at the hotel party and figured that since they came all the way here, they gotta try Osaka’s best okonomiyaki.”

Moroboshi pointed at Ikki and the others.

“So that’s what it was.” Moroboshi’s mother stepped away from the hot plate and smiled warmly at Ikki and the others. “Welcome everyone. I’m Yuudai’s mom. Thanks for coming all the way here.”

“Ah, nice to meet you.”

“I’m not sure if my food’s the best in Osaka, but I put my all into every dish, so I hope you like it.”

“It smells great, so I’m sure it’ll taste great too.”

“But it’s packed in here today. Are there any seats available for us?”

“Lucky for you, we’ve got exactly one table left. Koume! Come guide these customers to their table!”

Moroboshi’s mother turned around and called to someone in the back. When she did, a young girl wearing a kimono and an apron came running over. She looked to be in middle school, far too young to be a part-timer.

“What a cute girl. Is she your little sister?” Alisuin asked.

“Yep. That’s Koume. Unlike me, she’s not a Blazer,” Moroboshi replied.

Also unlike Moroboshi, Koume didn’t resemble her mother. She’d likely gotten her looks from her father.

“Koume, take these guests to the corner table, please.”

Koume nodded and trotted over to Ikki and the others. The moment she laid eyes on Ikki, though, her eyes widened in surprise.

Hmm?

Ikki cocked his head in confusion, and Moroboshi explained, “She’s just surprised to see my opponent for tomorrow here.”

“Oh, that makes sense.”

Koume’s surprise lasted only a second before she put on a

businesslike smile. It seemed the mercantile spirit ran in the family. She bowed to everyone, then pulled a sketchbook out of the sleeve of her kimono.


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“Welcome!” it said in cute, bubbly letters on the page she flipped to.

“Huh…”

Ikki, Shizuku, and Alisuin were all taken aback. This was the first time a waitress had greeted them in writing rather than verbally.

“She has trouble speaking, so she uses her sketchbook instead, that’s all,” Moroboshi quickly explained, having expected that reaction.

“Ah, I see…” Ikki said a little apologetically.

“It’s nothing to worry about. It’s not like she’s physically mute—it’s just a psychological thing,” Moroboshi said in a cheerful voice.

Koume also flipped her sketchbook to a page that read, *“I’m just a refined and quiet young lady,”* and gave everyone a playful wink.

“As if. You’re the biggest tomboy I’ve ever seen,” Moroboshi replied, gently flicking Koume on the forehead.

At first, when he’d heard she couldn’t speak, Ikki hadn’t been sure how to act around Koume. But seeing how casually Moroboshi was playing around with his sister, it seemed that acting natural would be for the best.

“You two sure are close,” he said.

“She’s my one and only sister, after all. Plus, she’s cute.”

Just then, Ikki felt a finger poke him in the back. He turned around to see Shizuku staring intently at him.

“Did you hear that?” she asked. “Your one and only sister. Plus, I’m cute.”

What do you want me to do with that information?! Unsure of how to respond, Ikki decided to copy Moroboshi, and gently flicked Shizuku on the forehead.

Shizuku blushed and smiled happily. She’d apparently wanted to show off to the Moroboshi siblings how close she and Ikki were. Figuring out what she was thinking was often a challenge, but this time, at least, Ikki was pretty sure he’d guessed correctly.

“But why’s it so packed? I came early ’cause I wanted to avoid the crowds,” Moroboshi muttered, looking around the restaurant floor.

Koume flipped her sketchbook to an empty page and started writing. *“They’re all people from the countryside who came here to see the Seven Stars Battle Festival. A lot of them are new customers.”* Her handwriting was neat despite how fast she wrote.

Moroboshi nodded and said, “I see. Hmm… Maybe I should help out too, then. Sorry for leaving you guys on your own, but I gotta help my mom out or she’ll get swamped.”

“Oh, you won’t be eating with us?”

“Believe me, I want to, but there’s too many customers.”

Considering that Ikki and the others were taking the last open table, it was clear that the restaurant was operating at full capacity. All of the hot plates in the kitchen were filled with sizzling okonomiyaki batter, and Moroboshi’s mother was barely keeping up.

“Understandable. We’ll be fine by ourselves, so go help your mother out,” Ikki said. While it was a shame he’d miss this opportunity to speak with Moroboshi, he didn’t want to tie him down.

Moroboshi bowed and said, “Sorry about this, especially since I’m the one who invited you and all. Once you’ve decided on your orders, just tell Koume. It’s my treat, so feel free to order as much as you want.”

“I thought you were trying to rope in new customers?” Shizuku said, and Moroboshi grinned at her.

“That was just a joke. Never take anything seriously that someone from Kansai says with a smile.”

It sounded like Moroboshi had intended to treat Ikki and the others from the start.

“I’d feel bad for you if we did that. It’s okay, we can pay our share,” Ikki said. He felt bad for making someone they’d only met yesterday pay for them.

“It’s fine. It’s not like I’m getting you anything expensive.”

“Still…”

“I’m telling you, it’s *fine*. I’m you guys’ senpai, so let me do this. First-years are supposed to listen to their senpai, right?”

In the end, Moroboshi managed to argue Ikki down. He was beginning to learn that Moroboshi was quite a pushy guy.

“All right, Koume. They’re all yours.”

Koume nodded, and Moroboshi tightened his bandana and headed over to the kitchen grill. Once he was gone, Koume turned back to Ikki and the others and flipped her sketchbook to a new page that read, *“Let me guide you to your seats!”* It seemed she’d prewritten all of the stock phrases she’d be using often. She

brought them to the one open table and flipped the sketchbook to another page that read, *“Here you are.”*

“Thank you,” Ikki replied.

They sat down, looked through the menu, and placed their orders. Koume wrote their orders down and showed them back to Ikki and the others to make sure she’d gotten them all correct, then trotted back to the kitchen. While they were waiting for their food to arrive, they overheard a bit of the conversation from the table behind them.

“Wait, so you really aren’t going out with Moroboshi?”

“That’s what I keep telling you. He’s not my type anyway.”

It was two girls talking, and one of the voices belonged to someone Ikki had met yesterday. Surprised, he, Shizuku, and Alisuin turned to see who was sitting behind them. The two girls had noticed them too, apparently, as they turned around at the same time.

“Huh?”

“Ah!”

“My, my…”

The five of them exchanged glances.

“Yakushi-san!”

The two girls were none other than Yakushi Kiriko, the Doctor Knight, and Yagokoro, a member of Bukyoku’s newspaper club whom Ikki and the others had met back at the training camp.

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It was an unexpected reunion in an unexpected place. If Ikki had met another one of the Seven Stars Battle Festival entrants at the hotel restaurant, it wouldn’t have been a huge surprise, but there were hundreds of okonomiyaki places in Osaka, and this one was pretty far from the hotel. At first, Ikki had thought it was one hell of a coincidence, but after he’d spoken with Kiriko and Yagokoro for a bit, he realized it was less of a coincidence than he’d thought.

“Wait, you’re the one who healed Moroboshi-san’s injury, Yakushi-san?!”

“That’s right. It’s how we met.”

It seemed Kiriko had come here not to eat okonomiyaki but to see Moroboshi.

“Wow, that’s a surprise. Aren’t you the same age as Moroboshi-

san, though? Are you allowed to treat people without a medical license?"

"I mean, I healed him, so there's no problem, right?"

I-I guess you could say that, but I feel like ethically, that's still an issue.

However, Ikki decided not to press the issue.

"So, are you here to visit your former patient, then, Yakushi-san?" he asked instead.

Kiriko nodded, but then she added, "Sort of. I'm here for a checkup, so he's not quite a *former* patient."

"Huh?" Ikki felt his heart sink as he heard that. "You mean Moroboshi-san isn't fully healed yet?"

"Oh, you don't need to worry about that," Kiriko replied with a smile and a shake of her head, assuaging his concerns. "He's made a full recovery. But the methods I used to treat him were a bit rough, so I'm doing regular checkups to make sure there are no side effects. I don't want anything happening to one of my patients, you know?"

"Ah, so you're just taking some extra precautions?"

"Pretty much."

"That's...a relief."

Ikki let out a relieved sigh. It would have been a real shame if the Seven Stars Sovereign wasn't in top form for their fight.

"Anyway, I wanted to give him one last checkup before the tournament, but he wasn't in his room. I asked Jougasaki-kun, and he told me he'd gone back home, so I came here. Though I took a taxi instead of the train and ended up getting here first. Unfortunately, because of that, a certain journalist here started making baseless accusations."

Kiriko glared at Yagokoro. It seemed she had suspected that the two were secretly going out.

"Ha ha ha... My condolences," Ikki said.

"It's a real pain, let me tell you."

"Oh, come on! The only reason a doctor would visit an old patient's house is because she's sleeping with him on the down-low! This is definitely a juicy scoop! You gotta tell me all about it!"

"Please don't even joke about that. I'm not into wild guys like him. If anything, younger guys like Kurogane-kun who put on a polite facade while hiding their real ferocity are more my type."

“What?!” Ikki shouted, and Kiriko grinned at his flustered reaction.

“Hee hee hee… What do you say? Would you like a little checkup before the tournament starts? I promise to look you over *very* thoroughly.”

She licked her lips lasciviously as she said that and opened one of the buttons on her white lab coat, revealing her ample cleavage. Though her boobs weren’t as big as Stella’s, she had the mature charm of an older woman.

I feel like letting you give me a checkup is only going to make my blood pressure rise!

Shizuku moved from her seat next to Alisuin into the empty one next to Ikki.

“Sorry, but no,” she said, glaring coldly at Kiriko. “Stella-san has already filled our quota of shameless harlots. We don’t need any more.”

“You don’t have to phrase it like that!” Ikki shouted, glad Stella wasn’t around to hear that.

Meanwhile, Yagokoro turned to Alisuin and asked, “By the way, did Moroboshi invite you all here, Nagi-san?”

“My, I’m impressed you were able to figure that out.”

“I had a feeling.”

“Does he do that often?” Alisuin asked, sensing that this was not an uncommon occurrence.

“Yep. Well, I wouldn’t say ‘often,’ but whenever he meets someone strong from another school during a training camp or something, he’ll invite them here. I guess it’s his way of welcoming all the strong opponents that come to Osaka. That’s actually why I decided to stake this place out today. I thought I might be able to overhear some interesting conversations from whoever he brought. Never expected him to invite his opponent in tomorrow’s match, though. That guy’s got nerves of steel.”

“That’s not something you’d normally do, that’s for sure,” Ikki said.

“I guess you’ve got nerves of steel too, though, since you accepted.”

“Ha ha. I’m aware of it, at least.”

Ikki needed to be this brazen or he’d never be able to aim for the top of the Seven Stars Battle Festival as a Rank F Blazer.

Welcoming his opponents, huh? I guess that fits my impression of him.

But just as Ikki thought that, Kiriko chuckled and said, “Hee hee hee. He doesn’t just invite people because he’s bold, though.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Exactly what I said. While he probably does genuinely want to treat all of you to a good meal, there’s something more he’s hoping to get out of this.”

“Like what?” Yagokoro asked, confused. “You think he’s hoping Kurogane-kun here’ll feel indebted to him because he fed him some good food or something? There’s no way Moroboshi’s petty like that.”

“Hee hee. Don’t worry, I know that all too well. If anything, it’s the opposite of what you’re thinking.”

What does that mean?

Before Ikki could ask, Moroboshi returned with their orders.

“Whoa! Didn’t expect to see all of you together!” he exclaimed.

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“I heard from Koume that you were here, Sensei, but I didn’t know you came too, Yagokoro,” Moroboshi said as he set a tray carrying five plates down in front of the table.

“How rude of you to say ‘whoa’ after seeing a dainty maiden’s face.”

“It’s your fault for being such a nuisance of a journalist. You better not be causing trouble for Sensei or Kurogane. I’ll kick you out.”

“I would never.”

“Huh?”

Seeing how blatantly Yagokoro lied to Moroboshi’s face, Kiriko thought, *You’re more brazen than anyone here… If anything, I’d call that being purposely rude.*

“Besides, you’re one to talk,” Yagokoro added. “You went and invited your opponent to eat at your family’s restaurant!”

“It’s not like I forced him to come.”

“Psh. Do you have any idea how intimidating you look? I bet he couldn’t’ve refused even if he’d wanted to.”

Moroboshi frowned and replied, “Don’t be stupid. Anyone who’d be scared off by the sight of me wouldn’t have made it to the Seven Stars Battle Festival. Ain’t that right?”

“It’s true, he didn’t force us to be here,” Ikki said.

Moroboshi grinned triumphantly upon being proved innocent. But then, his expression clouded over and he said, “Wasn’t expecting to see all of you together, though. Man, now I *really* wanna sit with you guys. It sucks that we’re drowning in work right now.”

Sighing, he placed everyone’s orders in front of them with practiced movements. Ikki had ordered the pork okonomiyaki set, which was the size of a small pizza and apparently had a reputation for being quite filling.

“Here you go. Three pork okonomiyaki and two seafood deluxes.”

“Wow, it smells so good. The dried bonito looks delicious too.” Alisuin stared excitedly at the okonomiyaki. As a foreigner, it was her first time seeing it.

Everyone picked up their chopsticks and started eating. Ikki was still curious about the ulterior motive Kiriko had claimed Moroboshi had, but he decided that could wait until after they’d eaten.

Besides, it’s not like I can ask, “Hey, what’s Moroboshi-san’s true goal in bringing us here?” when he’s still right there.

Ikki separated his chopsticks and looked down at his okonomiyaki plate. He could immediately tell that it was different from the okonomiyaki he’d had in Tokyo.

Oh, I realize what’s going on.

“There’s no hot plates on the tables here,” Ikki said.

“Nope. Costs too much in gas for that. The food gets burned on one side too. Yeah, it’d fit the vibes more if we had ’em, but we don’t. I promise we’ve cooked them to the perfect level of crispiness, so think of it as our way of saying we’d prefer it if you’d just eat it the way you get it.”

They’ve definitely got the confidence of a store claiming to be Osaka’s best.

Wanting to see for himself just how great this okonomiyaki really was, Ikki sliced off a chunk with his chopsticks and picked it up.

“Thank you for treating us, by the way,” he said, then took a bite.

Wow…

This okonomiyaki really was nothing like the one he'd had in Tokyo. It was way, way better. And to his surprise, it wasn't the sauce or the pork that was the most flavorful, but the batter. Plus, the cabbage inside the batter had the perfect amount of crunch and sweetness to it.

"This is delicious! Right, Shizuku?!"

"Mm-hmm. It's nothing like the okonomiyaki we had in Tokyo. The sauce was all I could taste there, and it was salty, but this okonomiyaki is sweet. It pairs perfectly with the saltiness of the sauce too. Though this might be too big a portion for me."

That was quite high praise coming from Shizuku. She didn't eat much, but she had a refined palate, and it took something truly exceptional to get this many words out of her. Alisuin seemed quite satisfied with the food as well, as did Kiriko and Yagokoro.

"Gah ha ha. Told ya we have the best okonomiyaki in Osaka," Moroboshi said, smiling as he watched everyone stuff their faces. "Looks like our secret ingredient did the trick. Can you figure out what it is, Kurogane?"

"You mean your secret ingredient?"

Ikki focused his senses on his tongue. The main thing that stuck out to him was the freshness and slight sweetness of the cabbage, as well as the sweetness of the flour-based batter. The salty sauce served as the binding agent that brought all the flavors together. But there was a surprising amount of richness to it that came from something else entirely. There was also a lingering sweetness that couldn't be explained by just the cabbage or the batter since those didn't really leave an aftertaste.

The source of this richness is probably the secret ingredient, but...

"Hmm... Could it be cheese?" Ikki guessed, realizing that the sweet aftertaste had a slight resemblance to that of cheesecake, and Moroboshi gave Ikki an impressed look.

"Wow, you've got a good tongue there. That's right. Our okonomiyaki's secret ingredient is cheese." There was very little used—so little that the flavor of the cheese itself was practically unnoticeable. But that small amount was enough to increase the okonomiyaki's richness and sweetness. "It really nails the 'secret' part of 'secret ingredient' too."

"I was worried the food might be subpar when I learned you were trying to bring in new customers, but this exceeds all of my

expectations. I'm glad I came."

The okonomiyaki here was practically a different dish from what Ikki and Shizuku had eaten in Tokyo. Moroboshi really hadn't been exaggerating when he'd said he'd take them to the best okonomiyaki place in Osaka. And that was precisely why Ikki couldn't help but ask, "Um, Moroboshi-san? I know you said you'd treat us, but are you sure? I feel bad not paying for food this good."

"It's fine, I promise. Besides, if I asked you guys to pay after inviting you here, Mom would kill me. So don't worry about it. This is my way of welcoming my rival who came all the way from Tokyo."

"But there's nothing I can give you in return…"

Since Ikki hadn't eaten at any of the other okonomiyaki places in Osaka, he couldn't be certain it was the best, but it was certainly tasty enough to be worthy of the title. He was extremely grateful to Moroboshi for taking time out of his last day before the tournament to bring them here, and then treating them on top of that.

"You can repay me in tomorrow's match," Moroboshi replied with a cheerful smile.

"What do you mean?" Ikki asked, confused.

"Eat up and sleep well so you're in top form tomorrow. I want you to be in the best possible shape when you fight me. If you can give me your best fight yet, it'll have been worth bringing you here. I wanna defeat my opponents when they're at their very best. It's how I prove my strength to myself."

"Ah…"

In that instant, Ikki realized that despite his friendly smile, his eyes were blazing with a fierce fighting spirit. He also finally understood what Kiriko had meant.

So that's why it's the opposite, huh?

The reason for Moroboshi's kindness toward his opponents wasn't that he wanted to get them to lower their guard. Rather, he was trying to ensure they were in top form so that he could fight them at their peak. He had no interest in beating someone who was feeling under the weather or wasn't ready to give it their all. If it wasn't a struggle against them at their full power, it wasn't a match worth winning to him. This was the path the Seven Stars

Sovereign had set for himself.

"We're gonna fight on the greatest stage in the country. I don't wanna have any regrets, and I don't want my opponent to either. So let's both give it our all tomorrow, Another One!"

Moroboshi considered Ikki an opponent worth giving his all against; it didn't matter that he was the Seven Stars Sovereign and Ikki a Rank F Blazer. For his part, Ikki was happy Moroboshi thought so highly of him. He, too, was only interested in a victory that came after fighting Moroboshi at his best. It would have been all too easy for Moroboshi to have underestimated Ikki because of his rank, but instead, he was taking Ikki seriously. Naturally, Ikki wanted to meet his expectations.

I'm glad I came here today.

He now knew that his opponent respected his strength and wanted him to bring his very best. There was no greater honor as a knight or as a martial artist. So of course there was no reason for him to refuse Moroboshi's request.

"I'd be happy to do that for you. I'll fight twice as hard to repay the hospitality you've shown us."

"That's just what I wanna hear."


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Ikki and the others spent another hour or so at First Star before leaving. At first, Moroboshi had asked them to wait until he was free so they could talk, but the number of customers just kept growing, to the point that Ikki and the others felt bad for holding up a table. Realizing that he wouldn't be free anytime soon, Moroboshi reluctantly told everyone to go.

"Phew. It's been a while since I've eaten this much at once," Ikki said, patting his stomach.

"Likewise. In fact, I may have overeaten," Alice said.

"That's because both of you ate two whole plates. You guys aren't Stella-san, so please don't act like her."

"Stella-chan would eat a lot more than two plates."

Stella would've pounced on you if she'd heard that.

Ikki was starting to miss Shizuku and Stella's constant catfighting, even if Stella had only been gone for a week now.

Dinner would've been livelier if she'd been here, though... They were constantly together at school, so now he felt lonely once they were apart for more than a day. *I know. Once the tournament's over, we can all come back with her. I'm sure she'd love the food here.*

That helped assuage the loneliness in his heart. Ikki then turned to Kiriko, who'd left with them, and asked something that had been on his mind for a while now.

"By the way, Yakushi-san."

"Hmm? What's up?"

"You left with us, but didn't you come here to check up on Moroboshi-san?"

Indeed, Kiriko had not examined Moroboshi while they'd been eating dinner. She'd just eaten and then left with Ikki and the others. Ikki was worried she might have forgotten.

"Oh, I already did," Kiriko said flatly.

"What? When?"

"Hee hee hee. When you're as good at manipulating water as I am, you can sense the flow of a person's blood and their lymph nodes even through their clothes. You can read a person's mind by reading that flow, or even take control of their body by interfering with it."

"Wow!" Ikki exclaimed. "I see, so that's how you sealed Tatara-san's movements yesterday..."

“Correct. I originally came up with this technique to help patients with their rehabilitation, but it’s just as useful for disciplining naughty children. Although…”

“Yeah?”

“It feels amazing controlling other people like your puppets,” Kiriko said, smiling sweetly.

Ikki mentally swore to himself that he’d never become her patient if he could help it.

“So, how’s Moroboshi-san’s condition?” he asked. Naturally, he was curious about the condition of his opponent.

“As healthy as can be. I guess my treatment really was perfect,” Kiriko replied, puffing her chest out proudly.

“So Moroboshi-san’s in top form?”

“That he is. You’re going to have a hard first fight.”

Kiriko sounded sympathetic, but Ikki didn’t mind at all. This was actually exactly what he was hoping for. He’d told Moroboshi he’d repay him by giving him a hard fight, after all.

As they reached the train station, Yagokoro waved to everyone and said, “Us journalists were given a hotel, so this is where we part ways. See you all later.”

“Want me to go with you?” Alisuin asked, but Yagokoro shook her head.

“I’ll be fine. It’s not that late yet. Besides, we’re all student knights here.” As she broke off from the group, she turned around and added, “By the way, Worst One, there’s something I wanted to ask you.”

“What is it?”

“Normally, I’m down to publish anything if it seems interesting,” she said, her expression clouding over a little. “But this rumor I heard sounded so crazy that I thought I should at least get confirmation first.”

Anything that sounded too crazy for even Yagokoro had to be something insane. Cold sweat beaded on Ikki’s forehead as he waited with bated breath to hear what story she’d gotten wind of.

“So, what rumor was this?”

“Uh, so… Is it true that you fought Twin Wings and won?”

“Wha—”

Ikki gave Yagokoro a stunned look. There hadn’t been anyone else around when Ikki had fought Twin Wings Edelweiss. It hadn’t

been reported on the news either, obviously. He hadn't expected to hear about that fight from anyone he hadn't told personally.

Seeing his reaction, Yagokoro shouted, "Wait, are you telling me that really happened?! You actually beat her?!"

"N-No, no, no, no, no! Definitely not! Calm down! It's true that I fought Edelweiss-san, but—"

"Y-You did?!"

"Like I said, calm down!" Ikki placed his hands on Yagokoro's shoulders and explained, "It's true that I fought her, but that's the only part of the rumor that's true. I certainly didn't beat her. I lost consciousness halfway through our duel, and when I woke up, I was in the hospital. That means she took pity on me and let me live."

He couldn't have Yagokoro getting the wrong idea about things. She'd had her doubts about the claim as well, so she believed Ikki instantly.

"I-I see. That makes more sense... Shoulda known those rumors were fake. But honestly, just knowing that you fought her and lived is crazy enough! H-Hey, I know we were all about to go back, but could you tell me the details of that fight?"

Ikki gave her an apologetic look and said, "Sorry, but I can't."

"Wh-Why not?! I wouldn't make fun of you in an article just because you lost! Especially considering who your opponent was!"

"I'm not worried about that. It's just... I don't really remember much."

"What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said. I remember getting beat up real bad, but by the end, I was fighting so desperately that I don't fully remember what happened. I was probably so focused on the fight that my brain didn't record any of it..."

Ikki wasn't lying. The last thing he remembered clearly was Intetsu breaking after Edelweiss repelled his Venomscale Cut. After that, he didn't remember how he'd kept fighting or what he'd accomplished. As a result, he didn't recall that his sword had, in fact, reached her. Kurono had told him that he'd injured her after he'd woken up, but since he didn't recall doing so, it didn't feel real to him.

"That's why I'm afraid all I can really tell you is that I lost," Ikki said.

“I-I see…” Though Yagokoro had only known Ikki for a short time, she knew he wasn’t the kind of person to lie about this sort of thing. So she shrugged her shoulders in disappointment and accepted that was all she’d be able to learn. “Sounds like there’s not enough info to write an interesting article… Mind if I embellish the details some?”

“Please don’t.”

“I’ll make it so your loss looks really cool!”

“Don’t.”

“Rgh. You’re so stingy.”

Yagokoro pouted at Ikki, but he refused to budge. There was no telling what kind of article would come out if he gave her the creative license to fill in the details herself.

Seeing the determined look in his eyes Yagokoro finally gave in.

“Fiiine. I won’t write any articles about this.”

“Thank you.”

“But I gotta be honest, after hearing that, I’ve got high hopes for you in the upcoming tournament. You better give us a good match against Moroboshi tomorrow! See ya!” Yagokoro waved goodbye and headed over to the bus stop.

Shizuku turned to everyone else and said, “Shall we head back together? We’re all staying at the same hotel.”

However, Ikki shook his head and replied, “Sorry, but I think I want to walk back tonight.”

“Are you sure? It’s pretty far to the hotel.”

“I know. But after how much I ate, I want to get some exercise in to help digest. Besides, I got excited after seeing how raring to go Moroboshi-san is. A good walk should help me calm down.”

The latter was the main reason Ikki wanted to walk. And frankly, it was only ten minutes away by train, so it was hardly a long walk by Ikki’s standards.

“I see. Very well. Just be sure not to do anything that might affect your condition for tomorrow’s match, Onii-sama,” Shizuku said, understanding that letting him return alone would be best for him.

“Don’t worry, I’m not planning on doing anything crazy.”

“Ikki, should I come with you?” Alisuin asked hesitantly.

“Nah, it’s fine. You stick with Shizuku.”

“All right, if you say so.”

“See you at the arena tomorrow, everyone!” Ikki said, then jogged off toward the main street.

As she watched him go, Shizuku muttered with a small smile, “Onii-sama looks so happy.”

Alisuin nodded in agreement.

“Indeed. It seems the Seven Stars Sovereign’s fighting spirit was infectious. It’d be hard not to get pumped up after learning that his biggest desire is to fight Ikki at his strongest.”

“Onii-sama was more provocative than usual with what he said back to him as well.”

“Heh. I’m sure he couldn’t help himself. For so long, everyone ridiculed him as a Rank F loser. He made it this far by believing in himself, but now, he has the opportunity to test his strength against an opponent who believes in him too. Best of all, that opponent is last year’s Seven Stars Sovereign. This is the best gift Ikki could ask for. I must admit, it’s rather cute how he’s so happy he can’t sit still and wants to walk all the way back.”

There was no doubt that Ikki would be at his very best when facing Moroboshi tomorrow. At least, that was what Shizuku and Alisuin believed.

“But he won’t be able to win like that,” Kiriko said suddenly.

“Huh?” Shizuku turned to her. “Are you saying Onii-sama won’t be able to win?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Wh-What makes you so sure of that?!” Shizuku exclaimed angrily.

“It has to do with their respective mindsets,” Kiriko responded, narrowing her eyes at Shizuku. “I do believe that Kurogane-kun is an exceptional knight. Not only does he have the mettle and strength to have made it to the Seven Stars Battle Festival despite being Rank F, but he wasn’t intimidated at all by the Seven Stars Sovereign either. His drive to keep improving is splendid as well. But those half-hearted feelings alone won’t be enough if he wants to claim victory.”

“‘H-Half-hearted’?!” Shizuku glared at Kiriko, thinking that the woman was insulting her brother. Alisuin gently patted her shoulder to calm her down, then turned to Kiriko.

“You called them ‘half-hearted,’ but doesn’t Moroboshi-kun possess those same feelings?” she asked. *Why else would he ask*

Ikki to fight him in peak condition?

"No," Kiriko answered, slowly shaking her head. "You sorely misunderstand the man known as Moroboshi Yuudai if you think that's what he's like. He's not doing this because he's constantly striving to improve like Kurogane-kun is. He wouldn't have been able to recover from such serious injuries with a half-hearted drive like that. It's something else entirely that's gotten him this far."

She continued her explanation.

"The reason he wants to fight stronger opponents and is always searching for even greater victories is that he's haunted by an almost tragic sense of duty. If all Kurogane-kun is thinking about is fighting more powerful foes and polishing his skills to reach even greater heights, he simply won't be able to win. I guarantee it."

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Meanwhile, Ikki didn't head straight to the hotel after leaving Shizuku and the others. Instead, he went to a small park a good ways away from the busy shopping district. It was deserted at this time of night, and only the sound of buzzing insects could be heard in the vicinity.

"You can come out now. No one's going to bother us here," Ikki looked up and said loudly.

He was speaking to the person who'd glared at him before they'd entered First Star. He'd sensed that same gaze again when they'd left, and the reason he'd said he'd head back alone was so that he could speak with them. The fact that this person had been able to direct their bloodlust at Ikki and only Ikki even with Moroboshi right there made it clear that they were someone of considerable skill.

A figure stepped out of the shadows, and Ikki let out a small gasp.

"I didn't think it'd be you."

Standing before Ikki was none other than his older brother, Kurogane Ouma. His Japanese-style robe flapped in the wind, and his eyes were narrowed like pointed daggers. A cross-shaped scar ran down his face, which naturally resembled Ikki's since they were related.

"Ouma-niisan."


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Ikki hadn't expected Japan's only native Rank A Blazer, the Gale Emperor, to have business with him. But Ouma said nothing and simply continued to glare daggers at Ikki. There was a great deal of enmity and bloodlust wrapped up in his gaze, and the pressure he exuded was immense. Now that they were meeting one-on-one, Ikki could tell just how overwhelming Ouma's presence was. Though they were roughly the same height and build, Ouma felt like he was twice Ikki's size.

Ikki tensed his solar plexus to keep himself from drowning in the pressure and asked, "What do you want? Considering you're part of Akatsuki now, I doubt you're here to rekindle familial bonds."

This standoff was getting them nowhere, so Ikki decided to directly ask Ouma what he was after. There was no way a guy like Ouma would call him out without reason.

"There's only one reason I came here to meet you today," Ouma said after a few seconds. "There's something I need to tell you."

"And what's that?"

Ouma nodded, then spoke in a low voice that reverberated inside Ikki's entire body.

"Forfeit your entry into the Seven Stars Battle Festival, Ikki."

"What?!"

It was such a sudden demand that Ikki was momentarily stunned. Why did Ouma want him to bow out of the tournament? "Can I ask why?"

"Do you really need me to spell it out for you? You're more hopeless than I thought." Ouma frowned and said simply, "Because you're holding the Crimson Princess back."

"What was that?!" Ikki frowned as well upon hearing that. "How have I ever held Stella back? I'd prefer it if you didn't make baseless accusations."

"I'm simply stating the truth. Because a Rank F worm like you caught her by surprise and defeated her, she's wasted the past few months foolishly thinking you're the one she should be competing with. This is all because of your worthless misdirections."

"What do you mean?"

"Your ability to catch your opponent by surprise, the tactics you use—everything about your fighting style relies on deception. You use every trick in the book to snatch victory from the jaws of

defeat despite the paltry amount of power you possess. That cowardly mindset of yours isn't strength. That's not where true strength lies. The Crimson Princess will never attain true strength as long as she's chasing after you. In truth, I was disappointed by what I saw when I fought her. If she's truly a Rank A like me, there's no way that's her full potential." Ouma believed Stella was being held back because she thought Ikki's cheap tricks amounted to true strength. "So leave, you weakling. You're not worthy of the Crimson Princess."

"I see. So that's what you wanted."

Ikki let out a long sigh. He understood what Ouma was trying to say. Basically, Ouma was judging Ikki's worth based on his own criteria and perspective. To him, strength wasn't the ability to win in any situation but rather the magnitude of one's presence, the full measure of their power. In his mind, it was only natural for the more powerful fighter to win, and he considered anyone who broke that trend a fraud.

He really has no mercy, huh?

Ouma's words were a direct denial of everything Ikki stood for and had achieved. He thought it was heretical for a Rank F to aim for the top. It was so very much like Ouma to have such a simple, straightforward view of strength. But of course, Ikki didn't agree with his stance.

"I understand now why you think I'm holding Stella back. But I have no obligation to accept your worldview as the correct one. Besides, even if what you say is the objective truth and I'm nothing more than a fraud who wins through deception, Stella loves me for who I am. And she wants to fight me as I am. That's all that matters to me, Ouma-niisan. The promise I made with her carries far more weight to me than your words ever could. You won't convince me to step down."

Ouma didn't look particularly disappointed; he clearly hadn't expected to convince Ikki with words.

"You truly are a fool. That was an order, not a request. If you don't want to retire, I'll make you retire by force. That's all there is to it."

Looking more annoyed than anything, Ouma slowly summoned his Device, Ryuuzume. It was a Japanese nodachi, a longsword slightly longer than a katana. The moment his blade appeared, the

atmosphere in the park grew heavy, and the birds hiding in the trees flew away. The birds understood that everywhere within this park was already within range of Kurogane Ouma's Device. Naturally, Ikki was able to tell that as well. But he just smiled fearlessly.

"I like it when things are simple," he replied.

He summoned his own Device, Intetsu. He'd been prepared for this confrontation from the moment Ouma had shown himself. After all, there was no way his brother would have come here just to talk.

More importantly, Ouma had claimed that the time Stella had spent with Ikki had been worthless. To Ikki, meeting Stella and spending his days with her was the most treasured time of his life. He wouldn't forgive anyone who disparaged that. He wouldn't be satisfied until he'd taught Ouma a lesson. Both for his sake and Stella's.

"Why don't you see for yourself whether the man Stella tripped over is just another rock or a diamond in the rough!"

"Don't act so conceited, whelp!"

And so, the Kurogane brothers' surprise duel began.

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It was Kurogane Ouma, the Gale Emperor, who made the first move in their battle. He readied Ryuuzume, and it began to glow with an ethereal green light.

"Tch!"

Then, he swung it horizontally at Ikki, even though Ikki was still a good ten meters away. Naturally, even a nodachi didn't have a range that large, but that was without the help of Blazer powers.

"Ngh!"

Ikki ducked so low that he was nearly sliding across the ground. A second later, a blast of cold wind passed over his head and the trees behind him were cut down. While Ouma's blade couldn't reach that far, the shock waves of wind he unleashed with his swings definitely could. Creating wind vacuums like that and shooting them out was one of the most popular Noble Arts among wind-aspected Blazers, so it was hardly surprising that Ouma could use them.

"Haaah!"

Ouma swung Ryuuzume again, sending another vacuum wave

at Ikki. While these waves weren't as powerful as Stella's Dragon Fang, they moved faster than the speed of sound, making them much harder to dodge. But of course, Ikki wasn't so weak that basic techniques like these could bring him down.

"Hmph!"

He avoided the vacuum blades by a hair's breadth and started running toward Ouma. He also deftly slipped between Ouma's follow-up slashes, not even bothering to slow down.

Though they were supposed to be invisible, Ikki could clearly see the vacuum blades' trajectories. He was, of course, calculating them by watching the speed and angle at which Ouma swung Ryuuzume. Each vacuum blade traveled in a straight line from its point of origin, which was Ouma's blade. In other words, as long as he was keeping an eye on Ouma's nodachi, he could dodge with ease. It was no different than dodging gunfire. So long as you could see the angle of the muzzle and the moment someone pulled the trigger, you could easily move out of the path of a speeding bullet. Especially if you had Ikki's superb kinetic vision and trained reflexes.

"Hmph..."

Seeing that the vacuum blades were failing to even slow Ikki's approach, Ouma decided that such a basic skill wouldn't be enough to bring him down. Thus, he stepped forward, preparing to meet Ikki head-on. He swung his blade down toward Ikki's neck, intending to defeat him with steel since wind hadn't worked.

"Hiyaaah!"

"Tch!" *He's fast!*

Despite a nodachi being nearly as long and heavy as a spear, Ouma's slash was much faster than Ikki's. It wasn't because Ouma was a better swordsman—as far as Ikki could tell their swordsmanship was about evenly matched. The reason Ouma was faster was that he was able to manipulate the air around him to remove all air resistance. He was effectively swinging his blade through a vacuum, so of course his would be faster than Ikki's. It would be impossible for Ikki to counter something like that without Ittou Shura. Once he realized that, he swapped to a defensive stance, planning on playing it safe for a bit first.

"Ah?!"

But then, he heard a faint whooshing noise, and a chill ran

down his spine. He abandoned the idea of blocking Ouma's slash and instead jumped backward with all his might, causing Ouma's sword to slam into the soft sand that covered the park. And when it did, it kept going. It sliced cleanly through the ground, leaving an extremely deep gouge.

"Whoa!"

It was as if Ouma had split the very earth with his attack. Even Ikki was terrified by the power of that strike. Stella's blows caused the earth to shake, but slicing cleanly through it was something else entirely. After all, the earth shaking meant that Stella's power was being diffused out from the point of impact, proving that it wasn't being directed as precisely as it could be.

A perfectly directed slash wouldn't cause the ground to quake when it hit. It would simply cut silently through the point of impact, going as deep as possible before the power behind the slash was expended—much like what Ouma's slash had just done. He'd sliced through the ground like it was jelly. Ikki couldn't even fathom how many hundreds or even thousands of kilograms of perfectly controlled force it must have required to accomplish such a superhuman feat. All he could say for sure was that Ouma's attacks were like Stella's in that he couldn't afford to block any of them head-on.

But considering what his body's like, I can see how he's able to launch crazy attacks like that.

"I see you've changed a lot in the few years since I last saw you, Ouma-niisan. Way more than should be possible. Just how did you get your body to be like that?"

"Oho, you noticed how unnatural my body was before even crossing swords with me once. No wonder a fraud like you was able to cut Twin Wings." Ouma gave Ikki a feral smile. "But even if you've discovered the secret to my strength, you won't be able to do anything with that knowledge. Unlike your fake strength, mine is real."

It was true that Ouma's slashes were a threat. Ikki had neutralized Stella's extremely powerful attacks by using softer defensive techniques like parries to redirect the force of her blows, so this was hardly the first time he was going up against attacks he couldn't block in a straightforward manner. However, the parry style he'd used against Stella had only been viable because her

power control was still lacking.

No matter how strong you were, if you were swinging your sword around wildly, you wouldn't ever be able to cut a leaf drifting through the air. It was the same principle Ikki had applied against Stella to divert her attacks. But Ouma's slashes were perfectly controlled. There wasn't an ounce of wasted power in them. His slashes could cut a dozen leaves in two with pinpoint accuracy.

In that case, even Celestial Counter might not save me. What's the best way to withstand those devastating slashes?

Using Ittou Shura would give him enough speed and power to parry Ouma, but it seemed too early in the fight to give himself a one-minute hard stop. Especially since it was clear his opponent had more tricks up his sleeve that he needed to see first. That being the case, he needed a different strategy. He thought back to how he'd handled similar situations in previous fights.

"I can tell you're trying to think of another petty trick," Ouma said, scoffing at Ikki's thought process. "But like I said, there's nothing you can do in the face of true strength."

Ouma leaped backward and raised his blade high.

Is he going to fire off another vacuum wave? Ikki wondered. *No...*

Ouma pointed Ryuuzume straight up at the moon as if he were going to pierce through it.

"And I'm not interested in wasting any more time on a man like you. I've had enough of your scurrying about, so I'll put you on a time limit." Ouma gathered a large amount of mana around himself. "Entrap him, Void Barrier."

The green glow around Ryuuzume grew stronger, and a whirlwind whipped up around the battlefield.

"Ngh!"

Sand flew into Ikki's eyes, and he was forced to close them as the whirlwind spiraled up into the sky. He had to dig his toes into the ground to avoid being pulled into the air by the fierce current.

Ngh! Is he just trying to blind me?!

The sandy whirlwind destroyed his field of vision and made it difficult for him to move. Ikki thought that was all Ouma was hoping to achieve, but a second later, he realized he'd underestimated his older brother. There was no way Ouma, a man who sought only pure strength, would devise a technique whose

sole purpose was to restrict an opponent's fighting ability. There was something far more terrifying about his Void Barrier.

"Did you— Ack?!"

I can't breathe!

The extremely powerful current was funneling all of the air upward, leaving no oxygen behind for Ikki to breathe. This was what Ouma had meant by putting him on a time limit.

"Even those with training can only survive ten minutes without air, and in a fight, you'll be lucky to last a whole minute with how much oxygen your muscles will need. That's all the time you have left, so stop being stingy about using what little strength you do possess. Come at me with everything you've got."

Sensing that the Gale Emperor was serious, Ikki made up his mind.

He's right. I don't have the time to try and conserve my trump card, and he's not exactly the kind of opponent I can afford to do that against anyway.

Ikki had no idea what Ouma had done in the years since he'd vanished, but it was clear he was leagues stronger than he'd been when he left. Meanwhile, Ikki's strength had been inferior from the very start. Ikki gave up on trying to slowly gauge Ouma's strength and brought all of his mana to bear at once.

"Ittou Shura!"

Faint blue light rose from Ikki's body, and he began exuding a bladelust so powerful that it caused the nearby trees to shake. After having fought with so many powerful opponents, Ikki's bladelust had grown to a point where it exerted physical force. But of course, it didn't cause even the slightest stirrings of fear in Ouma's chest.

"So you came up with the idea of concentrating all of your meager mana into a brief burst of strength to try and match those whose total strength far eclipses yours? You truly are a charlatan to the very core. Just looking at you makes my skin crawl." Ouma scoffed at Ikki's Ittou Shura, not the least bit impressed by it. "Come. I'll kick you to the curb like the pebble you are."

He slowly brought Ryuuzume down, settling into a martial artist's stance. He really was as unflappable as a mountain. Ikki felt as though he were facing down a force of nature. For a moment, he nearly let himself get intimidated, but then he remembered

that he'd already used his trump card. He only had a minute available to him now. He couldn't afford to waste even a second of it.

"Haaaaah!"

He dashed forward, keeping his body low to the ground.

"Hiyaaaaah!"

In response, the Gale Emperor brought his blade down at Ikki's neck once more. His swing was blisteringly fast. But under the effects of Ittou Shura, Ikki was even faster.

I can match him!

Ikki was hoping to hit Ouma with a counter to the torso after parrying his first slash.

Don't be afraid...

Ikki kept telling himself that as he stared down Ryuuzume. Ouma's sword was sharp enough to gouge through the earth itself. If he let even an ounce of fear enter his heart, his parry would fail and he'd lose his head. *Focus!*

The only way to thread the needle of death was to have perfect focus. He needed absolute precision to successfully parry a slash like Ouma's. But he was confident he could do it. He'd trained hard enough, so there was nothing to be afraid of.

Let's gooooo!

Pumping himself up, he stepped into the path of that deadly blade.

...Huh?

Just then, his legs came to a halt.

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What's...going on?

Ikki was stunned by the sudden change within him right in the middle of this all-important clash. Even though he had been focusing intently on parrying Ouma's blade and had discarded all idle thoughts, his body had stopped moving as if it had a will of its own.

What the...

Unfortunately, there was no time to ponder this strange development. Ikki was the only one who'd stopped. Ouma's blade was still bearing down on him.

Shit!

Ikki just barely managed to get his sword up in time to block.

However, that meant he was taking the full brunt of Ouma's powerful slash head-on.

"Hrrrgh!"

Ikki felt as though he'd been hit by a truck. He flew a few dozen meters through the air and slammed into the park's stone wall.

"Gah!"

The impact damaged his organs, and he coughed up blood. Blocking Ouma's blow had cost him both of his arms as well, as every bone all the way up to his shoulders was now shattered. But none of that mattered to Ikki right now.

What was that just now?!

Ikki was still confused about why he'd suddenly stopped at the vital moment before Ouma's sword reached him.

Why did I freeze up?!

In all the years he'd spent with the sword, that hadn't happened even once.

Seeing Ikki's confusion, Ouma gave him a condescending look and said, "Hmph. What are you so surprised about? Did you really think you could stay the same as before after fighting the world's strongest swordsman? Even if your body was healed, it's obvious that some wounds would remain in your heart."

"What?!"

"I can't believe you had the gall to challenge me when you can't even properly accept her gift. You truly are hopeless."

Not even bothering to hide his disgust, Ouma once again took an offensive stance. He held Ryuuzume out at eye level, and it began to glow brighter than ever as wind gathered around it. That wind formed into a miniature twister, sucking in everything around it. Ouma was formulating his almighty tornado of wind that had cut through everything it had struck, including Stella's ultimate attack. This was Ouma's most powerful Noble Art, Kusanagi.

"In truth, a fraud like you isn't even worthy of Kusanagi. I don't want to do a half-assed job, however, so I'll give you the honor of killing you with it."

With that, the Gale Emperor unleashed his ultimate attack against the injured Worst One.

I-I can't take that hit head-on!

Ikki had to avoid it at all costs. Otherwise, he would certainly die. While he was curious what Ouma had meant about

Edelweiss's "gift," he put that out of his mind for now and ordered his battered body to flee from the oncoming threat. But once again, his body froze. No matter how much his brain kept telling his body to move, it just wouldn't.

Why?! Is it because I've been hurt too badly?

That was the first possibility that occurred to him, but he realized it couldn't be the case immediately after checking himself over. He was definitely injured, but not to the point that he couldn't move.

So why?!

He simply couldn't figure that out. But at this rate, he was going to eat the full force of Ouma's Kusanagi.

I've gotta do something.

Ikki frantically racked his brain—the only part of his body that was still functioning—for a solution, but turned up nothing. Just as the slicing maelstrom of wind was about to engulf him, though, someone appeared in front of him.

"Eat it all, Tiger King!"

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A figure wielding a glowing, golden spear stood between Ikki and the raging maelstrom capable of slicing through everything in its path. It was, of course, none other than the Seven Stars Sovereign, Moroboshi Yuudai.

With a feral gleam in his eye, he shouted, "Eat it all, Tiger King!"

He thrust his spear out toward the whirlwind, and golden mana began to gather at its tip. The condensed mana formed into the shape of a tiger's head, its fangs bared, and the illusory golden tiger bit down on the raging whirlwind, quite literally eating it up. Kusanagi, Ouma's trump card that had bested both the Crimson Princess and the Thunderbolt, was dispelled with incredible ease.

"Are you all right, Kurogane?!" Moroboshi asked, turning back to Ikki as the last vestiges of Ouma's whirlwind faded away.

"M-Moroboshi-san! What are you doing—"

"You forgot something at the restaurant, so I came to deliver it." He took Ikki's student handbook out of his pocket and dropped it in Ikki's lap. "When I called the doc, she said you were walking back home alone. So I started walking down the route to the hotel and saw you two duking it out."

Moroboshi then turned back to glare at the Gale Emperor.

“Long time no see, Ouma,” he said. “Last time we met was at one of the elementary school tournaments, wasn’t it?”

“Naniwa’s Star, huh? Well, I guess it’s ‘Seven Stars Sovereign’ now, isn’t it, Moroboshi?”

“Ha. I’d rather you didn’t call me that. There’s no point in winning a Seven Stars Battle Festival you’re not part of. But anyway, that’s not important right now.” Moroboshi frowned as he looked around at the destruction Ouma had caused to the park. There were deep fissures in the ground, and his wind had knocked down over half of the trees and left cracks in the stone wall. “Don’t you think you’re taking it a bit far for a sibling quarrel? If I hadn’t stepped in, you would’ve killed him.”

“Tiger Bite. A Noble Art that nullifies any and all other Noble Arts. You swallowed up not just my Kusanagi but also my Void Barrier.”

“That’s right. Your wind can’t hurt me. You still wanna keep going even after learning that? If ya keep brawling in my backyard, I’m gonna have to get serious.”

Moroboshi pointed his spear, Tiger King, at Ouma, and golden mana started gathering at its tip once more.

“No. I’ve lost interest in continuing this fight,” Ouma said in response to that threat, closing his eyes and dematerializing Ryuuzume. He wasn’t stopping because he didn’t think he would be able to beat Moroboshi’s Tiger Bite, though. He wasn’t that weak-willed. He simply didn’t see any point in continuing now. Then, looking condescendingly down at Ikki, he continued in an almost bored voice, “If you can’t even make full use of Twin Wings’ gift, there’s no need for me to kill you. You’ll lose tomorrow’s match and get booted out of the tournament either way, so I don’t even have to waste my time on you. I’m sure after the Crimson Princess sees you lose so badly, she’ll realize she was a fool for looking up to you.”

Ouma turned on his heel and walked off into the darkness of the night. Just before he disappeared from view, he muttered, “Still, you were lucky to have forgotten your handbook.”

With that, he vanished from sight.

“He looks pretty different from when he was in elementary school, but I see his abrasive personality hasn’t changed at all,” Moroboshi said with a long sigh. He turned back to Ikki and said,

“So, what was all that about? He mentioned Stella-chan, so are you two fighting over her or something? Two brothers going after the same woman?”

“Please don’t joke about that. I think I’d be dead if that was the case.” Ikki smiled wanly at Moroboshi and slowly got to his feet. “Thank you for rescuing me, by the way. And for bringing me my student handbook.”

“Anytime, man. Oh, I did wanna ask you, though…” Moroboshi narrowed his eyes and said in a serious tone, “What happened back there, Kurogane? Even from a distance, I could tell there was something off about your movements. And not because you were injured.”

Moroboshi had noticed the irregularity within Ikki. He’d seen that Ikki hadn’t even attempted to dodge Ouma’s Kusanagi. Unfortunately, Ikki had no idea what the problem was either.

“To be honest, I don’t know. Something happened in that moment, but…” Ikki replied with a shake of his head. There hadn’t even been any signs that something was wrong. His body had just frozen up suddenly without warning even though he was pretty sure he was in top form for the upcoming tournament.

“I see. Well, from my perspective, it looked like you were just standing there like a deer in headlights,” Moroboshi said, not bothering to sugarcoat it at all. After a pause, he added, “But that couldn’t have been it, right?”

There was no way someone who’d earned a ticket to the Seven Stars Battle Festival would be a coward who froze up when up against an opponent’s overwhelming attack. Especially not when that someone was Ikki. Even in the face of Stella’s Karsalitio Salamandra, Ikki had just smiled. There was no way he’d be afraid.

“Ah!”

However, an ominous thought ran through Ikki’s mind upon hearing Moroboshi’s words.

“Did you really think you could stay the same as before after fighting the world’s strongest swordsman? Even if your body was healed, it’s obvious that some wounds would remain in your heart.”

He thought back to what Ouma had said during their battle. In retrospect, Ouma had a point. Ikki had fought the world’s strongest swordsman. And even though he’d been defeated, he was unscathed now. But that in and of itself should have been

impossible. There was no way nothing had changed inside him after having experienced such a harrowing battle. It was wishful thinking to hope that he'd come out truly unscathed.

A shiver ran down Ikki's spine as a terrifying possibility presented itself to him. He'd heard about similar things happening to people in other sports that involved fighting, like boxing. There were times when, after suffering a particularly traumatizing defeat, boxers would start instinctively fearing punches and freezing up whenever one was aimed at them. It was a psychological condition that was called "punch eye" by those in the boxing world. Naturally, boxers suffering from punch eye were unable to continue fighting. Most people considered fighters suffering such psychological conditions to be, in some sense, broken.

What if, after that fight…I became broken too?

The checkup he'd gotten after fighting Edelweiss had shown that, physically, he was perfectly fit. Furthermore, he'd had no trouble bringing out his full potential during training. But what if that had just been because he hadn't been in any danger? What if he'd developed punch eye and the symptoms had only begun to show after Ouma had seriously tried to kill him?

It was a harrowing thought, and one Ikki couldn't a hundred percent deny. If anything, he felt like Ouma had to be right. There was no way he could have survived a fight with Edelweiss of all people and come away unscathed. It only made sense for either his body or his spirit to have broken after that.

"What's with that look on your face? Do you have an idea of what the problem might be?" Moroboshi asked, looking concerned.

"No… Not really."

Ikki couldn't bring himself to voice the possibility he'd thought of to Moroboshi. He didn't want to show any weakness to the opponent he'd be fighting tomorrow, but more than anything, he didn't want to disappoint Moroboshi. *"I want you to be in the best possible shape when you fight me."* He couldn't possibly betray Moroboshi's expectations when Moroboshi was looking forward to fighting him so much. To that end, he swallowed his fears and put them out of his mind for now.

"I see. Well, we better get you to the hospital. I'll call an

ambulance, so you just wait here," Moroboshi said after staring at Ikki for a few seconds. He decided not to pry any further and called 911.

"I'm sorry..." Ikki muttered softly, placing a hand over his chest.

Ittou Shura had worn off, and all that remained was an overwhelming sense of exhaustion. It numbed his pain receptors, and his wounds didn't hurt as much as they should have. But that didn't make him feel any better.

What's wrong with me... What's wrong with my body?

He was still terrified of the possibility that he might be broken inside. The whole time he was getting treated, and even after he returned to his hotel room, he kept asking himself the same question. He delved deep into his psyche and tried to find out whether he really was broken or not. But as far as he could tell, nothing was wrong. In fact, he was in perfect condition.

Am I actually broken? If not, why did I freeze up back there?

Ikki couldn't figure out what the problem was, which made it impossible to try to overcome. He knew it would be reckless to fight the Seven Stars Sovereign without resolving this issue. If he froze up again in the middle of the match, he'd lose for sure. He needed to solve this problem no matter what, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't figure out what the root of it was.

As he continued to worry, morning arrived.

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"People claim that strife is evil. That it gives birth only to hatred. People claim that peace is sublime. That it nurtures compassion and generosity. People claim that violence is sinful. That hurting others is wrong. People claim that cooperation is a virtue. That it teaches people empathy. Those of good conscience all agree with these principles. And yet, people still admire strength! They long to be the strongest! To acquire the power to crush any who would oppose them! They crave absolute might so that they can do as they please with no one to stop them!

"Who among you can claim to have never once wished to be the strongest in the world?! You would be lying to yourself if you said the thought had never crossed your mind! Everyone dreams at least once of being the strongest alive! And most people give up on that dream after realizing how much time, effort, and sacrifice is required! But this is a tournament for those who never gave up

on that dream! For those who continue to risk their lives in pursuit of that pure goal we all long for, to be the strongest!

“Representing Hokkaido, we have Rokuzon Academy! Representing Tohoku, we have Kyomon Academy! Representing North Kanto, we have Donrou Academy! Representing South Kanto, we have Hagun Academy! Representing Kinki and Chubu, we have Bukyoku Academy! Representing Chugoku and Shikoku, we have Rentei Academy! Representing Kyushu and Okinawa, we have Bunkyoku Academy! And finally, we have our newest entrant, Japan’s homegrown Akatsuki Academy! Thirty-two elites picked from the eight best Blazer schools in the country will now fight for the title of Japan’s strongest student knight!

“There can be only one Seven Stars Sovereign! Who among these thirty-two knights will take the crown this year?! Fight to your hearts’ content, dear Blazers, for this is the one stage, the one time where no one will blame you for craving strength! Where your desire for might becomes not a sin but a virtue! Let the sixty-second Seven Stars Battle Festival begiiin!”

Hagun Academy Bulletin

Character Intros — Journalist: Kusakabe Kagami

Kurogane Ouma



■PROFILE

Affiliation: Akatsuki Academy

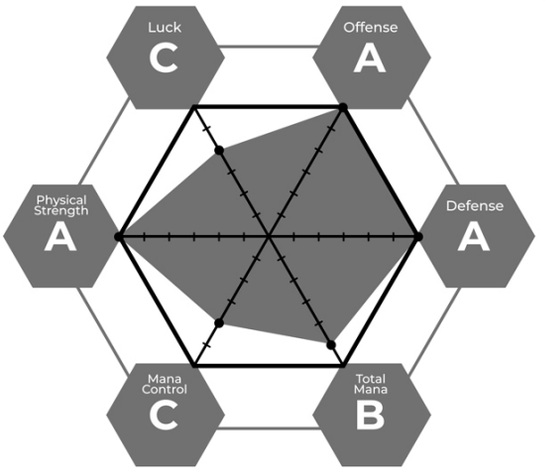
Third-Year

Blazer Rank: A

Noble Art: Kusanagi

Nickname: Gale Emperor

Summary: Formerly the strongest student knight in Bukyoku Academy.





Kagamin's Thoughts!

He's the only Japanese Rank A student knight. Back in elementary school, he won the under-twelve world championship and was quite a famous up-and-coming Blazer. But when he entered middle school, he stopped appearing in official matches. This Seven Stars Battle Festival is the first time in years that he's making a public appearance. No one knows where he was or what he was doing, but he's clearly as strong as ever. He's definitely the favorite to win the tournament.

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Chapter 3: The Seven Stars Battle Festival Begins

All the way back at Hagun Academy, a girl opened her eyes in one of the rooms in the hospital ward.

"Mmm..."

She found herself staring up at an unfamiliar white ceiling.

Where am I? she thought, slightly confused. She didn't recall being sent to the hospital, and she'd been unconscious for long enough that her mind was still fuzzy.

She reflexively pushed herself up into a sitting position and looked around. As the blanket slid off of her, the blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl sitting next to her bed, Toutokubara Kanata, turned away from the TV to look at her.

"Ah, you're finally awake, Touka-chan! Thank goodness."

Kanata breathed a sigh of relief, and Touka looked up at her.

"Kana-cha— Ack?!" She bit her tongue halfway through her first word. "I bith my thongue..."

"Your body's still sluggish, so don't push yourself. You've been asleep for quite a long time."

"I have?" *Why was I unconscious for so long?*

As Touka started sifting through her memories, she heard one of the announcers on the TV shout, *"And with that, we're almost halfway through the first round of the Seven Stars Battle Festival. Our final match in the B block is one I know everyone's excited to see! It's Hagun Academy's Crimson Princess, Stella Vermillion, versus Kyomon Academy's Icy Sneer, Tsuruya Mikoto! We have a professional King of Knights member, Muroto, here to give additional commentary on—"*

"Ah!" Upon hearing that voice, Touka remembered everything. She'd led the student council in a battle against Akatsuki's students to protect Stella and had fallen to the Gale Emperor, Kurogane Ouma. She had no idea what had happened after that, so she turned to Kanata, pale-faced, and asked, "Kana-chan, wh-what happened after we lost?! How's Stella-san doing?! Are Kurogane-kun and the others safe?!"

"Don't worry, the Hagure sisters were able to protect Vermillion-

san, and while Kurogane-kun was injured in the fighting, it was nothing serious. He was fully healed by the time he went to the tournament venue. All of us were defeated by Devices in phantom form, so physically, we're all fine as well. You and the vice president just took so much damage that you've been in comas for a while, that's all."

"Uta-kun too?"

"Yes."

Kanata gestured behind Touka, and Touka turned to see that Utakata was sleeping in the bed next to hers.

"Uta-kun..."

"It's all right. Just like you, he needs time to sleep off the exhaustion. His life isn't in any danger, and he'll probably wake up in another day or two."

"I see... Haaah..." Touka let out a relieved sigh. *I guess I managed to do my job as student council president, at least.*

If nothing else, it seemed Hagun Academy had managed to escape total destruction. That was more than good enough. And it had only been possible thanks to the comrades who'd fought alongside Touka.

"Thank you, Kana-chan."

"Heh. Don't forget to thank all the others too. I'm sure it'll make them happy."

"Yeah, I will."

"Uh-oh! Looks like we've got a problem!" the announcer on the TV shouted suddenly.

"Oh, what's all the commotion? Did something happen?"

"I don't know. Let's see what he says."

Touka and Kanata turned to the TV and turned up the volume.

Sweating profusely, the bespectacled announcer said, *"It seems Stella Vermillion has yet to reach the venue and is not present for her match!"*

Touka and Kanata looked at each other, stunned.

"Wh-What?!"

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What do you mean she's not present for her match?!

Kanata had just told Touka that Stella was fine, so this was a huge shock.

"Kana-chan, you mentioned that Kurogane-kun was already at

the venue. Did Stella-san not go with him?"

"I don't know all the details, but I heard she took her loss to the Gale Emperor particularly hard and went to Saikyou-sensei for special training. It's possible that she didn't travel to the venue with him."

"I see. But if she's with Saikyou-sensei, then why's she late?"

Kanata didn't have the answer to that, but fortunately, it seemed the announcers did.

"Ah, I just received word from the Management Committee. It appears the train Stella Vermillion was taking ran into some trouble and has been delayed."

"That's quite the dilemma. The whole reason we ask the players to gather two days before is to avoid issues like this."

"Indeed. It would have been nice if she'd come to Osaka with all of Hagun's other students. Oh, it appears Icy Sneer Tsuruya Mikoto is asking the Committee for a win by default!"

"Will Stella-san get disqualified?" Kanata asked worriedly.

"No, that won't happen," Touka replied, shaking her head. Since she'd participated in the previous year's Seven Stars Battle Festival, she was familiar with the tournament's rules. "You're not required to be on-site two days before, and according to the regulations, if you're late for your match, it'll simply be delayed."

"Looks like we have word from the Committee! Here's their statement, 'In accordance with the rules of the tournament, the final B-block match will be delayed, so we cannot award you a win by default.'"

"I suppose that is what the rules say."

"Is there no penalty for arriving late to your match?"

"Not in this instance, since the Committee has also confirmed that Stella Vermillion's train was delayed by forces outside her control. I really do wish we would formally make it a requirement to arrive at the venue two days ahead of time to avoid problems like this, though."

The Committee made all decisions regarding the Seven Stars Battle Festival, and as was the case with most sports tournaments, their decisions were absolute. If they'd decided that Stella wouldn't be disqualified for being late, she was safe.

"Phew..." Kanata let out a relieved sigh. "I was about to start panicking."

"She still has to make it to the venue before her extension runs

out. Otherwise, she'll be disqualified." *I'm sure she can get there in time…*

With Stella's match delayed, it was time for the tournament to move on to the next block's matches.

"We will now have a ten-minute break to repair and maintain the ring, after which we'll start the C-block matches."

"If they're already halfway through the first round, I must have missed a lot of matches. How unfortunate. Hey, Kana-chan, has Kurogane-kun already had his match?"

"Not yet. He's the fourth match in C block, so it should be coming up soon."

"That's good." Ikki was the one who'd defeated her to become one of Hagun's representatives. She had a duty to see his matches through to their end. "By the way, who's his opponent?"

"Oh, yes, I forgot you were unconscious when they announced the brackets."

"Yep. So who's he going to be fighting, Kana-chan?"

"I think you'll find his first opponent to be quite…interesting." Kanata half smiled, half frowned. Touka suddenly had a really bad feeling about what she was going to say next. "The Worst One's first opponent is…Moroboshi Yuudai, the Seven Stars Sovereign."

I should have known.

"I see Kurogane-kun is up against quite the opponent for his very first match."

"Indeed. I thought this back during the selection matches as well, but he might be the unluckiest person in the world."

"Another way of looking at it is that true heroes are always given the toughest trials."

Still, to think he'd have to fight the Seven Stars Sovereign right off the bat. Since so many people had pulled out of the tournament this year, there were no seed slots in the bracket, and Ikki was paying the price for that. *He's like a black hole that sucks in bad luck from everywhere…*

"Seeing as you've fought both of them, who do you think has the upper hand?" Kanata asked, unable to hide her curiosity.

"Let me think…" Touka said. They were running commercials during the break, so it wasn't like she needed to focus on anything else. After a few minutes, she finally said, "I'd say the odds are six-to-four in Moroboshi-kun's favor."

“Wow. That’s a lot more than I was expecting. Especially considering Kurogane-kun’s opponent is the Seven Stars Sovereign.”

“If you consider their official power rankings, it’s a bold claim, but there’s a reason I think it’s so close.”

“And that reason is?”

“Kurogane-kun is suited to fighting opponents like Moroboshi-kun. You know about Moroboshi-kun’s Noble Art, Tiger Bite, right?”

“A Noble Art that nullifies other Noble Arts, right?”

“Yep. It’s our Noble Arts, our ability to manipulate mana and basically use magic, that makes us Blazers superhuman. However, Moroboshi-kun’s power allows him to consume the mana of others. That gives him an immense advantage in battles against other Blazers. Lorelei’s water, the Crimson Princess’s flames, the Gale Emperor’s wind—all of them are powerless against Moroboshi-kun. After all, his Tiger King devours all the mana it touches.”

“That was why you were forced to get close to him in last year’s match, right?”

Touka nodded in response. The year before, Moroboshi’s Tiger Bite had consumed her long-range lightning attacks, so she’d tried to get into close range and hit him with her Thunderbolt since it was an attack that would come out faster than he could react. But his spear skills had been far greater than she’d expected, and ultimately, she’d been unable to get within striking distance. It had been a bitter defeat.

“It really does seem like a broken skill,” Kanata said softly.

“It sure is. It’s only useful against other Blazers, but it’s unbelievably powerful against them. That said, Kurogane-kun doesn’t rely on mana to fight. He relies more on martial arts to win his fights than possibly any other Blazer. He only ever uses his mana during decisive moments when he’s sure it’ll cinch the match. Meanwhile, Tiger Bite’s only property is that it nullifies the Noble Arts of other Blazers. It has no innate offensive benefits, which is why Moroboshi-kun also has to fight with martial arts, relying on his spear technique to actually attack his foes.”

As a result, Moroboshi and Ikki’s duel would be a contest of martial prowess, not Blazer skills. Of course, that still left Moroboshi at an advantage since spears had longer reach than

swords.

“But I don’t think superior reach alone will be enough to stop Another One,” Touka added.

A year ago, Touka had been brought down by that difference in reach. But Ikki possessed exceptional foresight and agility. On top of that, his suite of martial arts tricks was far beyond what any normal student knight had. Even the Seven Stars Sovereign would have trouble keeping Ikki at medium range.

“So you think it’s entirely possible for there to be a huge upset in this match?”

“Absolutely.”

At the very least, Touka doubted it would be a one-sided stomp. She’d fought both Moroboshi and Ikki, so she could say that much for certain. Ikki’s close-combat abilities were among the best in Japan—definitely enough to win him the title of Seven Stars Sovereign.

But even then, it really is bad luck that you have to fight the Seven Stars Sovereign in your very first match. Still, I have faith that you’ll pull through.

“You can do this, Kurogane-kun!”

Touka shouted words of encouragement for the boy fighting hundreds of miles away.


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“All right, everyone. The ring has been repaired, and we will soon start the C-block matches. Fighters, please make your way to your respective waiting rooms.”

The cameras panned over the arena, showing a pristine, white, stone ring surrounded by a field of artificial turf. Ikki watched from the stands as the maintenance workers hurried out of the arena before turning to Shizuku and Alisuin.

“All right, I’m gonna head over to the waiting room.”

He pushed off the fence he’d been leaning against and started heading toward the waiting rooms. As he was the last match in C block, he didn’t have to head over this early, but he wanted to anyway.

“Good luck, Ikki.”

“May you emerge victorious, Onii-sama. I must say, Stella-san truly is an ungrateful woman. I don’t care if she’s late to her own matches, but I can’t believe she didn’t make it in time for yours.”

“Normally, wouldn’t it be more important to make it in time for your own match?”

“I’ll have to torture her with the evilest tricks I learned from *Secrets to Being a Mother-in-Law: How to Torment Your Son’s New Wife* next time I see her.”

“Ha ha. Don’t bully her too much, okay? I’ll see you guys later.”

Shizuku clearly wasn’t happy that the person Ikki loved most was missing when his match was less than an hour away, but Ikki himself seemed perfectly relaxed. His expression was calm, and he didn’t look like he was moments away from a fierce battle.

“Thank goodness.” Shizuku breathed a sigh of relief as she watched him go. “It seems Onii-sama isn’t nervous like he was before.”

“Heh. I suppose that’s only to be expected. Now that he’s fought Twin Wings, I imagine the Seven Stars Sovereign doesn’t scare him in the slightest.”

Shizuku nodded in agreement. She fully believed his confrontation with Edelweiss had been a positive for him.

“Yo. How’s it going, you two?”

Just then, they heard a familiar voice. They turned around to see a girl in a white lab coat walking over to them.

“Hello, Kiriko-san,” Shizuku said.

“My, we seem to be running into each other an awful lot recently,” Alisuin noted.

“Hee hee, so we do. Perhaps we’re fated to keep seeing each other.”

“That’s not the kind of fate I want considering you’re a doctor,” Alisuin said.

“Fair enough,” Kiriko replied with a small laugh and a shrug of her shoulders. But then, her expression turned serious and she said, “By the way, I passed the Worst One on my way here and I’m curious, did something happen to him?”

“What do you mean?” Shizuku asked, immediately wary. “Onii-sama looked perfectly relaxed to me.”

“That’s the problem. He’s too relaxed,” Kiriko explained, frowning.

“Hmm?”

“I examined him as we passed by each other, and his pulse, body temperature, blood pressure, and hormone secretion were all at baseline levels. But normally, when you’ve got a fight coming up, you’ll get a little bit excited, or nervous, or something. And yet, Kurogane-kun was completely calm.”

That wasn’t a normal human response. Indeed, Ikki had in fact been rather excited last night when he’d been talking to Moroboshi. It was unnatural for him to be showing no signs of excitement now that their match was about to begin.

“The only explanation is that he’s forcing his body to stay relaxed,” Kiriko continued. “I didn’t get that sense from him yesterday. When we parted ways, he looked like he was in peak condition: excited, but only enough to sharpen his focus and hone his senses. Did something happen to worry him?”

Onii-sama…worried?

“A-Are you sure about what you saw?!”

“I never make mistakes when it comes to examining patients. I don’t know what could be bothering him, though.”

“Is it possible he’s simply forcing himself to relax to avoid tensing up too much?”

“I doubt it. You need a little tension to bring out your full potential. And frankly, he’s too good a fighter to not know that. That’s why I’m worried.”

An ominous silence fell over the group. Shizuku thought back to

what Kiriko had told them the night before, about why Ikki wouldn't be able to beat Moroboshi Yuudai.

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"What do you mean, 'haunted by an almost tragic sense of duty'?" Shizuku asked, perhaps a bit more harshly than usual because she didn't like the implication that her brother was inferior to Moroboshi. Even if that wasn't what Kiriko had meant, it was how it had come off to her. However, Kiriko wasn't just making baseless claims.

"You saw Moroboshi-kun's sister at the restaurant earlier, right? I'm sure you've noticed, but she can't speak."

"Yes, the Seven Stars Sovereign mentioned that it was a psychological problem."

"You see, it's Moroboshi-kun's fault that Koume-chan can't speak anymore."

"Wh-What?!"

"Or rather, that's what Moroboshi-kun believes. I don't really see it that way myself."

Kiriko then started explaining what she'd meant when she'd said that Moroboshi was driven by a sense of duty. It had all started with the accident six years ago—the tragedy that befell Naniwa's Star, the rising young champion of the Kansai region.

"Moroboshi-kun and his family were taking the train to a nearby amusement park when they got caught up in a large-scale train derailment. The accident made national news, so I assume you two have heard about it?"

"I heard there were hundreds of deaths and hundreds more injuries," Shizuku answered, nodding. She recalled seeing the news about that incident back at home. "I didn't know the Seven Stars Sovereign had been caught up in it until Onii-sama told me earlier today, though."

"That's right, it was a terrible accident with hundreds of casualties. Honestly, Moroboshi-kun was lucky to have survived it at all. But he didn't get out unscathed. His parents and sister only had minor injuries, but both of his legs were crushed."

"'Crushed'? As in completely?!"

"Yes. iPS capsules are the pinnacle of modern medical

technology, and they're capable of reattaching lost limbs, even heads that have been decapitated from bodies in certain situations. But reattachment is the most they can do at present. They can't grow back legs that have been smooshed into paste." In other words, Moroboshi's injuries had been too great for modern medicine to completely heal. "He survived the accident, but he was forced to retire from the upcoming elementary school tournament. It was a huge blow to the famed Naniwa's Star, who people had been calling the greatest prodigy since the Demon Princess."

Shizuku could imagine how unbearable that must have been. Unfortunately, Moroboshi had been unable to even walk on his own, so there was no way he could have fought in a tournament. While it had been a bitter pill to swallow, at first, Moroboshi had been willing to accept his fate. He'd always been an optimistic, cheerful guy, and he'd come to terms with the fact that he'd have to walk a new path in life. However...

"While he was able to accept things, his sister wasn't," Kiriko went on. Though Moroboshi Koume hadn't been physically impacted by the accident, her mind hadn't fared as well. "You see, the day of the accident, the reason they were all going to an amusement park was because she had begged her parents to take her there."

"D-Does that mean Koume-san..."

"Yes. Koume-chan blames herself for Moroboshi-kun's condition."

She'd convinced herself that if she hadn't asked to go to the amusement park, her brother wouldn't have lost his legs or his promising future. She believed it was her own selfishness that had ruined everything, and she'd kept blaming herself until her heart had shattered. As a result, she'd lost the ability to speak. It was almost as if she were punishing herself for speaking so selfishly before.

"I see. I never knew that happened after the accident..."

"Psychological conditions are the hardest ones to treat. Unlike physical injuries or illnesses, the symptoms and treatment methods vary from person to person. And medical science is woefully unequipped to help. Despite all that, one boy is still desperately trying to cure Koume-chan's condition."

Shizuku could easily guess who Kiriko was referring to.

"You mean the Seven Stars Sovereign, Moroboshi Yuudai?"

"That's right. Seeing his sister retreat into herself lit a fire under Moroboshi-kun. He'd been ready to give up on being a knight, but that gave him a reason to come back."

Kiriko went on to explain that not even six months after the incident, Moroboshi had shown up at her doorstep. She didn't know how he'd found out that she'd been researching full-body restoration using the body's own cells, but he'd been determined to undergo the experimental treatment she'd been working on.

"Doc. I'm begging you. Please give me a body capable of fighting again!" he'd said to her. He hadn't even consulted with his family before crawling all the way to Hiroshima from Osaka. He'd been covered in mud and hanging on through sheer determination alone.

"I agreed immediately. Not because I'd been moved by his passion, but because Moroboshi-kun was the ideal test subject for trying out my new treatment. Heh. I'm a pretty horrible person, don't you think? Back then, I thought I could do anything, and that it was fine to go to any lengths if it meant I cured my patient. So I didn't hesitate to try something unprecedented, something that everyone thought was beyond mortal ken."

"Does that mean Moroboshi-san's legs are…"

"Yes. I recreated them by breaking him down at the cellular level and remaking his body."

As a water user herself, Shizuku understood just how godlike that sort of technique was. The Doctor Knight was truly something else. There were probably only three Blazers in the world who could regrow someone's legs like that. Moreover, since Moroboshi's new legs were made from his own body's cells, there was no risk of rejection like there would be with an organ transplant. And unlike prosthetics, they would act and feel just like his legs—because they *were* his legs.

"But wait, a person's legs make up close to half of their body by volume. If you used Moroboshi-san's own cells to recreate his legs, wouldn't that mean the rest of his body was left in a barely functional state?" Alisuin asked.

Shizuku was thinking the same thing, and it seemed their guess was right on the money.

“You know how to ask the right questions. That’s right. Recreating his legs took a huge toll on Moroboshi’s body. For starters, he lost a huge amount of muscle mass. So much so that his atrophied muscles could barely support critical life functions like breathing. I also had to recreate dense bones like femurs, which meant he also lost a lot of bone density, giving him osteoporosis throughout his body.”

Right after the surgery, Moroboshi had been in such a critical state that every breath had caused his sternum to crack. Even the accident hadn’t left him that debilitated. But that had only been the start of his troubles. Since he was practically skin and bones, he’d needed to start exercising right away to rebuild what muscle mass and bone density he’d lost. If he’d put off rehab for too long, his body would’ve simply failed and he would’ve died. And so, Kiriko had forced him to undergo a professional athlete’s training regimen despite his brittle body.

“Of course, his bones and muscles couldn’t take that kind of strain.”

Moroboshi had continually suffered broken bones and torn muscles. His weakened tendons had snapped often as well, and even his nerves had occasionally ripped. But he’d just gritted his teeth, continuing to run with broken legs and lift weights with broken arms.

Naturally, every time his bones and muscles and tendons and nerves had broken, Kiriko had immediately healed him, but that meant he’d had to endure the pain of his body breaking thousands of times over. Kiriko’s treatment had been harsher than the worst torture. Moroboshi had spent his days throwing up and soiling himself from the pain as he’d tried to keep up with her hellish rehabilitation program.

“Finally, after three months, it just became too much.”

“I can’t blame him. Rehab like that is too much even for someone with an iron will…” Shizuku muttered.

“Honestly, it’s impressive that he lasted three months,” Alisuin said.

A treatment like that could hardly be called a treatment anymore. If anything, it would have been weirder if Moroboshi had been able to keep going. But to their surprise, Kiriko shook her head.

“Don’t misunderstand,” she told them. “He wasn’t the one who couldn’t take it anymore. It was me.”

“Huh?”

“At first, I kept an accurate medical log like I had with all of my test subjects thus far. But unlike all of my other test subjects, he was a human, not a lab rat. A living, breathing human being, just like me. After watching him get subjected to pain no person should ever have to suffer for weeks on end, I started to lose my sanity. It got so bad that I started having nightmares of him screaming in pain every night.”

Three months in, Kiriko had become convinced that her research was evil and that she had to stop before she took things too far. Modern prosthetics were quite good, she’d thought, though they couldn’t make the same minute movements a real leg could. You couldn’t channel mana through them either, so Moroboshi wouldn’t be able to return to being a knight, but he could live an otherwise normal life. Kiriko had felt like that was good enough, and she’d told Moroboshi that it would be best if they just stopped the hellish rehabilitation and she returned the body mass she’d used to make his legs back to his upper body.

“What do you think Moroboshi said to me then?”

She remembered those words vividly even now. Though he’d been panting heavily and had just finished throwing up, Moroboshi had looked Kiriko right in the eye and said, *“Hey, Doc. What do you think the last words Koume said were? She said ‘I’m sorry’ as tears spilled down her face. Ever since then, she hasn’t said a single thing, and it’s all because I’m such a pathetic older brother. If I hadn’t gotten hurt, Koume wouldn’t feel so guilty. Now she thinks it was selfish of her to ever ask us to take her to the amusement park. That’s why I can’t stop here. I have to show her that she has nothing to apologize for. That there’s nothing to worry about. But I can’t do that with this pathetic body. I have to get back everything I lost in that accident. My legs, my strength, and my title. I have to show her through my actions and not my words that I’m perfectly fine, or she’ll never forgive herself. So please, continue my rehab. It doesn’t matter how many times my bones break or my muscles tear, I can’t stop until she forgives herself and starts speaking again. I’m her older brother! I can’t afford to look pathetic in front of her!”*

“Moroboshi stuck with the rehab until the very end. His resolve

was unbelievable. After a few years, his hard work finally paid off. Naniwa's Star made a comeback, and he was even stronger than before." He'd gone on to win his way to the top, earning the title of Seven Stars Sovereign. "But he still hasn't completed the mission he's set for himself. He won't stop until Koume-chan starts speaking again."

The reason Moroboshi had wanted to fight Ikki at his best wasn't that he was trying to improve as a Blazer but that he believed he needed to beat ever-stronger opponents for his sister's sake. It was his desire to hear Koume speak again that had let him crawl out of the depths of hell, and it was what was pushing him forward even now. In other words, it was his sense of duty as an elder brother that was driving him.

"I've watched over him all these years, so I can say this for certain: Moroboshi Yuudai, the Seven Stars Sovereign, isn't the kind of man you can defeat if your primary motivation is just self-improvement. People who fight for others possess a unique strength that isn't easily overcome."

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Shizuku shivered as she thought back to Kiriko's story. In order to get his sister's voice back, Moroboshi had survived a hellish rehabilitation program and recovered from an injury that everyone had believed would be career-ending. His determination and resolve were nothing short of superhuman.

Moroboshi-san is certainly strong. Both in body and in spirit. Shizuku could tell he wasn't someone you could beat with doubts in your heart. *Onii-sama, please don't waver!*

She said a silent prayer for Ikki, looking over at the blue gate from which he would eventually appear.

"Ah…"

As she did so, she happened to catch a glimpse of Koume sitting in the spectator stands above the gate. Much like her, Koume was staring over at the opposite gate, which *her* brother would be coming out of. But she had a pained expression on her face.

"Ahem. Sorry for the wait, everyone. Maintenance on the ring is complete, so let's get the first match of the C block started!"

At the announcer's words, Shizuku turned her attention away from Koume and back to the ring. But she couldn't help but think

about how she would feel if she were in Koume's position. If Ikki had lost his legs because of her and then gone through hell anyway just to try and get her voice back, how would she feel? How would it feel to only be able to watch from the sidelines as he kept getting hurt over and over again, all for her sake? It tore at her heart just thinking about it.

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The C-block matches went smoothly, and there were no delayed matches like Stella's in the B block. While he waited for his match to start, Moroboshi did some light warm-ups and then sat down in one of the waiting room chairs and stared at a single piece of paper. It read, "Do your best!" in cutesy handwriting.

Last night, Moroboshi hadn't returned to the hotel. After getting Ikki an ambulance, he'd returned to the store, and it had remained extremely crowded all the way up until closing time. As a result, he'd decided to just spend the night at home. This morning, when he'd left to go to the tournament venue, Koume had given him this piece of paper. Before he'd headed out, he'd asked Koume, *"Hey, could you cheer me on and tell me to do my best like you always do?"* This was like a ritual for him; he always asked Koume to cheer him on before a match. And every time, Koume would scrunch up her face a little as if conflicted about something, but then quickly force a smile and write "Do your best!" on a piece of paper. This morning had been no different.

Moroboshi silently thought back to the face she'd made this morning. It had been equal parts apologetic and pained. He knew why Koume made that expression every time. She'd realized that he'd come back to the world of Mage-Knights for her sake. Of course, he had never actually said as much, but they were siblings. It wasn't hard for either of them to figure out what the other was thinking. And that was precisely why Koume hesitated each time. It felt presumptuous to tell Moroboshi to do his best when she knew he was doing it all for her.

Moroboshi could tell she felt that way, which was why he'd smiled at her and said, "Don't be silly."

You don't have to feel bad, Koume. You haven't done anything wrong. None of this is your fault. Just take your time recovering at your own pace. It doesn't matter if it takes years or even decades. I won't lose until you can speak again. Until you realize that you never took

anything from me and can move forward, I'll keep on winning! I just hope that when you do recover, we can go back to how things were before and—

"This is an announcement for the fighters in the waiting rooms. The third match of the C block has ended. We will soon begin the fourth match of the C block. Hagun Academy's Kurogane Ikki and Bukyoku Academy's Moroboshi Yuudai, please make your way to the ring."

"All right, let's do this!" *Watch me close, Koume!*

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"And that wraps up the third match of the C block. Jougasaki Byakuya expertly chased his opponent out of the ring and won by a ten-count ring out. It was an impressive play by the Blazer who placed second in last year's tournament. What did you think of the match, Muroto?"

"His skills were impressive, but honestly, as a Mage-Knight, ring outs aren't very satisfying. I understand that the rule exists to ensure the fighters' safety, but I feel like matches should be settled *in* the ring. Ha ha ha."

"Understandable. I imagine many spectators feel the same way as you. Well, hopefully we'll get a proper conclusion to our next match! All right, everyone, it's the battle you've all been waiting for! The most hotly anticipated match of the day! The final match of the C block!"

At announcer Iida's voice, the gates on both sides of the ring flew open. Moroboshi was the first to come out.

"Coming from the red gate, we have last year's winner, Bukyoku Academy third-year Moroboshi Yuudai! His spearmanship is a sight to behold, and his Blazer power is a natural counter to other Blazers! His ability to devour the mana of other Blazers is what allowed him to climb all the way to the top! But even so, he didn't have an easy climb! He suffered a debilitating injury that cost him both his legs when he was in elementary school, forcing him to retire from his final little league tournament. Everyone thought his career as a knight was over, but he overcame an injury everyone thought would be permanent and clawed his way back to the top! This is a man who's known both glory and despair! Give it up for the Seven Stars Sovereign, Moroboshi Yuudaaai! Will he win again and become the first person in history to hold the Seven Stars

Sovereign title multiple years in a row?!”

The crowd erupted into cheers, shaking the earth with their yells. There was probably no student knight in Japan as popular as Moroboshi.

“Hoshiii! Hoshiii!”

“Listen to that cheering! The whole dome is shaking! Looks like our local hero is as popular as ever!”

As he stepped into the ring, Moroboshi responded to the cheers by summoning his Device, Tiger King, and raising it high into the air.

“Hell yeaaaaah!” he shouted, declaring to his fans that he wouldn’t let them down.

The cheers grew even louder as the spectators shouted themselves hoarse.

“Whooooooooo!”

“What a guy! Despite the overwhelming weight of the expectations placed on him, Moroboshi isn’t faltering in the slightest! He carries it all with a champion’s grace! This is a real man, everyone!”

“This is part of what makes Moroboshi Yuudai so special,” Muroto interjected.

“What do you mean?”

“As you said earlier, Iida-san, he recovered from an injury that everyone thought was career-ending. That means his body might still not be in perfect shape. But despite that, he doesn’t show any uncertainty. He confidently states that he’ll live up to everyone’s expectations, and then he does just that, almost as if trying to prove to everyone that he’s just fine so they don’t need to worry about him. Also, the surgery Moroboshi-kun underwent to regrow his legs is no normal procedure.”

“That reminds me. One of your legs is a prosthetic, right, Muroto?”

“That’s right. King of Knights fighters often lose a limb or two during their careers. Because of that, there’s a huge demand for an effective restoration surgery. But very few people have successfully managed to complete it. Even I couldn’t. Do you know why?”

“No. Please enlighten me.”

“The restoration itself has a one hundred percent success rate,

but the rehabilitation that follows is truly harrowing. Currently, the most effective method involves taking cells from the patient's body and recreating their missing limbs with them. As a result, the patient is left with severe osteoporosis and muscle atrophy, and their organ functions are reduced as well. That causes a lot of painful side effects, but the only way to build that muscle and bone back up is through exercise, which means you have to complete a hellish training regimen while your body's barely functional. Your bones and muscles will break and tear tens of thousands of times over the course of your rehab, and it was something I just couldn't withstand. I'm a fully grown adult, and I gave up after three days and asked my doctor to undo the surgery."

Muroto had nothing but praise for the boy who had done what he could not, and so he went on.

"But Moroboshi-kun survived that painful rehabilitation process and came back stronger than ever. You need an incredible amount of resolve to manage that. Honestly, I can't even imagine him losing to anyone. His skills are top-notch, he has more courage than most adults, and his determination is second to none."

"I see. Looks like we can expect great things from him, then! Now, let's move on to his opponent for the first match, who's just coming out of the gate!"

At the announcer's words, the audience turned to the blue gate. Ikki walked out into the ring, Intetsu held loosely at his side.

"I'm sure many of you have heard of him! He was at the center of that commotion with the Crimson Princess a few months ago, and he's the very first Rank F knight to make it to the Seven Stars Battle Festival. But don't let his rank fool you, because he's as strong as they come! In his school's selection matches, he defeated the Thunderbolt, Toudou Touka, the Blazer who gave Moroboshi Yuudai the most trouble in last year's tournament! And in one attack, no less! Furthermore, he's also defeated Stella Vermillion in an unofficial practice match! There are some who call him Another One! His mana's pitiful for a Blazer, but his swordsmanship is world-class! The number one dark horse candidate for this year's tournament, Hagun Academy first-year Kurogane Ikkiii!"

Ikki also got a respectable amount of cheers, though the

audience didn't go absolutely wild the way they had for Moroboshi. Still, it was clear that plenty of people expected great things from him as well. Everyone wanted to see just how big a splash this Rank F knight would cause in Japan's biggest tournament.

"At long last, Ikki is fighting on the national stage," Alisuin said breathlessly. The knight everyone had labeled a useless failure and treated like dirt was now fighting in the biggest tournament in the country, against Blazers who all respected his strength. As a friend who'd watched Ikki's tortured journey for some time now, it was a truly moving sight for her.

"Yes... But Onii-sama's goal lies even further ahead. He can't afford to lose here," Shizuku replied in a stern voice. She then turned to Kiriko and asked, "Kiriko-san, how is Onii-sama doing now?"

"Hmm, give me a sec. Doctor Scope." Kiriko closed her left eye, gathering her mana in her open right eye and looking down at Ikki. After a few seconds, she smiled and said, "Hee hee hee, I suppose I should have expected as much from someone who's survived so many difficult battles."

"What did you see?"

"There's no issues with him physically anymore. His blood pressure and hormone levels are slightly elevated, and he's just a little tense, which is exactly what you want when you're about to go into a fight. He must have gotten himself into peak condition while waiting. No need to worry, Shizuku-chan. Your brother's in the best possible condition right now."

The stage was set, and the main stars had arrived.

"Now then, it's time to begin the fourth match of the C block, Moroboshi Yuudai versus Kurogane Ikki! Let's go ahead!"

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The moment the gong rang out signaling the start of the match, Ikki shot toward Moroboshi.

"Wow! Kurogane makes the first move! Look how fast he is!"

Both the announcer and the spectators were shocked by Ikki's immediate charge. He didn't even try to feel out Moroboshi before running in. The crowd began to wonder if maybe nerves and impatience had gotten the better of him and caused him to act hastily. However, Alisuin didn't think that at all.

“That’s a smart choice!”

“Alice?”

“There’s nothing Ikki can do from a distance anyway. He has no long-range skills. This match depends on whether or not he can outmaneuver the Seven Stars Sovereign and get close enough for his sword to reach.” Thus, an immediate charge wasn’t a bad idea. “The spear’s effective range is both an advantage and a disadvantage. It can reach farther than a sword, but it’s less effective in extremely close quarters. If Ikki manages to close in, he’ll have the upper hand!”

“But Moroboshi-kun knows that too. He won’t let Kurogane-kun close in that easily.”

Just as Kiriko said that, Moroboshi sprang into action. Unfazed by Ikki’s sudden charge, he brought Tiger King’s spearhead down and dropped into a low stance. Everyone in the audience shivered, and goose bumps rose on their arms.

“Ngh!”

Even Shizuku and the others could feel the pressure Moroboshi was exuding.

“U-Unbelievable! He exudes that much pressure just by taking a stance?”

Moroboshi’s aura overwhelmed the crowd, causing them all to go quiet. Tens of thousands of spectators had been silenced by a single man. Ikki, too, had no choice but to stop his charge. Not because he was intimidated, but because he realized Moroboshi was using the same technique that had frozen Tatara Yui in her tracks last night, Perfect Guard. But Ikki didn’t stay stopped for long.

“Rah!”

After a second, he kicked off the ground again and resumed his charge.

“Kurogane stopped for a second there, but he remains undeterred! He’s still going for Moroboshi!”

“The boy has courage. Most Blazers would be shaking in their boots after being exposed to the Seven Stars Sovereign’s aura, but he isn’t faltering at all,” Muroto said, the admiration clear in his voice.

But of course, Moroboshi also knew that Ikki was a fierce warrior. There was no way intimidation alone would stop the Worst

One. The moment Ikki entered the range of Moroboshi's spear, he struck.

"Hah!"

In a flash, Tiger King shot out toward Ikki. Ikki immediately backstepped out of the way, but the spearhead still clipped his hair, slicing off a bit of his bangs. He'd underestimated Moroboshi's speed and dodged a hair too late. Awed by the exchange, the crowd started cheering again.

"M-My god! That thrust was so sharp, I could hear it slicing the air from all the way up in the commentator's box! Kurogane had no choice but to back away! With just one attack, Moroboshi stopped his opponent's charge!"

"It wasn't just one."

"Huh?"

"Zoom in on the Worst One's chest."

Iida did as Muroto asked and zoomed the camera in on Ikki, projecting the image onto the big screen in the arena. When he did, everyone could see that there were two small holes in Ikki's shirt.

"L-Look at that! There's two punctures in Kurogane's shirt!"

"That's right. If we include the thrust that sliced off some of his hair, that's three thrusts in total. Though it looked like a single thrust, in that brief span of time, Moroboshi stabbed in three different directions. That is the Seven Stars Sovereign's signature spear technique, Triple Star. Because his Blazer powers allow him to nullify other people's Noble Arts, people tend to focus on his magical abilities, but if you ask me, his greatest weapon is that refined spear technique of his. It's nigh impossible to slip past his triple thrusts. I'm sure the Worst One has realized he won't be able to carelessly charge in now," Muroto said confidently.

But this was only to be expected. It was foolish to try to close in on a spearman head-on, even if they didn't possess Moroboshi's level of skill. Spears were the ideal weapon when dealing with someone coming from directly in front of you. Since the surprise factor of Ikki's initial charge had failed, he'd have to find a way to circle around and get in from Moroboshi's side or rear.

Or so everyone thought. But to their utter surprise, instead of running to the side or trying to leap around Moroboshi, he started slowly walking toward him. Even more shocking, he came to a stop

a meter and a half away from Moroboshi—the outer edge of his spear's range, and much too far away for his sword to reach.

"Wh-What's this?! Kurogane, what are you doing?! It's like you're *asking* to get stabbed!"

The announcer was just as confused as the audience. It was incomprehensible that Ikki would do this. It almost looked like he was taunting Moroboshi. That certainly was how it came across to part of the audience.

"Hoshi! Don't let him look down on you! Fuck him up!"

"Don't let that bastard from Tokyo make a fool out of you!"

As the spectators started yelling at him to do something, Moroboshi took action.

"And Moroboshi brings out his Triple Star to punish the cocky challenger!"

He once again launched three thrusts in quick succession, his spear as fast as a barrage from a machine gun. They should have been impossible to dodge, but Ikki did, in fact, dodge all three.

"L-Look at that! He missed! Moroboshi's legendary Triple Star missed! Kurogane's footwork is amazing! It's almost like he's dancing as he maneuvers around Moroboshi's spear with the least amount of movement necessary!"

Rather than merely backstepping out of their range, he sidestepped away from the thrusts as well this time. It seemed he hadn't just walked into Moroboshi's range without thinking. Moroboshi's Triple Star was a truly deadly technique. It was practically superhuman. But Ikki had already fought against someone with an even faster technique than Triple Star: the Sword Eater. His Marginal Counter surpassed the limits of human reflexes, to the point that he could launch eight attacks almost simultaneously. Compared to that, Triple Star was still something Ikki could follow with his eyes. It wasn't as crazy as Kuraudo's ability to make it seem like he was slashing eight times in the same instant. So long as Ikki read the trajectory of Moroboshi's thrusts, they were slow enough that he could react to them.

After ten seconds of his attacks being dodged, Moroboshi decided this was going nowhere and backstepped away.

"Moroboshi's the one who retreats this time! Unbelievable! It seems Kurogane's the one putting the pressure on now!"

"N-No way!"

“You’ve gotta be kidding me!”

“Holy shit! Is that guy really Rank F?!”

“He’s so cool!”

“The crowd’s going wild. Looks like these knights are going to give us quite a show!”

“So this is the man who defeated the Hunter and Thunderbolt. I see his past victories weren’t just flukes. This is my first time seeing anyone capable of moving this swiftly and accurately at mid-range like this. However, it seems both fighters have yet to get serious,” Muroto said softly. He was right, of course.

“Thanks for helping me warm up,” Moroboshi said, grinning at Ikki. “How about you? Feeling all right?”

“Yeah. Thanks for letting me test that.”

Indeed, in the previous exchange, neither Ikki nor Moroboshi had been attacking each other in earnest. The reason Ikki had stopped at the edge of Moroboshi’s range and dodged Triple Star from the most dangerous position possible was that he’d wanted to make sure that his body wouldn’t freeze up in fear randomly. Moroboshi had realized that was what Ikki was doing and gladly played along. That was why Ikki was thanking Moroboshi. Now, he knew for certain that he could fulfill his promise.

“I’m definitely in top form today,” Ikki added. His limbs moved exactly like he wanted them to, and his vision was as clear as ever. His heart hadn’t been seized by fear even when he’d just barely dodged Moroboshi’s spear as well. There was no sign of the strange phenomenon that had occurred when he’d fought Ouma last night.

I can do this. I can fight!

Finally, for the first time since stepping into the ring, Ikki raised his blade with a real intent to attack.

“Good.” Moroboshi nodded in satisfaction. “Then you won’t be getting any more help from me. From here on out, I’m gonna get serious!”

The pressure Moroboshi was exuding intensified, so much so that it became hard to breathe just by being in his vicinity. Despite that, Ikki felt better than ever.

I’ve got this. I can win.

In their earlier exchange, Ikki had confirmed something important.

Moroboshi-san's spear techniques are no different than the videos I've watched of his fights…which means he has one fatal weakness!

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"Look at Kurogane-kun's expression. It seems he's seen through the Seven Stars Sovereign's weakness," Touka commented as she watched Ikki and Moroboshi's fight on TV.

"He has a weakness?" Kanata asked.

"Yes. I imagine Kurogane-kun spent tons of hours watching videos of Moroboshi-kun's fights. And then, during that earlier exchange, he confirmed what he suspected after watching those videos."

"I'm afraid I don't understand. What exactly is Moroboshi-san's weakness?"

"Kana-chan, what ways do you think you can attack with a spear?"

After thinking about it for a few seconds, Kanata replied, "Thrusts mostly, right?"

"Thrusts are definitely the primary way you can attack with a spear. However, there's one other way to attack with a spear that takes advantage of its long reach, and that's a sweep."

A spear only had a sharp blade on its tip, so most people believed that a sweep with a spear wouldn't do much damage. However, while it wasn't as powerful as a sword slash, a spear sweep was quite deadly as well. Most spears were over a meter long, which meant the centrifugal force generated at the outer third was more than enough to break bones. There was even a form of Chinese martial arts that used thrusting techniques solely for feints while the real attacks were all sweeps, using the spear more like a club than a bladed weapon.

"The Seven Stars Sovereign doesn't use sweeps, though," Touka continued. "And that isn't just because he's up against Kurogane-kun right now. Ever since coming back from his injury, he's stuck to using only thrusts and no sweeps. He didn't use any in the battle against me either."

"My… I never noticed that." Kanata elegantly put her hand up to her mouth to indicate surprise. "But why does Moroboshi-san only ever use thrusts? Does he see no point in using sweeps?"

"Yes. Thrusts are far more powerful, you see. Because they require few motions, they're very fast, and because their force is

concentrated on a single point, they pack a punch. Moroboshi-kun's Triple Star is so fast that it even compensates for the opening a spearman usually shows when pulling back from a thrust. The way he wields a spear, his thrusts are unstoppable. To the point that he doesn't need to use sweeps. But against someone of Kurogane-kun's caliber, that no longer remains true."

Touka went on to explain that no matter how sharp or fast a thrust was, it had a very small area of impact. Compared to a sweep, it basically covered no space at all. That meant it couldn't deter someone from advancing. They were also easier to see through than sweeps, which meant a skilled fighter could deliver a powerful counterattack when the spearman's body was extended forward for a thrust.

"In kendo, they often call that a fatal stance—a position where your vitals are exposed."

"So you're saying that Kurogane-san has fast enough reflexes to beat Moroboshi-san's spear techniques?"

"Normally, yes."

Touka gave Kanata an impish grin, a rare expression for her.

"What do you mean by 'normally'?"

"Unfortunately for Kurogane-kun, the man he's up against is no normal spear wielder. If Kurogane-kun's thinking the same thing I explained to you, then he's in for a rude awakening. Just like what happened to me last year."

As Touka said that, the announcer on the TV shouted, *"Whoa! Looks like Kurogane's charging in again!"*

The fight continued in faraway Osaka. After confirming that he wasn't freezing up in fear, Ikki had decided to immediately try to take advantage of the weakness he'd found in Moroboshi's spear techniques.

"But Moroboshi won't let him close in that easily! Here comes another Triple Star!"

Naturally, Moroboshi took advantage of his superior reach to attack first. Ikki didn't falter, however.

One!

The first thrust came for his forehead, and he sidestepped to the right, barely dodging it.

Two!

The second came for his heart, and he dodged to the left this

time. Though Moroboshi's ability to launch three thrusts in a single breath was impressive, it was ultimately still an attack a normal human could perform with enough training. It didn't have the same speed or unpredictability as the Sword Eater's Marginal Counter. Therefore, Ikki could dodge it no problem.

I've dodged the first two thrusts. The next one's going to be the last! After that, Moroboshi-san's going to have to stop and take a breath! From what Ikki could tell, three thrusts was the limit of what Moroboshi could accomplish in one breath. He planned to counterattack right after avoiding the third thrust. *I'll land the first blow and start building up momentum! I doubt he'll go down in one hit, but that'll let me take the initiative in this fight!*

Moroboshi's third thrust was aimed at Ikki's femur. After seeing its trajectory, Ikki immediately put his plan into action.

That's three!

No matter how fast they were, each of Moroboshi's thrusts was still aimed at only a single point. So long as Ikki moved a few millimeters away from that point, they wouldn't hit him. Ikki sidestepped to the left, then prepared to jump into sword range.

I'll slash at his torso as we pass each other and—

But just as Ikki prepared to close the last of the distance between them, he spotted something insane out of the corner of his eye. Even though he'd dodged Tiger King's tip, the spear bent slightly, its bladed edge chasing after him to the left as if it were a snake hunting its prey.

"Nnngh?!"

Despite his shock, Ikki immediately leaped even farther to the left, which proved to be the right decision. Even with his reflexive spot dodge, he wasn't able to completely evade Moroboshi's spear, and it clipped his ear as he jumped back.

"U-U-U-Unbelievable! Kurogane managed to dodge most of Moroboshi's Triple Star, and it looked like Moroboshi was on the defensive! But then, in an instant, the tables were turned and Kurogane was the one jumping back! Not only that, but he's lost a bit of his earlobe! It looks like first blood goes to the Seven Stars Sovereign, Moroboshi Yuudai!"

The crowd went wild upon seeing the first landed hit of the battle. But Ikki didn't even pay attention to the small wound as he thought back to what had just happened.

Wh-What was that thrust?! I never saw that in any of the recorded footage I watched! Ikki had spent countless hours researching Moroboshi's fighting style by watching old videos of past tournaments. But none of those videos had ever shown Tiger King moving like that. *Is that a new technique? No, that doesn't make sense. If it was, the commentator would be mentioning it, wouldn't he? Could it be that...he didn't see what happened there?*

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Ikki was correct. Neither the crowd nor the announcer had seen Moroboshi's spear suddenly bend.

"Oh man, he was so close too! A little more and he would've been in sword range!" Alisuin shouted, biting her lip in frustration. It had looked to her, too, like Ikki had just barely failed to dodge Moroboshi's final thrust. In her eyes, it seemed like reading Moroboshi's trajectory a bit better would have let Ikki dodge that final thrust.

That wasn't something she would have said if she'd understood what had actually happened. Though Moroboshi used only thrusts, he'd turned that weakness into a trap that he'd successfully lured Ikki into. Ikki had assumed that since he was only dealing with thrusts, as long as he dodged to one side, he'd be safe, but that clearly wasn't true. However, it wasn't just Alisuin who'd failed to notice that. No one else watching the match realized what was going on either.

"Was he really that close?" Shizuku asked softly. She hadn't seen the spear bend either, but she was looking intently at Ikki.

"What do you mean, Shizuku?"

"Look at Onii-sama's expression." Ikki looked visibly shaken. "He wouldn't be so wary if he'd just failed to dodge a sharper-than-expected thrust. Something's happening down there that we can't see. And whatever it is, it's clearly going according to Moroboshi-san's plans."

Meanwhile, in faraway Tokyo, there was one person who'd predicted this development. The Thunderbolt, Toudou Touka.

"Looks like he's using it," she said, her grin widening. She'd been caught off guard by the same technique last year. "Though in my case, I totally failed to dodge, and his spear stabbed through my side."

"Um, President? Was there something special about that last

thrust? It seemed to me that Kurogane-san simply failed to dodge the last part of Moroboshi-san's Triple Star."

"Like I said earlier, the main weakness of thrusts is that they're relatively easy to dodge. However, Moroboshi-kun's thrusts throw common sense out the window. You see, Kana-chan, his thrusts bend to chase you in the direction you're dodging."

"H-His thrusts *bend*?"

"That's right. By using attacks that chase after his opponent, he manages to nullify the primary disadvantage of thrusts."

"B-But President, his thrust didn't look like it was bending to me. His Blazer powers shouldn't allow him to manipulate the range of his weapon either. Each Blazer is only able to use one category of superpowers, so I can't imagine Moroboshi-san has a Noble Art that allows him to change the length of his Device like the Sword Eater does."

"I'm not surprised you didn't see that thrust bend. After all, the spear itself *didn't* bend. And like you said, Kana-chan, this isn't a Noble Art. It's another martial art technique, just like Triple Star."

"Huh?"

"Anyway, now that he's gotten the first hit, the momentum's in Moroboshi-kun's favor. Things are about to get pretty tough for Kurogane-kun."

The match progressed precisely as Touka predicted.

"The Seven Stars Sovereign has stepped forward! He's going on the offensive now!"

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He saw his chance and took it immediately! His intuition's amazing!

Grimacing to himself, Ikki braced for Moroboshi's assault. The Seven Stars Sovereign could clearly see how shaken he was.

"Shah!"

Moroboshi thrust out toward Ikki's foot, hoping to rob him of his mobility.

I have to focus on dodging for now! I'll stay on the defensive until I've got my groove back!

Trying to calm himself down, Ikki took a half step back to dodge away from the thrust. With how fast Moroboshi's thrusts were, he knew he wouldn't be able to stop himself, and if he was lucky, Moroboshi's spear would clang into the ground, leaving an opening for him to strike. But then, just like what had happened a

second ago, the trajectory of Moroboshi's thrust suddenly changed, and his spear rose to shoot toward Ikki's face.

Shit!

Ikki managed to tilt his head out of the way just in time, but the spearhead still grazed his cheek.

There's no doubt about it! I don't know how, but Moroboshi-san's thrusts can bend!

Moroboshi's thrusts were as soft and flexible as clay. Though that should have been impossible, Ikki could not deny the evidence before his very eyes.

From that point on, all of Moroboshi's thrusts started to have that flexible, bendy quality. He attacked from all sides, as well as from above and below, aiming for Ikki's vitals from impossible angles. And every time Ikki dodged, Moroboshi's thrust changed directions to chase after him.

Holy crap! If I try to just barely sidestep them like I did last time, I'll be poked full of holes!

Ikki had no choice but to back out of the range of Moroboshi's spear.

"What's wrong, Kurogane?! What happened to those beautiful dodges you showed us earlier?! Now it looks like you're just desperately running away!" the announcer shouted.

That's because I am! Ikki thought with another grimace. However, he hadn't given up yet. Running away and admitting defeat were two different things.

Indeed, he was running away precisely because he believed he could still win. It didn't matter how pathetic he looked as long as he could snatch victory in the end. Besides, Ikki had a plan in mind. While he'd been running, he'd been carefully observing his opponent, and he was coming close to understanding how it was that Moroboshi's thrusts could bend.

Based on what the announcer's saying, he and the others can't see what Moroboshi-san's doing. If they could, the announcer wouldn't have been so confused by Ikki's actions. Instead of wondering why Ikki was fighting so passively, he would be praising Moroboshi's godlike spear technique. *That means the thrusts that chase after my dodges have to be—*

"What's wrong, Kurogane?! You can't beat me by running away!"

Moroboshi unleashed another lightning-fast thrust at Ikki. Until

now, Ikki had been focusing all of his attention on the spear's tip. It was exhibiting such strange movements, after all, that Ikki's attention had naturally been drawn to it.

But that was a mistake. I should've been watching Moroboshi-san's wrists instead!

As soon as he began doing so, he discovered the secret behind the attacks that seemed to chase after him. The moment Moroboshi thrust, he snapped his wrist and changed the angle of his elbow in order to alter the trajectory of his stab.

I knew it!

As Ikki had suspected, it wasn't the spear itself that was bending. It only *looked* like it was because of how swiftly Moroboshi was altering the path of his strike. The instant after he thrust, he changed the direction of that thrust, and that change in direction was how the attack was able to hit its target.

When put into words, it sounded quite simple. And while it looked like a regular thrust from an outside observer's perspective, what Moroboshi was doing with his Triple Star was anything but simple. The speed at which he changed the final trajectory surpassed human reflexes. It wasn't something he could do by consciously thinking about it. He had instead carved this particular action into his muscle memory. He must have practiced it so often that he could accomplish this feat subconsciously.

It had to have taken a staggering amount of practice and effort to get to this level, but now, Moroboshi could alter his thrusts to match his opponent's dodges without even needing his brain to process their movements. It was the pinnacle of martial arts, a technique so powerful that it seemed almost like magic. This was Moroboshi Yuudai's ultimate spear technique: Chasing Comet.

What a technique...

It was a move that surpassed human limits. And it was one that Moroboshi had acquired through endless effort and training, not a special trait he'd been born with like the Sword Eater.

As a fellow martial artist, Ikki had nothing but respect for Moroboshi's dedication. What was truly amazing about it was that it turned the usual weakness of thrusts—the fact that they could only target a single point and were easy to dodge—into a strength. By luring his opponent into dodging, he made them easier to hit.

I'm glad I came to the Seven Stars Battle Festival. It gave me the opportunity to fight such a wonderful foe. Of course, I won't be satisfied just by getting to fight him! I'm here to win!

Now that Ikki knew Moroboshi's Chasing Comet was a martial arts technique, he could think of a few ways to get past it. Its primary strength was that it caught the opponent by surprise right as they thought they dodged.

"So all I have to do is not dodge!"

"Hmm?!"

In an instant, Ikki changed up his fighting style. Instead of dodging away from Moroboshi's Chasing Comet, he knocked the spear aside with Intetsu and stepped forward.

"Ngh?!"

Moroboshi immediately launched another Chasing Comet-enhanced Triple Star at Ikki, but now that Ikki understood how the technique worked, it was hardly a threat. He parried all three thrusts, slowly closing the distance between himself and Moroboshi.

"Unbelievable! Kurogane's suddenly changed tactics, and it's working splendidly! He's given up on dodging and is just parrying his way in! Look at those sparks fly as he blocks every one of Moroboshi's thrusts!"

For the first time since the fight began, Moroboshi looked like he was struggling. Most people wouldn't be able to parry Chasing Comet-enhanced Triple Stars even if they understood the principle behind it. But Ikki wasn't most people. Thanks to his Blade Steal and Perfect Vision, he had already analyzed Moroboshi Yuudai's spearmanship and learned all of his habits and idiosyncrasies. In an attempt to corner Ikki, Moroboshi had shown off too much of his technique.

"Haaah!"

"Moroboshi's desperately trying to keep Kurogane at bay, but it's not working! He's blocking everything Moroboshi throws at him!"

"The Seven Stars Sovereign's in a tough spot. The main advantage of a spear is its reach. If Kurogane makes his way into sword range, Moroboshi's spear will be far less effective. He has to push Kurogane back somehow!"

Unfortunately, thanks to his powers of observation, Ikki could

block anything and everything Moroboshi threw at him. It was only a matter of time before he made it into sword range. And someone of Ikki's caliber could end the match immediately once he was. As soon as he made it in, victory was his. One more step and he'd be able to reach Moroboshi.

"Damn it all!" Moroboshi shouted, firing off one final, fruitless Triple Star.

Expectedly, though, it didn't stop Ikki. He'd already completely analyzed that technique. He could immediately predict the angle of the three thrusts from the position of Moroboshi's elbows and wrists. He easily parried the first two and stepped forward right as the third was coming out.

"Kurogane's finally in range!"

"Hoshiii! You gotta get outta there!"

His fans screamed. However, Moroboshi still needed to complete his final thrust. Both Triple Star and Chasing Comet were techniques that Moroboshi had pounded into his body until they were basically a seamless, unconscious movement. But that meant everything happened before conscious thought. In other words, even if he wanted to run, he couldn't give his body any new commands until his Triple Star was done.

His body naturally moved to launch a final thrust at Ikki's chest. But of course, Ikki was ready to block it, and he knew he wouldn't mess up at this critical junction.

Once I knock away this final thrust, I'll win! I just have to—

But just then, he realized something.

No, wait, this is bad!

A warning signal ran down Ikki's spine, but he was a hair too late. Tiger King sliced through his shoulder, and he was pushed back out of sword range.

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"Whoa! Wh-What's going on?! Kurogane was on the offensive, but he suddenly got knocked back! And look at that gash on his shoulder!"

"Impossible! Onii-sama wouldn't mess up in a situation like that!" Shizuku cried, shocked. Alisuin, meanwhile, paled and pointed at Ikki's sword.

"Shizuku, look at Intetsu!"

At her friend's urging, Shizuku turned and saw something truly

horrifying.

"N-No way..."

"What's this?!" the announcer exclaimed. "Kurogane's Device, Intetsu, is damaged! It's almost as if a beast took a bite out of the blade!"

Indeed, a chunk of Intetsu's blade was missing, as if it had been gouged out.

"What's going on?! Devices only break in the most extreme circumstances, and that certainly didn't seem to fit the bill!"

The announcer, Iida, was just as confused as everyone else. A Blazer's Device was a crystallization of highly dense mana packed together. Iida had been commentating for the Seven Stars Battle Festival for many years now, and he could count on one hand the number of times he'd seen a Device break. Muroto, however, seemed to have figured it out.

"No, there's one exception to that rule!" he shouted excitedly.

"And that would be?"

"Look at the Seven Stars Sovereign's Tiger King!"

At Muroto's words, the entire audience turned toward Moroboshi. After a few seconds, they realized that his spear was wreathed in a yellow glow. Naturally, everyone knew what that was.

"I-It seems the Seven Stars Sovereign has activated his Tiger Bite!"

Moroboshi's Noble Art, Tiger Bite, was powerful enough to devour even the Gale Emperor's Kusanagi. It was the ultimate weapon against other Blazers.

"But why did Moroboshi choose to use Tiger Bite *now*?! Kurogane has yet to use his own Noble Art..." Just then, Iida realized something, and his expression froze. "D-Don't tell me..."

"I see you've caught on," Muroto said. "That's right. Tiger Bite destroys other Noble Arts by devouring the mana they're made of. However, it's not just Noble Arts that are created by mana. A Blazer's Device is made of mana as well! It appears Moroboshi has strengthened his abilities significantly over the past year. Last year, his Tiger Bite was only strong enough to erase other Blazers' Noble Arts. But it seems he's now able to devour even the super dense mana that creates a Blazer's Device!"

Touka gasped as she listened to the commentary coming from

the TV.

"I don't believe it..."

"President, doesn't this put Kurogane-san in a tough spot?"

"That's the understatement of the century."

A Blazer's Device was a manifestation of their very soul. Destroying it caused such severe mental pain to the wielder that it knocked most Blazers unconscious. If Tiger Bite was strong enough to break Devices, then trying to match blades with Moroboshi was equivalent to handing your heart to him on a silver platter.

Thankfully, it seemed Ikki had pulled Intetsu away fast enough that it hadn't been completely devoured. But there would be no second chances. If Intetsu and Tiger King clashed once more, Intetsu would be destroyed. That also meant Ikki no longer had any means of stopping Chasing Comet.

There's nothing I can do now! Ikki thought. Touka, Kanata, and everyone watching in the arena shivered as they realized just how fearsome Tiger Bite had become, but he was more impressed by Moroboshi Yuudai himself than this new power he'd shown off. *What a terrifying man!*

Tiger Bite was a truly powerful Noble Art, one that could easily have brought Moroboshi to victory on its own. However, he hadn't brought it out against Ikki at first. Rather than relying on its power, he'd instead laid a very careful trap for Ikki. Everything from the very first Triple Star had been all for this moment. First, he'd used Triple Star to lure Ikki into dodging. Then, he'd used Chasing Comet to make it clear that dodging wouldn't be effective.

At the time, Ikki had thought that was the full extent of the trap Moroboshi had laid for him. He'd assumed Triple Star had been a feint, while Chasing Comet was the real threat. But Ikki had fought plenty of strong opponents before, and it seemed Moroboshi had taken that into account. He'd predicted that Ikki would be able to see through Chasing Comet and start parrying it. And that was exactly what Ikki had done. But because he'd predicted that, Moroboshi had been able to lay a second trap. Even Chasing Comet had been a feint. Its job hadn't been to take Ikki down but to make him bring Intetsu into contact with Tiger King. All so Moroboshi could target a Blazer's biggest weak point: their Device!

If anyone else had that power, they'd be a lot less careful with how

they use it...

However, Moroboshi had played his cards close to his chest and done everything he could to catch his opponent unawares with his ability. Had Ikki begun to wonder "If he can erase Noble Arts, maybe he can devour Devices too" even a millisecond later, he would have lost both Intetsu and the match.

"I almost had you there. A second longer and that puny sword would've been gone."

"Ngh!"

Moroboshi didn't look panicked anymore. He had a ferocious grin on his face, and he was staring down Ikki the way a predator looked at its prey. As Ikki stared back, he became certain of one thing. Though Moroboshi Yuudai looked like a brash fighter who wore his heart on his sleeve, he was, in fact, a masterful strategist. His every action was calculated to try to trick Ikki in some way. Every time Ikki had thought he'd found an opening, he'd found himself on the back foot a second later. Moroboshi had tons of tricks up his sleeve too.

It's not gonna be easy to get close. It was only five meters to Moroboshi, but those five meters felt more like light-years. *So this is what fighting the Seven Stars Sovereign is like...*

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"Things are getting pretty bad for Ikki," Alisuin muttered as she looked down at the ring.

Now that Moroboshi was using Tiger Bite, Ikki couldn't block his thrusts. He had no way of stopping Chasing Comet. Of course, Alisuin and the others hadn't even realized that Moroboshi was using another technique with Triple Star, but they could tell he was doing something that made it difficult for Ikki to dodge.

Shizuku nodded, frowning. Two times now it had looked like Ikki was about to corner Moroboshi, only for him to turn the tables. Ikki had been cut both times, while Moroboshi remained unharmed. It was obvious who had the upper hand.

"I've never seen anyone toy with Onii-sama like this."

"Is that how it seems to you?" someone said, coming to stand next to Shizuku. The girl turned to see a tall woman wearing a suit.

"Director..."

It was Hagun's director, Shinguuji Kurono. She took a puff of her cigarette and said, "From the outside, it certainly seems as though

Kurogane's being toyed with. And it's true that Moroboshi's held the initiative the whole fight. But things aren't going the way he'd hoped. He's putting up a brave front, but I'm sure he's panicking on the inside right now."

"Why's that?"

"That Tiger Bite was an expertly set, multilayered trap Moroboshi spent the entire battle luring Kurogane into. He'd planned to end the match with it. But as you can see, Kurogane's still standing. At the very last second, he realized that Moroboshi's target was Intetsu and used his body as a shield to protect his sword. Failing to end things here was a huge blow for Moroboshi."

A surprise attack like that wouldn't work a second time. Ikki would never try to block Tiger King with Intetsu again.

"In other words, Ikki's quick thinking got him out of the fatal trap Moroboshi had spent the entire fight working on," Kurono added. Furthermore, since Moroboshi had shown more of his trump cards, he was at a disadvantage. "Besides, Moroboshi isn't the only one capable of catching people by surprise."

Of course, Ikki wasn't able to hear Kurono from where he was down in the ring, but funnily enough, he was thinking the exact same thing.

"Well played, Moroboshi-san. You really got me there. No wonder you became the Seven Stars Sovereign."

"You're not gonna call me out for using dirty tactics, are you? Tricking people is part of fighting too."

"Oh, definitely not. If anything, I like using tactics like that myself." Ikki grinned impishly at Moroboshi, as if he were about to play a prank on him. "Now it's my turn to surprise you, Moroboshi-san."

Ikki had just as many martial arts tricks up his sleeve, and it was about time to start using them. He had to pay Moroboshi back, after all. After a few seconds, Ikki came up with the perfect plan. He knew exactly how he was going to trick Moroboshi and end this match.

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"Whoa! Kurogane's started taunting Moroboshi! Even though he's been burned twice now, he's as strong-willed as ever! He just doesn't give up!"

"That's the spirit, Kurogane! Don't give up!"

“You can do it, Ikki-kun!”

People cheered Ikki on, impressed by his dauntless determination. Meanwhile, Moroboshi chewed on Ikki’s words.

He’s…not the kind of guy to bluff. But at the same time, Moroboshi couldn’t fathom how Ikki could beat him. As long as his Tiger Bite was active, Ikki couldn’t parry Chasing Comet. It was also impossible to dodge it. Ittou Shura wouldn’t help Ikki here either. Tiger Bite could devour even Kusanagi’s mana, and Ittou Shura’s was a drop in the bucket compared to that. Moreover, the time limit that Ittou Shura imposed would be too restricting in this situation. *So why’s he so confident?*

Moroboshi couldn’t figure it out, but that was precisely why he was intrigued. Grinning, he bared his fangs at Ikki.

“Why don’t you show me what you’ve got, then.” Since Ikki had claimed he had something in mind that Moroboshi couldn’t predict, it’d be a waste not to bear witness to it. Moroboshi loosened his shoulders and pointed Tiger King at Ikki, taking an adaptive stance that would be ready to react to anything Ikki might throw at him. “But if you show me something boring, you’re gonna pay for it. There’s nothing us Osakans hate more than a bad joke.”

“I’ll let you decide for yourself how boring this is.” Ikki crouched low and raised Intetsu high. Then, he kicked off the stone floor of the ring, dashing forward at full speed. “Here I come!”

“Kurogane’s charging in again! H-He’s fast! We haven’t seen him go this fast since the start of the match! He’s been forced back twice now, but maybe the third time’s the charm?!” Iida cried expectantly. The crowd was also curious to see what Ikki was about to show them.

“Wait, he’s fast, but…he’s not doing anything different!” Muroto shouted, confused.

Indeed, Ikki looked like he was just charging in blindly the way he had at the start. Moroboshi frowned.

Another frontal approach?! You’re not even using Ittou Shura! You can’t dodge Chasing Comet with your current speed! You know that! No way you think the same old trick is gonna work!

“I told you, Kurogane, there’s nothing we hate more than bad jokes!” Naturally, Moroboshi unleashed his Chasing Comet at Ikki. “Take this! Tiger Bite!”

At the same time, he covered his spear in destructive mana and activated his Tiger Bite. Now, his Chasing Comet was impossible to block or dodge. Ikki tried to sidestep to the right, but unsurprisingly, Moroboshi was easily able to chase after him. Chasing Comet reacted to his dodge and changed the trajectory of Moroboshi's thrust to his left. He was aiming straight for Ikki's throat, intending to end it here. But then Ikki vanished as if he'd been nothing more than a mirage.

What?! Moroboshi stared in bewilderment at the spot where Ikki had been standing. A second later, he realized that Ikki had actually gone the other direction and was now within sword range. *Wh-What was that?!*

"Oh no, Moroboshi missed! To think he'd miss one of his thrusts! But this mistake is going to cost him!"

Of course, the announcer didn't realize that this wasn't a mistake on Moroboshi's part but rather one of Ikki's techniques. The only people who realized that, however, were Shizuku and the others, since they'd seen it before.

"Shizuku, that was..."

"Yep, it's the same move he used against Ayatsuji-senpai, Flicker Mirage!"

This was the fourth of his seven unique techniques, Flicker Mirage. By alternating the pace of his steps, he was able to create an afterimage, causing his opponent to miss. Normally, he only used it to create afterimages in front of or behind him, but this time, he'd created one to the side.

Dammit, he got me with an afterimage?!

Still, Moroboshi was a first-rate student knight. He was able to quickly analyze what had happened and choose the best possible counterattack option. There was no time to bring his spear back or to sweep it at Ikki, but he still had the opposite end of the spear in his hands. He flipped it around and stabbed at Ikki with the butt of his spear.

While that was the best choice he could've made in this situation, it was sadly still too slow. Moroboshi knew that as well. He'd been baited into using Chasing Comet, and as a result, he'd left himself open to Ikki's blade. This would prove to be fatal. Even the best possible counterattack wouldn't get him out of this predicament.

Ikki's sword was faster. Moroboshi was certain of it. And he couldn't dodge. In that instant, he was prepared for defeat, which was precisely why he was so shocked when the butt of his spear collided with Ikki's cheek and knocked him back.

"That was so clooose! Well played, Moroboshi! The moment he realized he missed, he reversed his grip and used the butt of his spear, knocking Kurogane back! Kurogane's once again forced outside of his sword's range! The Seven Stars Sovereign's defenses are unbreakable!"

Cheers rang out across the stadium as Moroboshi repelled Ikki a third time. But Moroboshi could barely hear them.

No, that wasn't because I reacted fast enough! Definitely not! Moroboshi had known in that instant that no matter what he did, his counterattack wouldn't reach Ikki in time. Not unless Ikki made a mistake of some kind. *Don't tell me…*

Moroboshi was slightly shaken as he thought back to what he'd seen last night. Back when Ikki had stopped for a second while fighting Ouma.

You mean there really is *a problem, Kurogane?!*

Unfortunately, Moroboshi was right on the money.

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Ikki felt his brain rattle in his skull as Moroboshi's spear slammed into him. His vision swam, but that wasn't what was bothering him right now.

Not again!

The same problem that had occurred when he'd been fighting Ouma had reared its ugly head. At the most critical moment too. Right as he'd been about to win the match, his body had frozen up. And once again, it had been right when his concentration had been heightened to the absolute limit.

Dammit! What's wrong with my body?!

Ouma's words flashed through his mind. *"Did you really think you could stay the same as before after fighting the world's strongest swordsman? Even if your body was healed, it's obvious that some wounds would remain in your heart."*

Am I really just broken? Did that fight with Edelweiss plant a seed of terror in my heart?

Cold sweat beaded on Ikki's forehead as he considered the worst-case scenario. His companions noticed that he was acting

strangely as well.

“What’s wrong? Ikki should have been able to end the match then and there, but it looked like he slowed down at the last second,” Alisuin muttered.

“He definitely did. Moroboshi-kun’s counterattack was pretty fast, so it was hard to notice, but he did slow down at the end there,” Kiriko said.

“I-Is Onii-sama nervous after all?” Shizuku muttered, but Kiriko shook her head.

“No, that’s not it. If that were the case, he would have frozen up long before this. Besides, your brother isn’t so weak a knight that he would let nerves impact his performance. He knows how to adjust his actions if he’s not in top form. But that’s precisely why this might be much worse than we thought.”

“Wh-What do you mean by that?! Is there something wrong with Onii-sama’s body?”

“Whatever it is, it’s not physical. I examined him, so I can be certain of that. His body’s in perfect shape, and he hasn’t taken that much damage over the course of the fight. It’s almost certainly a psychological issue. Unfortunately, I’m not a psychologist, so this is outside my purview. But I have heard of a phenomenon known as ‘punch eye’ that boxers and martial artists sometimes suffer from. They develop a subconscious, deep-rooted fear of enemy attacks, and they freeze up when one’s coming toward them. It’s a serious condition that can end people’s careers.”

“And you think Onii-sama has that?!”

Shizuku had been faintly aware that something was going on with Ikki’s body, but she hadn’t thought it was as bad as Kiriko was implying.

“Calm down. Like I said, I’m far from a real psychologist. It’s just a possibility. However, it’s true that he fought Twin Wings Edelweiss and lost, right?”

“Ah!”

The blood drained from Shizuku’s face. She realized what Kiriko was getting at. Ikki was certainly strong, but not nearly strong enough to fight the world’s strongest swordsman on equal footing. If anything, it was strange that Ikki had come out of that battle unscathed.

“It wouldn’t be too surprising if he was carrying some psychological wounds from that battle.”

“N-No…”

“You have a point, Kiriko-san. Besides, even if it’s not punch eye Ikki is suffering from, his movements clearly dulled in that critical moment. And it’s obvious from his expression that he didn’t intend to do that.”

Alisuin was right. Ikki looked visibly shaken down in the ring. He was doing his best to keep his expression level, but the fact that she and Shizuku could see the effort it was taking him meant the situation was dire. He was rattled badly enough that he couldn’t hide it from his friends.

On the other hand, Kurono, who’d moved a short distance away from the trio, had a very different read on what was happening to Ikki.

That’s not punch eye or any other form of PTSD.

At a glance, she’d been able to figure out what was happening to Ikki—something even Ikki himself hadn’t been able to do. Though in truth, she’d suspected that this would happen from the start. Having witnessed the end of Ikki’s duel with Edelweiss, she’d had a feeling things might develop this way. That was why she knew Ikki wasn’t suffering from any career-ending psychological burdens.

However, that doesn’t change the fact that your movements are getting dull, Kurogane. I’m sure Moroboshi’s noticed that too. If he has, you’re in quite the pickle.

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Back in the ring, Moroboshi realized that his guess was right when he looked at Ikki’s face.

He’s trying his best to look calm, but he’s got the same look on his face that he did last night.

Something Ikki himself couldn’t understand was happening to his body, and the shock was showing. It seemed yesterday’s issue hadn’t been resolved.

Moroboshi let out a small sigh. He’d wanted to beat Another One at his best. He figured that would be the best way to show Koume that he was doing just fine.

But now that we’re in the ring, I can’t show you any mercy.

Not utilizing every possible advantage to try to win would be

disrespectful to the match. Though Moroboshi regretted this outcome, he had no intention of going easy on Ikki.

You're the one who showed me this weakness, so don't blame me for taking advantage of it!

Moroboshi dashed forward in order to claim his victory.

"Moroboshi's charging forward while Kurogane's still reeling from that last attack! He's in trouble now! Will you be able to fight your way out of this, Another One?!"

Hagun Academy Bulletin

Character Intros Journalist: Kusakabe Kagami

Yakushi Kiriko



■PROFILE

Affiliation: Rentei Academy

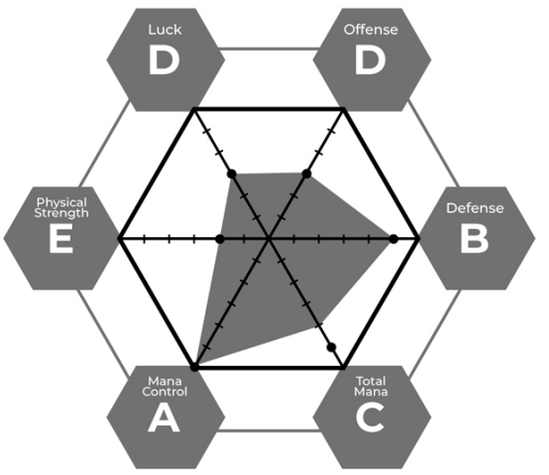
Third-Year

Blazer Rank: B

Noble Art: Local Anesthesia

Nickname: Doctor Knight

Summary: Japan's best doctor.





Kagamin's Thoughts!

She's a water user like Shizuku-chan, but rather than using water itself as a weapon, she manipulates the water inside other people's bodies to fight. That makes her a tricky opponent to deal with. While she's pretty famous as a knight, she considers herself more of a doctor than anything, which is why she's declined to take part in the Seven Stars Battle Festival in past years. However, since this is her final year in school, her teachers begged her to take part at least once, and she reluctantly agreed.

© Won

Chapter 4: Showdown! Another One vs. Seven Stars Sovereign

“After that splendid counter from Moroboshi, the match has become completely one-sided. Kurogane’s slower than before, and he’s having trouble dodging Moroboshi’s thrusts! He’s been grazed dozens of times now, and the ring is dyed red with his blood! We’re getting to the point where the referee might forcibly stop the match!”

The plaza outside the Bay Dome was normally a ghost town, but today, it was filled with people who hadn’t been able to get a ticket for the stands and were watching the broadcast of the Seven Stars Battle Festival on their portable devices.

“It’s over now…” one of those people muttered. Even an amateur could tell the Worst One was struggling.

Most people seemed to share their opinion.

“Yeah. The Worst One put up a good fight at the start, but he’s out of steam. He can barely even run away now.”

“Moroboshi’s just too strong…”

“Ha ha. He’s the Seven Stars Sovereign, after all. No way that Rank F dandy can beat him!”

There was just one person who disagreed.

“No, Ikki’s going to win,” she said, voicing her thoughts to the other spectators.

“Huh?”

Everyone turned to see who it was, but there was no one there. Squinting, one of the men spotted a red-haired figure disappear into the dome.

“Was that… No way!”

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At around the same time, back at Hagun Academy, Touka watched as Ikki slowly got more and more cut up.

“Uh-oh, Kurogane’s finally taken a clean hit! And it’s to the thigh no less!”

“That’s not good. His speed’s going to drop even more now. The referee really should just call this match.”

“That’s strange…” Touka muttered as she stared at the TV, a

thoughtful look on her face.

"Indeed. Why did Kurogane-san's movements suddenly slow?"

"Well, I *am* curious about that as well, but what's even weirder is Moroboshi-kun."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"That's three times now that Moroboshi-kun's had that opportunity to finish Kurogane-kun and let it pass him by," Touka explained. It was clearly unnatural.

"Is he toying with Kurogane-san?"

"He's not the kind of person to do that. But that's precisely why I don't get why he's letting those chances slip past."

It's almost as if Moroboshi-kun's scared of something, Touka thought, looking back at the screen. *What is he seeing that we don't?*

Just then, Ikki fell, and Touka began to see what was going on.

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"Gah!"

"Uh-oh! It looks like Kurogane's slipped on a pool of his own blood! This is a huge opportunity for Moroboshi! Will he be able to end things here?!"

Ikki tried to scramble back to his feet, but it was too late. There was no way a fighter on Moroboshi's level would miss this chance. Ikki was certain he'd lost. But to his surprise, the finishing blow never came.

"Oh?! It seems Moroboshi's keeping his distance! Does he not want to hit his opponent while he's down?!"

The spectators thought the Seven Stars Sovereign was simply giving Ikki a proper fighting chance, and they started cheering.

"That's the spirit, Hoshi! Show the world Japan's honorable samurai spirit!"

"But you know, you really should end it soon! This is getting painful to watch!"

"Kick his ass, Moroboshi-kun!"

But while the crowd was getting hyped up, Moroboshi himself was shivering with dread.

That's the fifth time now.

He'd had five opportunities to finish Ikki off, and he'd let all of them pass him by, including this one. In truth, he himself couldn't figure out why he wasn't taking them.

What's this strange sensation?

For some reason, the more he cornered Ikki, the stronger the pressure of Ikki's aura became. It was that pressure that was making Moroboshi hesitate, though he didn't realize it. But he had the feeling that if he got too close, he'd be waking a beast far more terrifying than any tiger.

"Tch!"

However, he also knew he couldn't just keep dragging things out like this.

Stop cowering and look your opponent in the eye, Moroboshi! he shouted to himself. Despite being covered in blood and suffering from some unknown condition he didn't understand, Kurogane Ikki's eyes were still burning with a fierce fighting spirit. He hadn't given up on trying to win yet. *So why am I giving up when I'm the one who's winning?! How could I live with myself if I let Koume see me fight so pathetically?!*

As the Seven Stars Sovereign, and as Koume's big brother, Moroboshi refused to let that pressure get the better of him. Spurred on by his pride, he dropped into a low stance and charged at Ikki.

"Let's end this, Kurogane!" he shouted, determined to finish their match right then and there.

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Moroboshi launched another Triple Star, his fastest one yet. The first thrust was aimed at Ikki's forehead, the second at his throat, and the third at his stomach. He fully intended to clinch the win with this move. Ikki's body wasn't moving as he wanted it to, and he had a deep gash in his thigh. There was no way he'd be able to avoid this Triple Star. Ikki was aware of that as well, and he gritted his teeth in frustration.

"I'll fight twice as hard to repay the hospitality you've shown us." He'd promised to give Moroboshi the best fight he could, and here he was, about to break that promise. His biggest regret wasn't that he was about to lose but that he'd failed Moroboshi. It was also why he was still struggling despite knowing his defeat was inevitable. That was the least he could do for his opponent.

That's why I can't use Ittou Shura just yet.

With his body not doing what he wanted, it was too dangerous to put himself on a one-minute time limit. He would be throwing

away any hope of victory, and that was the one thing he refused to do. He had to keep fighting believing he could win until he collapsed. It didn't matter how pathetic his struggling looked.

Determined, Ikki raised Intetsu to meet Moroboshi's attack, forcing his bleeding and battered body into action. As he did so, a memory flitted across his mind.

Come to think of it, I was in just as desperate a situation back then too... It was a memory of the final few seconds of his battle with Edelweiss. He'd been blinded, and things were moving so fast that he barely had any time to think, which was why his memories of the latter half of the battle were so hazy. But now that he was in a similarly hopeless situation, those memories were starting to come into focus. *What did I do to avoid dying in that instant?*

To his surprise, Ikki was able to recall his actions with startling clarity now.

When Edelweiss-san came at me, I fought back using her own sword techniques.

Edelweiss had moved so fast that Ikki had barely even been able to see the afterimages her swords left behind, but he'd just barely been able to analyze her techniques by observing the movements of her body. He could vividly remember the blistering speed of her sword slashes.

The reason they'd seemed so quick was that they hadn't needed time to accelerate. Ordinarily, when someone swung a sword, the start of their swing was slower than the end of it. It took a moment for the tip of the sword to reach its maximum velocity. Edelweiss, however, hadn't needed that acceleration time. Both her slashes and her dashes had gone from zero to full speed in an instant. From the moment she'd raised her sword or kicked off the ground, she'd been in top gear. That was the secret behind her godlike martial arts techniques.

Because there'd been no acceleration to her movements, they'd seemed even faster than they actually were. The lack of a start-up time made it harder for the human eye to properly track her motions. Ikki had figured all of that out during the battle. And during their very last clash, he'd tried to replicate her technique with his Blade Steal. There'd been no guarantee he'd be able to do it, but that was the strongest technique he'd been aware of, and in that moment, he'd instinctively known that if he didn't use it, he'd

die.

Now that he'd recalled all of that, he simply had to replicate it again here. He doubted he'd be able to manage it with his body still not listening to him, but at the same time, it was still the strongest technique he knew. Using it was the only way out of this dire situation. Ikki focused intently on the memory of his final clash with Edelweiss and tried to order his unruly body to take the proper actions to replicate that technique once more.

I'm pretty sure I had to make all of my muscles move like…

"This."

In an instant, Ikki's body became as light as a feather, and he easily dodged all three of Moroboshi's thrusts. On top of that, he slashed through the side of Moroboshi's torso as he dashed past. His movements were as fast as when he was using Ittou Shura, but he hadn't had to expend any mana to achieve this speed. Whatever problems his body had been experiencing had vanished.

Moroboshi slumped to the ground, blood spraying from his side.

"Huh?"

He didn't even realize that Ikki had cut him.

"Wh-What just happened?!" the announcer shouted, stunned.

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"Wh-Wh-Wh-What on earth was that?! It looked like Moroboshi was about to wrap things up, but now he's the one on the ground! Kurogane must have cut him as they passed each other, b-but I'm afraid I wasn't able to see what happened! My apologies, everyone! It was just too fast!" Iida shouted. Even from his vantage point high up in the announcer's box, Ikki's movements had been too fast to see. It was as if he'd vanished and then reappeared next to Moroboshi. "Kurogane hasn't shown us a move like that before! It's like nothing I've ever seen!"

Muroto, on the other hand, was more than just stunned. He was awestruck.

"I-Impossible! It can't be…but I can't think of anything else it could be either!"

Unlike Iida, Muroto recognized the footwork and sword technique Ikki had just used. He knew who'd originally come up with them.

"Muroto, do you know what Kurogane did?!" Iida asked as he

excitedly turned to the commentator. “Was that the Worst One’s famous Ittou Shura?!”

“N-No, it wasn’t. Kurogane’s mana remains the same as it was a second ago. That was…pure swordplay and nothing else! Movements that the eye can’t follow, combined with sharp slashes that need no acceleration to reach their top speed. I’ve seen these techniques once before. Though that person used two swords rather than one…”

“Where did you see such amazing swordplay?! A-An A-league match, perhaps?!”

Muroto shook his head.

“No. I don’t know of any A-league knights capable of such a feat. This swordsmanship belongs to a woman so powerful that the governments of the world have given up on arresting her. The world’s least-wanted criminal, the peerless swordmaster Twin Wings Edelweiss!”

A wave of shock swept over the stadium.

“Wh-What did you just say?! By ‘Twin Wings,’ do you mean *that* Twin Wings?! But how is the Worst One able to use her swordsmanship?!” one of the spectators shouted.

“I heard that the Worst One has the power to steal his enemies’ techniques!” another spectator replied.

This time around, Ikki’s companions were just as shocked as everyone else. They knew better than everyone else just how strong Kurogane Ikki could be, but this time, he’d exceeded all expectations.

“O-Onii-sama… I don’t believe it!”

“Not only did he survive his battle with Twin Wings, he even stole her techniques?!” Alisuin exclaimed.

“N-No way!” Kiriko stammered. However, there was one thing that didn’t make sense to her. “If that’s the case, why wasn’t he using her techniques from the start?!”

It was a natural question.

“It wasn’t that he *wasn’t* using them, it was that he *couldn’t*,” Kurono explained, stepping forward. “His memories were still too hazy, which was why he couldn’t properly replicate Edelweiss’s swordsmanship.”

“Ah!” Kiriko thought back to what Ikki had told Yagokoro before they’d parted ways.

“It was his hazy memories that were causing his body to constantly seize up as well,” Kurono added.

“How so, Director?”

“Edelweiss’s swordsmanship is absolutely insane. Normally, you move your body by expanding and contracting different muscles one after another to create a single smooth movement. But doing that isn’t enough to let you do what she does. In order to go from zero to a hundred with no acceleration time, you need to utilize all of the body’s muscles at once and focus all of their energy into a single motion. However, the human brain isn’t wired to send those kinds of signals to the body. To properly make use of Edelweiss’s technique, you have to rewire your entire brain.”

A normal brain didn’t have enough neurons dedicated to the task of sending electrical signals to the body’s muscles that it could send signals to every muscle at once. You literally had to create new pathways in your brain dedicated solely to combat that could send information-dense electrical signals as quickly as possible. It was the only way to allow a machine as complex as the human body to activate all of its hundreds of muscles at once.

“During his battle with Edelweiss, Kurogane had the opportunity to experience her swordsmanship firsthand. He fought in that blisteringly fast arena where sword swings come out faster than a blink of an eye, and even if his memories were hazy, his brain still recorded all of that information.” It was precisely because Ikki was as skilled a swordsman as he was that his mind instinctively tried to use the strongest techniques he knew when he was in danger. “That’s why whenever he honed his focus to the absolute limit, his brain would switch into full combat mode and try to use those new pathways he’d forged. But his body didn’t properly remember what he’d done, the same way he himself didn’t. Because of that, his muscles failed to properly interpret the new signals his brain was sending them.”

“And that’s why he froze up? His body couldn’t figure out what his brain was telling him, so it just did nothing?” Shizuku asked, and Kurono nodded.

“That’s right. Edelweiss didn’t break Kurogane. Far from it. She actually gave him what he needed to improve even further. But Ikki’s technique evolved so fast that his body couldn’t keep up with his knowledge. Until now, anyway.”

In his moment of crisis, Ikki's body had finally managed to figure out what it was supposed to be doing. It recalled the new form of movement it had acquired during Ikki's battle with Edelweiss—one that required interpreting signals that were completely different from the ones Ikki's brain had been sending it for the past sixteen years.

"At long last, Kurogane's body and brain are in sync. It's not possible for him to lose anymore. Moroboshi Yuudai is the strongest Seven Stars Sovereign we've seen in over a decade, but unfortunately for him, he's completely outclassed," the director explained. "Kurogane crossed swords with the world's strongest swordsman. Though he lost, you all know just how observant he is. He learned everything he could from that fight, and now, his skills far surpass those of any student knight. The man down there in the ring with Moroboshi is a true monster."

Indeed, Edelweiss's swordsmanship was vastly superior to that which was standard for the Seven Stars Battle Festival. As far as Kurono was concerned, it was Moroboshi, not Ikki, who'd drawn the short straw in the bracket pairings.

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"Bwuh?!"

The feeling of cold stone on his cheek jolted Moroboshi back awake.

Wh-What? Why was I unconscious?

Everything had happened so fast that Moroboshi still hadn't processed the events of the last few seconds, including the fact that Ikki had cut him.

First things first, I need to get back up.

It was a warrior's instinct to get back up if they were in a vulnerable position. Even though Moroboshi didn't know what was going on, he still reflexively got to his feet. But as he did so, a sharp pain ran through his side.

"Gaaaaah!"

He instinctively pressed a hand against it, and it came away bloody.

"Moroboshi's back on his feet! But he's clearly lost a lot of blood! That was one deep cut! Look, his legs are trembling!"

It was at this point that Moroboshi finally realized he'd been wounded.

What happened?! How did I get cut?! I didn't even see anything!

Before he could work through his confusion, he heard Ikki's voice coming from right next to him.

"Ah, I finally understand now," Ikki muttered softly to himself.

"Kurogane…what did you do?" *What does he understand? Is that how he became so fast?*

"Moroboshi-san, I'm sorry I made you wait so long," he answered, looking over at Moroboshi and giving him a small nod.

"You're…sorry?"

"Yes. It took far longer than it should have, but everything's fallen into place now."

Ikki was, of course, apologizing for taking so long to fulfill the promise he'd made last night. Now that he'd properly mastered Edelweiss's techniques, he could finally give this fight his all, just as Moroboshi had requested. He wouldn't end up disappointing the proud knight after all.

"Now, I can finally show you Kurogane Ikki at a hundred percent, just like I promised to!"

"Ngh!"

Right after he said that, Ikki vanished from Moroboshi's field of view.

He disappeared?!

Of course, he'd simply gone from standing still to full speed in an instant, giving the illusion that he'd vanished. He ducked under Moroboshi's wildly aimed Triple Star, circled around to his right, and slashed at him again.

"Graaah!" Ikki sliced through the right side of Moroboshi's torso as well, leaving another deep gash. "Goddammit!"

Moroboshi guessed Ikki's location based on where he'd been cut and launched another Triple Star to try to counterattack. But all of his thrusts found only air. By the time he turned around, Ikki was already gone.

H-He already moved again?!

Moroboshi was flabbergasted by Ikki's newfound speed. But he didn't have time to stay awestruck, as Ikki sliced at him again, this time cutting through his back.

"Rrrgh!"

"Ah, that's another hit! Moroboshi's no longer able to keep Kurogane out of close range! He can't follow Kurogane's

movements, and his Triple Star keeps missing completely!" Iida shouted.

"I can hardly blame him! Even from our high vantage point this far away, I can barely track Kurogane. With how close Moroboshi is, I doubt his eyes can register anything at all. The Worst One may as well be invisible to the Seven Stars Sovereign!" Muroto explained.

Indeed, Moroboshi had completely lost sight of Kurogane.

Shit!

Moroboshi couldn't believe what was happening. He could feel himself getting cut, and he could hear Ikki's footsteps. He knew Ikki was right next to him, and yet he couldn't pinpoint his location.

What the hell is this shit?!

Even if he tried to turn in the direction of Ikki's footsteps, by the time he finished moving his head, Ikki was no longer there. It was as if he were standing alone in the ring while being sliced up by a ghost. It didn't feel real at all. The hundred-meter-wide ring was an open space with no obstacles whatsoever to obscure one's vision. Ikki was close enough that Moroboshi could even hear his breathing, and yet he couldn't catch a single glimpse of him.

Th-This isn't good...

Moroboshi could sense another slash bearing down on him. He couldn't afford to take many more hits. But he couldn't push Ikki away with his spear anymore. There was only one option available to him now.

"Raaaaah!"

He crossed his arms in front of him, covering all of his vitals. Then, he dispelled Tiger Bite and focused all of his mana on defense, wrapping it around himself like a suit of armor.

"W-Would you look at that! The Seven Stars Sovereign, the strongest student knight in all of Japan, has given up on trying to fight back and taken up a fully defensive stance!"

Moroboshi didn't possess as much mana as Stella. As a result, he couldn't completely nullify the power of a Rank F Blazer's Device the way she could. But if he focused all of his mana on defense, he could still reduce the power of Intetsu's slashes to the point that they were more like blunt blows than sharp cuts. And since he was protecting his head and neck with his arms, those blows wouldn't

be able to deal fatal damage.

As long as he was in this stance, however, he could do nothing to fight back. He was stuck defending. That meant Ikki could approach him without fear of retaliation.

“Kurogane’s taking full advantage of his foe’s passiveness! He’s raining down blows from all sides! This is one hell of a beatdown! And there’s nothing Moroboshi can do to stop it! Has he given up completely?!”

“Not at all! The Seven Stars Sovereign has lost sight of the Worst One. He knows all he can do here is focus on defense. Right now, he’s doing everything he can to stay in the match and find a path to victory!” Muroto was extremely impressed by Moroboshi’s grit, even though it looked to everyone else like he was just giving up. “But I still think the referee should call this match!”

“Truly?! Is there no hope for Moroboshi to make a comeback?!”

Muroto shook his head sadly.

“I’m afraid not. The difference in their abilities is too great. There’s nothing Moroboshi can do!”

Muroto was one of the best Knights in Japan, a Blazer who’d fought his way all the way up to the KOK A league. He’d seen enough fights to know when someone was outmatched. The gap in skill between Kurogane and Moroboshi was too large for any stratagem to bridge it. However, Muroto’s analysis only served to incense Moroboshi’s fans.

“What are you saying, you brainless announcer?!”

“Hoshi! Don’t give up just yet!”

But despite his fans’ fervent support, Moroboshi’s position only continued to worsen.

“With each blow, Moroboshi’s mana barrier weakens! At this rate, it’s only a matter of time before it’s completely destroyed! Is this how it ends?! With the man who took the world by storm, Naniwa’s Star, being one-sidedly battered by his opponent?!”

It was a total reversal of how things had been a few minutes ago. The audience was captivated by this unexpected development, and people shouted encouragement to both sides. Meanwhile, Shizuku caught a glimpse of Koume on the other side of the stadium. She was walking out of the stands as if running away from the reality before her.

Koume-san…

Shizuku thought back to the conflicted expression Koume had worn when she'd seen Ikki yesterday. Today too, since the start of the match, she'd looked like she was in pain. As someone who also had an older brother who constantly threw himself into the world of battle, Shizuku understood how Koume must have been feeling. She knew what was eating away at Koume—and that it was a mistake for her to feel that way. Before she knew it, Shizuku found herself running after the girl.

"I told you this before, but I really like that kind side of yours, Shizuku…" Alisuin muttered as Shizuku ran past. Shizuku blushed a little, but she didn't slow down.

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A curved hallway ringed the outer edge of the stadium, with wall-length glass windows that provided a stellar view of Osaka Bay. Benches dotted the hallway at regular intervals, and Moroboshi Koume was sitting on one of them. She was no longer watching the match her brother, Moroboshi Yuudai, was participating in.

Onii-chan, you've done enough. Please, just stop. You don't need to go this far for my sake…

Of course, Moroboshi had never once told Koume that he was fighting to help her regain her voice. But Koume didn't need to be told to know. And that was exactly what made watching him fight so painful. She couldn't bear to see her beloved brother shed blood for her sake. That was why she'd run away from the match.

"You don't want to see the rest of the match?"

Koume turned to the direction of the voice and saw Kurogane Shizuku sitting next to her. They were both the same height, so their eyes met.

Ah, she was the one who came to the restaurant yesterday. I think her name was… Koume couldn't recall Shizuku's name, but she remembered that she was the younger sister of the person her brother was fighting. *What's she doing here? Her brother's out there fighting right now too.*

Shizuku guessed what Koume was thinking from the puzzled expression on her face and smiled awkwardly at her.

"I just couldn't bear to see you leave like that. As someone who also has an older brother, I know how you feel, Koume-san."

Koume gasped, her eyes widening in surprise. *How does she*

know about us?

"Kiriko-san told us the story of why Moroboshi-san came back to the world of knights," Shizuku explained simply.

I see. Kiriko was the one person outside their family who knew the whole story.

"Like I said, I understand your feelings completely, Koume-san. I love my brother more than anything too. It's painful to watch him get hurt over and over in the ring. My brother is doing it for himself, but yours is doing it for you, so it must hurt even more."

Shizuku had read Koume's mind perfectly, and she nodded softly, not bothering to hide her pain.

"You probably wish he'd stop working so hard for your sake, right?"

Koume nodded again.

"You don't want to be a burden on the man you love and wish to marry, right?"

Koume almost nodded, but then she realized what Shizuku had just said, and her face scrunched up in confusion. She blushed profusely and shook her head. She didn't have that kind of relationship with her brother.

"Oh, it's not that kind of love? I see."

Why do you look so disappointed? Koume was surprised to learn that there was another dimension to Shizuku's love for her brother.

"Well, regardless, you feel like it would be wrong for you to cheer for your brother when he's fighting to get your voice back, right? You feel guilty about it, right?"

"..."

Shizuku was giving voice to all of the misgivings that Koume had kept bottled up inside all this time. Koume really did want to cheer for her brother with all her heart. She'd been able to in the past, back when Moroboshi had been fighting in elementary school tournaments. And she'd done so with a surprisingly large voice for her tiny body. Her love for her cool, strong brother who always did his best had been that strong.

Back then, watching his matches had been fun, even if seeing him get hurt had still been a little painful. But now, she couldn't bear it. The accident had changed everything. Now, he was fighting for her sake. She felt guilty about that, which was why she couldn't wholeheartedly cheer him on anymore. She felt as though

she didn’t have the right to since despite all of his efforts, she hadn’t gotten her voice back.

She couldn’t help but feel like she was relying on him far too much. That was the reason she hadn’t been able to truly cheer him on since the accident. Even today, she’d been overcome by guilt and run away from the match.

And this girl knows all that.

Koume felt a little embarrassed at having been seen through so completely. But at the same time, she was warmed by Shizuku’s sympathy. She took out her cell phone and started typing out “Thank you.” But before she could finish, Shizuku held up a hand.

“But so what? You don’t need to worry about that.”

Koume was so stunned by Shizuku’s words that her fingers stiffened up and she stopped typing. She looked up at Shizuku in shock. Shizuku had just said that all the things that had been bothering her for all these years weren’t worth worrying about. Of course, Shizuku did have her reasons for saying that.

“It’s okay to be overly reliant on your brother, you know. You, me, and little sisters all over the world have that right. After all, we’re their little sisters, and they’re our older brothers. Other people may not have that right, but we certainly do.”

Koume gasped again. It was a natural law of the world that older brothers protected their little sisters and little sisters relied on their older brothers. That was true of many animal species, not just humans. It was a special exception granted to little sisters toward their older brothers.

“That’s why I don’t care how much trouble I cause my brother. Even if he has someone else he loves, I’ll keep making moves on him even if it only flusters him. I have no intention of holding back my love for my brother for anyone else’s sake. Compared to my selfishness, yours is nothing. If anything, it’s cute that you want to keep cheering him on even though you haven’t gotten your voice back. You don’t need to feel guilty about that at all.”

This was why Shizuku had come here. She couldn’t bear to see Koume holding her love for her brother back because she didn’t want to be overly reliant on him. She wanted Koume to know that there was no reason to feel any guilt over her desires.

As she finished saying her piece, the announcer’s voice carried into the hallway.

“Kurogane’s getting even faster now! Just look at the speed of his blows! Moroboshi’s mana’s almost all gone now! It’s only a matter of time before he falls!”

“It sounds like the match will be over soon. I’ll be heading back now.” Shizuku got to her feet and looked down at Koume. “What about you? What will you do? No, what do you *want* to do?”

Koume looked conflicted. She understood what Shizuku was trying to say, but she still wasn’t sure if it was okay for her to be that selfish. It was her fault her brother had gotten injured. She’d lost her voice as a result, and she still hadn’t gotten it back even though he was trying so hard to help her. While she didn’t disagree with Shizuku’s logic, the guilt had eaten away at her for years now. It wasn’t something she could overcome so easily.

“Oh no, that’s the last of Moroboshi’s mana gone!” the announcer shouted while she was waffling. “He’s in real trouble now!”

Onii-chan!

Even as her mind grappled with what to do, she found her legs taking her back to her brother.

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Meanwhile, in the ring, the match was reaching its conclusion.

“Moroboshi’s backstepped away to gain some distance, but Kurogane read his moves! There’s no escape! Moroboshi throws out another Triple Star, but this one misses too! Kurogane’s just too fast! Oh no, that’s another three, no, four slashes Moroboshi’s gotten hit by! The ring’s being drenched in blood! All of Kurogane’s slashes connect, but none of Moroboshi’s thrusts leave so much as a scratch! Even Moroboshi’s fans have gone silent now! Things are looking bad! My apologies to everyone, but I really don’t see how Moroboshi’s going to be able to turn things around from here! Kurogane’s just too strong! His might is overwhelming!”

With most of his mana gone, Moroboshi didn’t even have the strength left to use Tiger Bite, and he desperately tried to keep Ikki at bay with a series of Triple Stars. He couldn’t keep up with Ikki’s movements, though, and all of his thrusts were missing. This could hardly be called a match anymore. Moroboshi was just getting one-sidedly cut to ribbons. Everyone could tell his defeat was imminent. But even so, Moroboshi refused to give up.

“Despite taking all those hits, the Seven Stars Sovereign stands

firm! Look at that determined pose!”

Even now, Moroboshi was struggling to find a way to win.

I won’t…lose here!

Was he fighting this hard for Koume’s sake? No. Not completely, at least. At first, that was certainly why he’d pushed himself so hard. Because he’d been so weak that Koume had lost her voice, he’d thought he needed to show her that he was stronger than everyone to get it back. But after returning to the ring, his feelings had slowly started to change. He’d remembered just how much he’d genuinely loved this world of heated battles and burning passions.

And so, he’d found a second reason to want to win, to want to be stronger than anyone. He didn’t just want his sister to get her voice back, he wanted her to cheer him on like she used to as well. He wanted to return to those idyllic days when he’d been able to throw himself into his battles wholeheartedly and she’d been able to cheer him on wholeheartedly. He wanted to share the joy of being a knight with her again.

Some would say wishing for the past was a desire born out of weakness. *But I don’t care. That’s what’s most important to me, after all!*

Until that dream came true, Moroboshi would never give in.

“What’s wrong, Kurogane?! I’m still standing! Come at me like you mean it!”

He would continue to be the invincible older brother Koume could be proud to cheer on. It was that unshakable pride that was keeping Moroboshi Yuudai going despite his numerous injuries.

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“What a guy… I can’t believe he still hasn’t given up…” Shizuku muttered, shivering.

There was nothing Moroboshi could do, and he was covered in even more blood than Ikki, yet his will remained unshakable. His fighting spirit was almost frightening.

“I can see how he made it through such a grueling rehab process now,” Kurono said with a nod. “I doubt anything can break his spirit. Unfortunately, his body is nearing its limits. He’s out of mana, and he can’t use Tiger Bite anymore. Sure, he’s talking a big game, but I doubt his legs have the strength left to move. Right now, Moroboshi’s hardly a threat. Ikki knows that as well. He’ll

probably end it in the next charge."

Things progressed precisely as Kurono had predicted. Ikki's body became enveloped in a sheen of pale blue mana. That was his declaration that he planned on ending the match.

"A-A-And just to be doubly sure that he claims victory, Kurogane's used Ittou Shura! The technique that brought down the Hunter, Thunderbolt, and even the Crimson Princess!"

"The Worst One's a master of reading the situation! He used his trump card at the best time to clinch him the match. Between his already overwhelming speed and now his use of Ittou Shura, any last-ditch strategy the Seven Stars Sovereign might have been planning on using to catch him by surprise won't work either!"

Muroto had hit the nail on the head. Moroboshi was already losing to Ikki in terms of speed and strength, and now Ikki had increased his physical capabilities tenfold by using Ittou Shura. With this one move, Ikki had sealed off any hope of Moroboshi making a comeback.

"Using everything I have, I will dethrone you, the Seven Stars Sovereign. Are you ready, Moroboshi-san?!"

It was time at last for the final exchange of this long and grueling match. Ikki crouched low and focused all of his strength into his legs. He rocketed forward at full speed, heading toward Moroboshi like a shooting star.

"Kurogane's going in for the kill! The Seven Stars Sovereign's in a tight spot!" Iida shouted in his loudest voice yet as the audience watched on with bated breath, wondering if the reigning Seven Stars Sovereign was really about to lose in his very first match of the tournament.

While everyone screamed in triumph or dismay around her, Koume thought back to what her brother had said to her in the morning before heading out for his match. *"Hey, could you cheer me on and tell me to do my best like you always do?"*

Ah... How could I have forgotten?

She wasn't the only one who wished she could cheer Moroboshi on like she used to. He wanted that as well. He'd been wishing for that all this time, and what had she done? She'd just written "Do your best" on a piece of paper for him. That worthless scrap of paper wasn't what he wanted. No, he obviously wanted something more.

“What will you do? No, what do you want *to do?”*

I know exactly what I want to do!

“Onii-chaaan! Do your best! You can do iiit!” she shouted, her feelings finally bursting forth from her mouth. She’d wanted to say that for so, so long, but she’d held herself back, thinking that she didn’t deserve to after taking his legs away from him.

Her voice was raspy and faint; she hadn’t used it in years, after all. However, it was still loud enough to reach her brother’s—Moroboshi Yuudai’s ears through the noise of the crowd. Of course it was. Her voice was the one he’d been waiting so long to hear.


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“You bet I caaaaan!” With a fierce battle cry, Moroboshi threw his spear at Ikki, shocking all of the spectators. “Punch right through him, Tiger King!”

Until now, Moroboshi had fought while staying within a spear length’s range at all times. This was the first time he’d utilized a throwing technique. Kurono let out a surprised gasp as she watched the spear hurtle toward Ikki, who was charging forward at full speed.

“Th-This isn’t good!”

There were a couple of compounding factors that made this such a dangerous move. While it was a surprise tactic that had come out of left field, it was still a long-range throw. Under normal circumstances, a knight of Ikki’s caliber would be able to dodge it with ample time to spare. But Ikki was using Edelweiss’s instant acceleration movement, which meant that he couldn’t easily decelerate or change directions. While the ability to go from zero to a hundred instantly was extremely powerful when it came to offense, it was also extremely susceptible to surprise attacks because it couldn’t adjust to sudden changes in the midst of battle. Moreover, Ikki was using Ittou Shura on top of it. Honestly, though, even without Edelweiss’s technique, he would still have been moving too fast to turn or stop himself.

Right now is the only time a spear throw like that could be effective against Kurogane!

The only thing Ikki could do to safely deal with Moroboshi’s attack was to deflect the spear with his sword. But he couldn’t do that either, because Moroboshi had enveloped Tiger King in Tiger Bite. With his mana completely depleted, he shouldn’t have been able to use that ability anymore, but he had done something truly unprecedented: He’d dissolved half of his Device’s handle, shortening it to the length of a javelin, and used its mana to activate Tiger Bite one last time. As a result, Ikki couldn’t block the attack, and he was in no position to dodge it either.

Moroboshi…was waiting for this moment!

Indeed, the moment Moroboshi had first seen Ikki use Edelweiss’s technique, he’d figured out its one weakness. From there, he’d slowly started laying his final trap. He’d endured the countless slashes, waiting for the moment Ikki used Ittou Shura and rushed forward at too high a speed to make minor course

adjustments. He'd purposely made it seem like he was helpless against Ikki's onslaught so that Ikki would go in for the final blow. It had cost him dearly, but his bluff had been so perfect that it had deceived all of the spectators, including highly skilled knights like Kurono.

Kurogane's already at top speed! He can't dodge this throw!

Kurono shivered, awed by just how honed Moroboshi's battle senses were. He'd managed to deceive even her. Naturally, Alisuin and Shizuku were taken completely by surprise as well.

Even this was part of his plan?!

So this is the might of the Seven Stars Sovereign!

Everyone had been shown just how tenacious, just how relentless the man who'd earned the title of Seven Stars Sovereign could be. But in the next instant, everyone witnessed something even more surprising. The moment Tiger King pierced Ikki's forehead, he faded away like a mirage.

What…the…

Moroboshi was speechless. A second later, a shadow fell over him. He looked up and saw Ikki bearing down on him from above, the sun at his back.

Ikki had used the same technique he had to avoid Moroboshi's Chasing Comet: Flicker Mirage. But this time, he'd created an afterimage below him rather than to his side. He'd then leaped upward using his enhanced leg strength, cleanly evading Moroboshi's spear, which had been aimed at the afterimage.

Unlike everyone else, Ikki had known that Moroboshi wasn't out of the fight just yet. He'd expected the Seven Stars Sovereign to bear his fangs one last time.

Ah… I see… Upon seeing Ikki's expression, Moroboshi realized why his opponent hadn't been fooled when everyone else had. There wasn't the slightest bit of pride on Ikki's face from having managed to dupe Moroboshi with his feint. No, the only thing reflected in his eyes was a deep measure of respect. *You believed in me, didn't you?*

Ikki had believed that the Seven Stars Sovereign, who'd constantly laid trap after trap and who had absolute confidence in his own fighting skills, would never give up his crown without a fight. The reason Moroboshi Yuudai had lost was that Kurogane Ikki had more respect for him than anyone else present, including

Moroboshi himself. That was why he'd been able to see through Moroboshi's final trick.

Ikki slashed down as he landed, finally putting an end to this heart-stopping match. Moroboshi had put his all into that surprise attack, and he had no weapon or mana left with which to defend himself, nor did he have the strength left to dodge. Ikki's blade bit deep into his shoulder, and he dropped to his knees in a spray of blood. As he did, he squeezed out the last of his strength to raise his hands and clap Ikki on both shoulders. Just before losing consciousness, he spoke to the knight who had surpassed him.

"You better not lose."

Entrusting his wishes to the foe who'd believed in his strength to the very end, Moroboshi collapsed onto the ring, and the referee blew the whistle signaling the end of the match.

◆◇◆◇◆

"A-And that's the match! What a series of twists! The final match of the C block ends, and it sure was an exciting one! Ultimately, it's Another One Kurogane Ikki who takes the win! This is truly unprecedented! To think that last year's Seven Stars Sovereign would fall in his very first match of the tournament! This is a huge upset!"

The moment the match ended, the medical team ran in and loaded Moroboshi onto a stretcher. He'd used up all of his strength, so there was no way he'd be walking out of the ring. But even as he was carried away, his fans clapped for him.

"Nice try, Hoshi! You did good!"

"I've been cheering you on since before your accident, so I can say with confidence...that was your best match yet!"

"It looks like all of his fans are still cheering the local hero on as he gets carted off for medical treatment. He came back from an injury everyone thought would be career-ending and has won every single one of his matches until today. Naniwa's Star Moroboshi Yuudai was by no means a weak opponent. And though he lost, the grit he showed until the very end was worthy of the title 'Seven Stars Sovereign.' There's no question that he's one of Japan's strongest student knights!"

"I promise. I won't lose," Ikki muttered as he watched Moroboshi get carried off. He then turned on his heel and started walking out of the ring.

“Another One is taking his leave as well. The man with the smallest amount of mana but the strongest sword skills proved that his reputation is well-earned by defeating last year’s Seven Stars Sovereign! Anyone who saw today’s match can clearly tell that his strength is the real deal! He may be Rank F, but he’s not just any Rank F! Without a doubt, he’s one of the top contenders to be this year’s Seven Stars Sovereign!”

“You were hella cool, Tokyo boy!”

“I love you, Ikki-kun!”

“Make it all the way to the top, kid! I know you can do it!”

Ikki blushed a little as the crowd showered him in praise.

Thank you, everyone.

His steps were a little unsteady as he made his way back to the gate he’d come out of. The recoil of using Ittou Shura and the strain he’d put on his muscles by using Edelweiss’s technique were taking their toll. Even so, his back remained ramrod straight. He was proud of himself for managing to defeat such a strong foe. There had been a lot of unknowns going into the match, and he’d honestly been pretty scared while he’d been sitting in the waiting room.

But he’d won. He’d earned the right to fight in the next match of the tournament. He just needed to win four more and he’d reach the stage he’d been dreaming of for so long: the finals of the Seven Stars Battle Festival.

The summit…isn’t as far as it used to be!

As he approached the gate, Ikki heard someone clapping from inside. They were walking toward him, but the hallway was dark, so he couldn’t make out who it was.

“See? I knew you’d win.”

“Ah!”

Though he couldn’t see her face, Ikki would have recognized her voice anywhere. He knew it better than his own, after all.

“You had to. Because the one who’s going to beat you is me.”

Stella walked out of the gate, and her flaming red hair and ruby eyes glimmered in the light of the sun.

Hagun Academy Bulletin

Character Intros Journalist: Kusakabe Kagami

Moroboshi Yuudai



■PROFILE

Affiliation: Bukyoku Academy

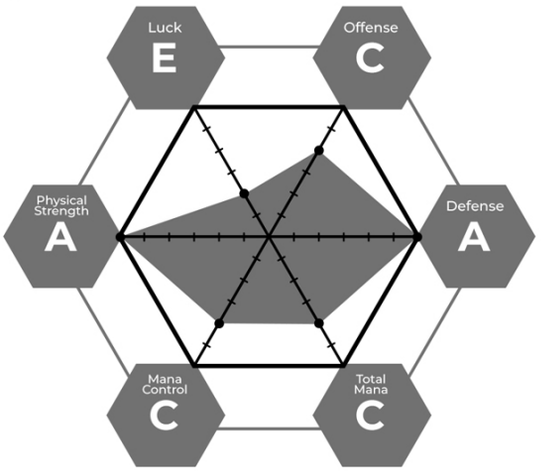
Third-Year

Blazer Rank: B

Noble Art: Tiger Bite

Nickname: Seven Stars Sovereign

Summary: The winner of the previous Seven Stars Battle Festival.



Kagamin's Thoughts!



Everyone's heard of the Seven Stars Sovereign, of course. He has the extremely rare ability to devour the mana of others, which gives him a huge advantage in battles against other Blazers. He combines that power with his exceptional spear-wielding skills to lay numerous traps for his enemies. Though he seems like a straightforward martial artist, he's actually quite a crafty fighter. He really is like a wild tiger, coming out of nowhere when you least expect it and ripping out your throat.

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Interlude: The True Star Arrives

Stella Vermillion was waiting for Kurogane Ikki as he reached the gate after defeating Moroboshi Yuudai, the Seven Stars Sovereign. She'd been late in getting to the stadium because her train had been delayed, but she'd finally arrived.

"Th-That's Stella Vermillion, the Crimson Princess! She's made it to the stadium!"

"Wow, it's really her!"

"She really does have red hair! It's so pretty..."

"She's pretty tall too. Look how long her legs are!"

The crowd was as excited to see Stella as they had been to see Moroboshi. As one of the few Rank A Blazers in the world, she attracted a lot of attention. But naturally, out of everyone, it was Ikki who was the happiest to see her.

"Stella... I'm glad you made it..."

He was, of course, happy she'd made it in time to not be disqualified, but more than anything, it had been a while since he'd seen her, and he was glad to be with her again. His heart leaped, and as he smiled at her, he was once again reminded of just how much he loved her.

"Well, I was planning on making it in time for my match, but a rockslide blocked the tracks. It took longer than I wanted to move all the rocks out of the way. Honestly, they should put drills in front of all the trains. It'd make things faster, plus it'd look cool."

"Ha ha... Talk about bad luck..." *Wait,* you *moved all the rocks out of the way? Like, by hand? You know what, I'm just not going to ask.*

"You had a seriously tough opponent, though. I only managed to see the very end, but I could tell he was amazing."

"Yeah... But I won. Now, it's your turn."

"Don't worry, I know."

Stella's eyes were sparkling with confidence. She'd come a long way from the girl who'd lost faith in herself while crying over Touka's unconscious body. It seemed her training with Saikyou had paid off.

Thank god...

Stella walked past Ikki and looked up at the waiting crowd.

"Sorry I'm late, but I'm finally here!" she announced in a loud, clear voice.

"Stella's quite polite, apologizing for her tardiness like that."

"Now that she's here, when do you think her match will be?"

"I believe the Management Committee's holding a meeting about that right now. Either they'll save it for the very end, or they'll do it right now since all of C block's matches just ended. Oh, it seems the meeting just ended. They apparently want to address the crowd directly, so please take a look at the screen, everyone."

At Iida's words, everyone turned to the large screen at the top of the stadium. A bald man appeared on it.

"Ah, it's Kaieda!"

"Wow, you're right. It's Kaieda Yuuzou, the Smiting Lightning!"

The spectators aged forty and older pointed excitedly at the screen. The Smiting Lightning was a famous hero who'd fought for many years in the KOK A league in the past. But he was well past his prime now, and these days, he served as the chairman of the Seven Stars Battle Festival Management Committee. It seemed he would be giving the verdict on when Stella's match would be held.

"Good afternoon, everyone. I'm the chairman of the sixty-second Seven Stars Battle Festival's Management Committee, Kaieda. Now that Stella Vermillion has arrived, we were discussing when to hold the postponed final match of the B block, and I'm here to tell you all what decision the Committee has come to. We've decided that it will be the next match."

Iida's prediction had been correct, the Committee had indeed decided that since the C block's matches had just ended, now was the perfect time to hold Stella's match.

"Is that all right with you, Stella?" Kaieda asked, turning to Stella.

"Sure," Stella replied immediately. She was the one who'd been late, so she had no intention of objecting to any of the Committee's decisions.

"Well, it's not fine with me!" a voice as cold as ice said, a stark contrast to Stella's bright voice. It belonged to none other than the Icy Sneer, Tsuruya Mikoto. She jumped out of the stands down to the ring ten meters below, glaring up at the screen. Then, she brushed back her ash-blonde hair and added, "Please don't decide things without my consent, Chairman."

“Oh, no, we were going to confirm things with you as well, of course. But you said you’re not fine with this decision, does that mean there’s a problem with holding your match next? If so, we can move it to the end of today’s schedule. You were on time for your match, so the Committee is willing to acquiesce to any reasonable demands you might have.”

Tsuruya shook her head. Her problem wasn’t with when the match was going to be held but rather something more fundamental.

“I don’t mind when the match is held. But I can’t accept that there’s no penalty for Stella even though she was late. I request that Stella be given some kind of restriction for her tardiness.”

She pointed at Stella, and the crowd started to mutter angrily.

“Come on, don’t be like that!”

“You’re a knight, aren’t you? Fight fair and square!”

Most of them didn’t want to see Stella fighting with a handicap. They wanted to see a fair match where both sides gave it their all.

A few people saw Tsuruya’s point of view and said things like “But you know, Mikoto-san has a point,” or “Yeah, it’s not fair for someone who’s late to get off scot-free,” but the overwhelming voices of discontent drowned them out. However, Tsuruya didn’t waver. She sneered coldly at the crowd, daring them to challenge her.

Hmph. Say whatever you want. I won’t back down.

She knew that she didn’t stand a chance against Stella Vermillion in a fair fight. That was why she was trying to eke out any advantage she could. It didn’t matter how much people hated her for it, the most important thing was to win. Victory alone decided a knight’s true worth. At least, that was what Tsuruya Mikoto believed. Much like Ikki and Moroboshi, she understood what the true nature of a knight was. Unfortunately, the rules weren’t on her side.

“I see… We have administered penalties to fighters who were late to their matches before, but that was in cases where they had no reasonable excuse for their tardiness. We confirmed that Stella Vermillion’s train was indeed delayed due to a rockslide, so the Committee has decided not to issue any penalties to her. Fighting her match immediately after arriving feels like enough of a penalty to us.”

“Ngh!”

The Committee had discussed whether or not to give Stella a penalty even before Tsuruya had brought it up. After looking at past rulings, however, they'd decided there was no need. For that reason, they couldn't accept Tsuruya's request.

"No, I agree with her."

Not unless Stella herself asked to be penalized.

"S-Stella?!" Ikki shouted, stunned.

"The Icy Sneer is right," Stella said, ignoring him. "If I'd arrived a few days ago like all the other fighters, this wouldn't be a problem in the first place. I take full responsibility for my lateness and believe a penalty is required."

Everyone was dumbfounded—Ikki, the crowd, and even Kaieda. In a single-elimination tournament like this, where you couldn't afford even a single loss, there was no reason to ever put yourself in a disadvantageous position.

"Th-That's a surprise. Are you truly asking for a penalty?"

"Even if Tsuruya-san hadn't said anything, I would have asked for a penalty anyway," Stella replied, nodding. "The Vermillion family believes in fighting fairly. Since I was late, it's only fair that I be punished for it."

"Mm. I see..."

"Incidentally, I have an idea in mind for what my penalty can be."

"You do?"

"Yes. If we fight under the usual rules, it won't be fair to Tsuruya-san, who wasn't late. So I was thinking that for this next match, we should change the rules a little. Specifically, I would like to fight all the remaining fighters in block B at once, as a four-against-one match."

"Wh-What did you say?!" Kaieda shouted, his voice rising an octave.

He wasn't the only one stunned, the rest of the crowd was as well.

"I-Is this princess insane?!"

"That's way too strict of a penalty!"

It was enough to make people doubt their ears. Even Tsuruya was taken aback, despite how big a boon this would be for her.

"A-Are you serious?!" she asked.

"You bet," Stella answered in a casual tone, grinning and

nodding. “Honestly, being late is normally grounds for disqualification. If you think about it that way, this is a pretty reasonable penalty. Of course, this is only if all of the other B block fighters are willing.”

Ikki paled as she said that.

O-Oh no!

The penalty Stella had suggested was insane, of course, but what was even worse was that the other three members in the B block were all Akatsuki students.

Students from other schools probably wouldn’t have agreed to this penalty. They’d already won their matches, so they wouldn’t want to fight Stella for Tsuruya’s sake. There was nothing in it for them. But the members of Akatsuki Academy were mercenaries who’d been hired to dominate the Seven Stars Battle Festival. They didn’t care about their individual results; all that mattered was that one of them won the tournament.

There’s no way they won’t jump at this opportunity!

This was Akatsuki’s best chance to take down Stella, a Rank A knight and the biggest threat to Ouma, their trump card. A four-against-one battle was far more than they could have ever hoped for.

“Heh heh heh heh. That’s quite an interesting proposal,” the Jester, Hiraga Reisen, said with a smile. “There are no easy opponents in the Seven Stars Battle Festival, and yet you want to fight four of us at once? The rumors don’t do you justice. Your arrogance truly is something else, Crimson Princess.”

Hiraga jumped out of the stands and landed next to Tsuruya Mikoto.

“You’re just a wild boar who relies on brute strength. You’re gonna regret this,” Tatara Yui added, jumping down as well.

“Ku ku ku. Words once spoken cannot be taken back, Crimson Princess,” Kazamatsuri Rinna noted, directing her black lion to bring her down into the ring.

It was clear from their words that they were more than willing to take this fight.

“We members of Akatsuki Academy are fine with this. We’ll gladly lend our strength to the Icy Sneer for a fair match.”

“Hmm. I-I see. And is this acceptable to you as well, Tsuruya?”

“Th-That works for me.”

There was a bit of hesitation in her voice. She hadn't expected such a favorable outcome. But there was no reason for her to refuse.

"All right..."

Kaieda closed his eyes, his wrinkled face lined with worry.

"H-Hey, surely you aren't considering this! There's no way a penalty like that is fair!" one of the spectators shouted.

"Four against one isn't a fair fight! It'll just be a lynching!" another said.

"But Stella-san's the one who requested it!"

"Seems fun to me! Let 'em do it!"

Opinions among the crowd were split. Some people just wanted to see how the match would turn out, and others felt that if Stella herself was asking for it, there was no reason to refuse. But about half of the spectators still felt that this was far too unreasonable. The arguing went on for a full minute before Kaieda opened his eyes again.

"Okay," he said in a solemn voice. *"Since all of the fighters have agreed to the proposal, we will allow this match to take place under a special four-against-one rule set."*

"Really?!"

"What's the Committee thinking?!"

"Silence, please! As this is a tournament where the student knights are the stars, there have been cases where battles with unique rule sets have taken place when both parties have agreed. There is precedence for this. While I personally feel that this is a bit extreme for a penalty, it is what Stella herself has asked for. As a result, we will treat it like we would any other request for a rule change," Kaieda said, then turned his attention back to Stella and Tsuruya. *"Allow me to confirm the full list of rules. For Stella to win, she must defeat Tsuruya, Hiraga, Kazamatsuri, and Tatara. On the other hand, Tsuruya will win if any of the four fighters manage to defeat Stella. Is that acceptable to both sides?"*

"Works for me," Stella replied with a nod.

"Yes. Thank you for your magnanimous decision, Chairman," Tsuruya said.

With that settled, the Management Committee's role in this match was done.

"Very well. Iida-san, I hand the floor back over to you."

“Uh, o-okay.”

The screen went blank, and Iida took a few seconds to process what had just transpired.

“Um, so… Well, it seems things have taken quite an unexpected turn. I’ve been a commentator for many years, but this is my first time witnessing a four-on-one battle. But seeing as this is what the fighters themselves wished for, and seeing as the Committee has given its permission, I’ll commentate to the best of my ability!” By the end, his voice had gotten its usual confidence back, and he was acting like nothing was out of the ordinary. “The final match of the B block, Stella Vermillion versus Tsuruya Mikoto, will now begin! Both fighters, as well as the guest fighters, please make your way into the ring!”

“I’ll be going, then. You look exhausted, so you can sleep if you want. I doubt it’ll be all that interesting a match anyway,” Stella said, turning back to Ikki. Even though she was about to fight three hardened Blazers from the criminal underworld as well as the Icy Sneer, who’d made the top eight the year prior, she was grinning like an excited child. Ikki couldn’t understand why she’d done this.

“Stella… Why are you taking such a huge risk?” If she hadn’t said anything, she wouldn’t have been given any penalty at all. She had nothing to gain by doing this. At least, nothing that Ikki could see. That was why he was so confused by Stella’s actions. “Are you that confident you can beat all four of them at once?”

Stella shook her head in response.

“Nah, there’s no guarantee I can. At the very least, I’m not a hundred percent sure. We don’t even know what the Akatsuki members’ Blazer abilities are.”

“Then why?”

“Because this is the only way,” she muttered, looking back up at the big screen, which was now showing the tournament bracket. She glared at the spot that showed the next day’s B-block matches. “At this rate, Hiraga and Kazamatsuri will be fighting each other in the first B-block match tomorrow. And since we know Akatsuki’s true purpose, I’m certain one of them is going to forfeit. I won’t allow that.”

That made sense. Akatsuki’s students weren’t interested in individual glory; they were a team working together to destroy the

tournament. They wouldn't battle each other and risk lowering their fighting strength. Either the Jester or the Beast Tamer would concede the match.

"Stella..."

At long last, Ikki understood what Stella was after. The reason she'd suggested such a ridiculous penalty wasn't that her family valued fairness or anything like that. What she'd told Kaieda had just been an excuse.

"They wrecked our school, hurt our friends, and now one of them is going to get to leave this tournament unscathed? No, I won't allow that."

That was the real reason Stella had wanted this penalty. Hiraga and the others had harmed Touka, Ayatsuji, and all of her other friends, and she was going to make them pay.

"I'm going to burn them all to ash," she growled, sounding like a volcano that was about to erupt. Her scarlet hair began to glow, tiny embers shooting out of it. She finally had a target for the anger she'd kept bottled up since the attack on Hagun Academy. She glared at the Akatsuki members waiting for her in the ring.

Ikki couldn't help but think that Stella was getting too emotional. He had no intention of rebuking her for getting angry for her friends' sake, though, so he just silently watched her walk off.

All I can do now is put my faith in you. Hopefully the strength you gained from your training with Saikyou-sensei was enough. Good luck, Stella!

"Now then, let's go ahead with the final match of the B block!"

And so, the most irregular match of the tournament began.


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Afterword

Hello everyone, Riku Misora here. Thank you all for picking up volume 5 of *Chivalry of a Failed Knight*.

I'm writing this afterword in July, and as always, summers in Japan are crazy hot and crazy humid. What's even worse, I don't have a fan or AC in my room, so it's a struggle to get any work done in my sweltering home. But I'll only have to put up with this for another month. For the first time since moving out of my family home, I've finally found a place that has AC and a TV. Whoooo!

What's even better, this place allows pets. I can get a cat. I'm so getting a cat. Next volume's afterword is probably going to be me just gushing about my cat. But who can blame me? Cats are cute.

Anyway, we've finally started the Seven Stars Battle Festival. Right after Ikki wins his first match, Stella goes and causes a scene. Will the two of them really be able to make it to the finals and face each other? I hope you keep reading to find out. As long as you guys are following their story, I'll keep writing it.

I'd like to thank my editor for helping me polish the script, and of course, Won-san for his wonderful illustrations. I'd also like to thank all of my readers for sticking with me this whole time. I'm eternally grateful to all of you.

May we meet again in the next volume.


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Chivalry of a Failed Knight
5


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"You pass with flying colors."
Bloody da Vinci:
Sara Bloodlily
"P-Pass"?! What do you mean, "pass"?!"


© Won
"Hee hee hee...
What do you say?
Would you like a little
checkup before the
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I promise to look you
over very thoroughly."
Doctor Knight:
Yakushi
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© Won
So this is what fighting the Seven Stars Sovereign is like...
Moroboshi had a ferocious grin on his face, and he was staring down Ikki the way a predator looked at its prey.
Seven Stars Sovereign: Moroboshi Yuudai

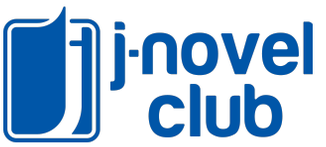

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