Riku Misora

Illust. Won

All new translation by j-novel club



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Chivalry of a Failed Knight

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Table of Contents

Cover

Interlude: The Reflector

Chapter 5: Mowing Them Down

Chapter 6: The First Round Ends

Chapter 7: The Second Round Begins

Interlude: Blackout

Afterword

Color Illustrations

Bonus High Resolution Illustrations

About J-Novel Club

Copyright

Interlude: The Reflector

"We're almost done with the first round of the sixty-second Seven Stars Battle Festival! In the A block, all of the favorites cleared their first matches. Among them, Gale Emperor Kurogane Ouma and Panzer Grizzly Kaga Renji crushed their opponents with overwhelming force! Meanwhile, in the B block, the newly formed Akatsuki Academy's students swept the competition, with all three members in that block defeating powerful foes to make it on to the next round! They're truly as strong as the rumors claim! And just recently, the C-block matches ended with the Rank F knight Kurogane Ikki defeating the winner of last year's tournament, Seven Stars Sovereign Moroboshi Yuudai! We're only on the first day, and already the matches have proven to be quite exciting!"

The announcer was yelling so loudly that his voice was growing hoarse. He had to in order to be heard over the raucous din of the audience.

"*And now, for the first time in Seven Stars Battle Festival history, we're going to have a four-against-one match! Stella Vermillion is going to fight all four of the B block's remaining fighters at once as a penalty for being late, including her original opponent, Tsuruya Mikoto! Both sides have agreed to these rules, and there's no telling how this irregular, lopsided battle is going to turn out!"*

Typically, battles between knights were always one-on-one matches. As the announcer had said, never before had there been a four-on-one battle in the Seven Stars Battle Festival. It was an unprecedented historical event. None of the spectators in the coliseum had any idea why the Crimson Princess, Stella Vermillion, had offered to take on a penalty that was stacked so heavily against her. But Thunderbolt Toudou Touka and Scharlach Frau Toutokubara Kanata, who were watching the event on a TV back in Hagun Academy, knew exactly what Stella was thinking.

"Stella-chan really is a kind girl..." Touka muttered.

"Indeed. We're blessed to have such a caring underclassman."

The two of them knew that Stella had no intention of letting even a single one of Akatsuki's members escape punishment. They'd messed up Stella's school, her friends, and her teachers. If things had progressed normally, in the second round of matches tomorrow, Jester Hiraga Reisen would be going up against Beast Tamer Kazamatsuri Rinna. But considering Akatsuki's goals, it was likely that one of them would just forfeit the match. After all, they were mercenaries who'd been hired by Prime Minister Tsukikage to ensure that their school won the tournament, thus tarnishing the International Mage-Knight Federation's reputation. They didn't care about personal prestige, so they wouldn't risk whittling away at a fellow Akatsuki member's strength by fighting each other.

Stella knew that as well. Thus, she'd used her tardiness as an excuse to ask the Management Committee for a chance to beat them all at once. All for the sake of Touka and the other students who'd been attacked. While Kanata was extremely grateful that Stella cared so much about them, she couldn't rejoice at this turn of events.

"But President, it hurts me to watch this."

"Why's that?"

"Because she drove herself into a corner due to her own kindness. She has to fight Tatara Yui, of all people, in a four-against-one situation. That's too big of a handicap," Kanata muttered sadly.

It was then that Touka recalled that Kanata had been the one to fight Yui when the Akatsuki members had attacked.

"I was focused completely on Ouma-san back then, so I didn't really pay attention to everyone else's battles. Is Tatara Yui truly that dangerous a Blazer?"

"As embarrassing as it is to say, I didn't stand a chance against her. I wasn't even able to scratch her."

"What?!"

Touka was flabbergasted. When there was a big enough gap in skill between knights, it was possible to beat someone without taking any damage. Touka had managed to get a clean victory over

Shizuku during the qualifying matches because of that. But when up against Scharlach Frau, it was nigh impossible to achieve perfect victory. Even in the King of Knights A league, there wasn't a single Blazer who could defeat Kanata without taking at least some damage.

Her Noble Art, Diamond Dust, crushed her Device into a thousand tiny pieces that she could freely control. She usually scattered them throughout the air and sliced up her opponents wherever they were, regardless of whether that was at close or long range. Because of how small those fragments were, enemies were liable to breathe some in as well, which let Kanata cut up their lungs. It was exceedingly difficult to avoid taking any damage whatsoever from her Noble Art. That was why Touka had thought it impossible for anyone to come out unscathed in a fight against Kanata. And yet, Tatara had accomplished just that. Touka could think of only one way to achieve such a feat.

"Don't tell me Tatara-san is a Reflector!" Touka cried, the blood draining from her face.

Kanata nodded sadly. This was the worst possible scenario for Stella. Reflectors were a class of Blazers who possessed Noble Arts that allowed them to completely reflect any attack. The stronger their opponents were, the more dangerous their reflection abilities became. And of course, the Crimson Princess was as strong as they came.

Chapter 5: Mowing Them Down

In the past, there had been plans to develop a new city along Osaka Bay, but then funding had dried up halfway through development, and for years, a half-built ghost town had languished. But now, those buildings had been converted to hotels that were all fully booked, and the once-empty Bay Dome was currently packed with over a hundred thousand spectators. The arrival of the Seven Stars Battle Festival had breathed new life into this failed megaconstruction project.

"You better not disappoint us after all that big talk, Crimson Princess!"

"Guess we'll get to see just how strong Akatsuki's students really are now."

"Mikoto-chan, I'm rooting for you!"

As the signal to start the match rang out, the spectators went wild with excitement. But unlike the audience, the fighters didn't seem particularly thrilled by this turn of events. Rather, they all looked furious, and Tatara Yui was the angriest of them all.

Don't underestimate us, bitch!

They were, of course, pissed off at Stella for insinuating that they were so weak she could beat all four of them at once. The Icy Sneer, Tsuruya Mikoto, was happy with this turn of events since all she cared about was victory, but the members of Akatsuki hated being underestimated, especially Tatara. They'd agreed to Stella's terms because they'd known that doing so would put them in an advantageous position, but that didn't mean they had to like it.

I'll make you pay for treating us like small fry!

"Hey, Hiraga. Since this is a tournament match, no one's gonna complain if I 'accidentally' kill her, right?"

"Heh heh heh, that's right. In high-profile tournaments like this, accidents happen all the time. Our client understands that as well.

He's a knight too, after all."

"Geh heh heh. Then I guess I don't need to hold back!" A feral grin spread across Tatara's face as Hiraga, the acting captain of the Akatsuki team, gave her the go-ahead to go wild. "No need to blunt your edge this time! Let's saw our way through her guts, Crawling Centipede!"

Tatara revved the engine of her chainsaw Device, Crawling Centipede, and set the chain whirring. The toothed edge of her chainsaw did indeed look like a crawling centipede as it spun, and the engine let out a high-pitched scream as it warmed up. She dragged her chainsaw along the floor as she ran at Stella, gouging the ground behind her.

"Tatara's making the first move! She's charging fearlessly at Stella! How will the Crimson Princess— Oh?!" As the announcer turned to Stella, he let out a shocked gasp. "The battle's begun, but Stella still hasn't summoned her Device! What's she thinking?!"

"Wh-What are you doing?! Hurry up and get your weapon out!" one of the spectators shouted.

"Come on, the battle's already started! Did you not hear the signal or something?!"

"There's no way she didn't. So why isn't she summoning her weapon?!"

The audience couldn't figure out what Stella was thinking. She was doing nothing to impede Tatara, who was closing in blisteringly fast, her black hair whipping in the wind behind her.

"Diiiiie!"

Tatara swung her chainsaw up at Stella's neck. But it was a slow, wide swing that someone of Stella's caliber could easily react to. She leaned back, just barely dodging the weapon's tip.

"Gah ha ha ha ha!"

Tatara didn't seem to care that Stella had dodged, and she kept on swinging wildly at her, relying solely on brute strength. There was no technique behind her attacks; she almost looked like a child play-fighting with a toy sword. Except she had a deadly chainsaw in her hand rather than a plastic toy. There was no need for technique when even a glancing blow would cut deep by virtue of it being a

spinning blade. Tatara's chainsaw could cut through the hardened stone of the ring floor, meaning it would have no trouble slicing through flesh.

"What a deadly offensive! Tatara's pressing forward with her chainsaw, knowing that Stella won't block!"

As sloppy as Tatara's swings were, she was attacking so much that it was getting difficult for Stella to keep dodging. She needed to fight back, yet she still hadn't summoned Lævateinn.

"Tatara's really hit her stride! She's not giving Stella any time to rest! She's swinging that chainsaw around like a veritable dervish! But Stella still hasn't brought out her Device! With how sloppy Tatara's swings are, it feels like there's an opening to counterattack, so I wonder why..."

"Whoa! That was real close!"

"Is it just me or is Tatara starting to read Stella's dodges?!"

"I can't bear to watch this! Hurry up and draw your sword, Stella!"

The audience was starting to get confused. The match had long since started, and Tatara had been whaling on Stella for a while now, but she still refused to draw her sword. They couldn't tell what she was thinking. Fortunately, former KOK A-league fighter Muroto answered the question that was on everyone's mind.

"She's probably measuring the timing of Tatara's attacks."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Remember the third match of the B block, when Tatara was fighting Rentei Academy's Niidome? She was able to reflect his battle axe with some invisible force, then defeated him when he was off-balance from having his strongest swing knocked away. Tatara's Blazer powers likely allow her to reflect any impact. That's one of the most powerful abilities you can possess when it comes to combat. If Stella attacks without a plan, she'll just get her sword reflected and leave herself wide open. In fact, considering how powerful her blows are, she's liable to defeat herself with her own attack."

Indeed, Tatara's Noble Art, Total Reflect, grew stronger the more powerful her opponent's attacks were. If Stella launched a full-power slash at Tatara and it got reflected, it was possible that the recoil

would shatter both of her arms.

"In order to defeat Reflectors like Tatara, you need to figure out the process by which they activate their reflective powers, as well as any limitations they might have," Muroto added. "That's why simply dodging while analyzing your opponent is the correct strategy here."

"I see, so she's keeping her cards close to her chest and waiting for an opening that she can take advantage of with a lightning-fast attack?"

"That's what it looks like to me."

As they watched their friend fight, Alisuin turned to Shizuku.

"It reminds me of how Ikki acted during that one crisis. Do you remember?" she asked.

"There isn't a single moment I've spent with Onii-sama that I would ever forget. But I take it you're referring to when we fought the Rebellion terrorists in the shopping mall?" That was before the selection matches had even started. The four of them had gone to a local shopping mall, which had then been attacked by a Rebellion looter squad. The leader of that squad, Bishou, had possessed a similar power to Tatara's. "Stella-san was right there when Onii-sama cut that man down. I'm sure she remembers the tactics he used to beat him."

Ikki had launched an attack that was too fast for Bishou to see, taking him by surprise before he'd even had a chance to activate his reflection ability. Surpassing your opponent's reaction time was one way to overcome a Reflector. It was actually the most common strategy Blazers employed when facing one. It wouldn't be a bad idea for Stella to try that tactic. However, Alisuin shook her head.

"But Stella-chan won't be able to copy what Ikki did back then," she said.

"Why's that?" the Doctor Knight, Yakushi Kiriko, asked. She was sitting with Alisuin and Shizuku.

"It's a matter of speed," Alisuin explained. "Stella-chan's attacks are exceptionally powerful, but her sword is much slower than Ikki's Thunderclap. On top of that, Lævateinn is a much larger sword than Intetsu. Her swings naturally have to be wider and slower because of that. I doubt she'll be able to unleash a swing that's so fast it's

impossible to react to."

Honestly, even if she is *capable of slashing faster than Tatara can react, I doubt a trick like that is going to work on the famed Unmovable.*

As someone who'd spent time working for Rebellion, Alisuin knew just how strong their Blazers could be. She was right to be worried too. After a few more swings, Tatara smirked derisively at Stella.

Ha! You stupid bitch! I bet you think if you can hit me before I have a chance to react, I won't be able to reflect your attack back at you. Technically, that's true, but you better not think I'll go down as easily as that small fry Bishou! I'm from a family of assassins who've served Rebellion for generations! I'm built different!

Tatara was nothing like Bishou, who'd stepped onto the path of evil to indulge in his vices. She was a born and bred assassin who'd been taught to kill before she'd even known right from wrong. And her education had been extremely thorough. Ever since her third birthday, her own father had trained her to be ready to activate Total Reflect at any time, when even the slightest hint of danger presented itself. He'd done so by trying to kill her at unexpected times.

For years, she'd been unable to sleep for more than a few minutes at a time, afraid that at any moment a bullet or blade would be headed her way. After a decade, she'd developed permanent bags under her eyes, but at the same time, she'd developed a kinetic vision so acute that she could see individual raindrops falling in a storm, as well as the reaction time necessary to activate her Total Reflect immediately. She could reflect anything—bullets, explosions, sword slashes, even attacks created by Blazer powers. Meanwhile, she was able to one-sidedly pressure her target until eventually they grew exhausted and became food for her chainsaw.

It was that fighting style that had earned her the nickname Unmovable. Her vision was so well trained that she had even been able to follow Ikki's movements when he'd replicated Edelweiss's techniques. You couldn't beat her reaction time with speed. No matter how long Stella waited, Tatara would never show her an opening.

Besides, I have no reason to fight you fair and square!

"Rinna! Take her out!" Tatara shouted in a hoarse voice. While Stella had been focusing on dodging Tatara, Beast Tamer Kazamatsuri Rinna had circled behind her on her jet-black lion.


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"Do not presume you can give orders to me! I know what to do!"

Despite her grumbling, Kazamatsuri was in perfect sync with Tatara. Her Device, Binding Collar, allowed anything she leashed with it to use her Noble Arts. And right now, she was having her lion activate his ability to make people freeze up.

"Kneel before me! King's Pressure!"

"Roooaaar!"

"Ngh!"

The lion had roared at Stella from behind while she'd been distracted by Tatara. There was no way for her to dodge this. The shock wave of sound slammed into her back, making it impossible for her to move a muscle.

"Oh no! Stella's been hit by the Beast Tamer's Noble Art, King's Pressure. That same technique defeated Bunkyoku Academy's Komashiro! Tatara's got the perfect chance to take Stella down now!"

"I'll kill you before you can even draw your sword! This is what you get for underestimating us!" Tatara swung her chainsaw horizontally at Stella. Due to the effects of King's Pressure, she could no longer move, and Crawling Centipede bit into her stomach. "Raaaaah!"

The blow knocked Stella back a few meters, and Kazamatsuri chased after her with a follow-up attack.

"King's Charge!"

Lions were already much bigger and stronger than humans, but this particular lion was also bolstered by mana, and it tackled Stella with the force of a dump truck. Stella weighed as much as any human girl would, so she was sent flying. She bounced off the hard stone floor a few times before slamming into the wall right beneath the spectator stands with a thunderous boom. A huge cloud of dust rose up as a section of the wall crumbled away.

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"Wh-What a combo! Kazamatsuri and Tatara both got in clean hits there, sending Stella flying! She must be hurt real bad!"

"Damn, that was nasty!"

"What if that killed her?"

In a sense, seeing someone get knocked around like a pinball was even more gruesome than seeing them get cut up. The crowd watched with bated breath as the referee started his countdown. If Stella couldn't make it back into the ring before he reached ten, she'd lose.

"Stella's buried under the rubble, so it's hard to tell what kind of state she's in. But the material this ring is made out of is sturdy enough to take shots from a tank, so she must be hurt pretty bad if she hit the wall so hard it crumbled. Will she be able to make it back into the ring in time?!"

"Come on, Crimson Princess! Pull yourself together!"

"There's gotta be more to you than that!"

"She shouldn't have asked for a four-on-one! She let her enemies circle behind her too easily!"

"The audience doesn't seem too happy with this result. I can't blame them. Everyone expected the Crimson Princess to make it to the finals. No one expected her to get trounced this badly."

However, Muroto shook his head at Iida's commentary.

"No, this is hardly surprising. If anything, this is the expected result."

"Wh-What do you mean, Muroto?!"

"That's just how hard it is to take on multiple opponents at once when you're alone. While it's just one against four in terms of pure numbers, if you think about how Vermillion's opponents can use combination tactics and exhibit a variety of different powers at once, it's fair to say their strengths are multiplied exponentially. The Crimson Princess may be one of the strongest student knights out there, but this is one serious handicap she's fighting with. That's why Kazamatsuri was able to get behind her so easily. Furthermore, this arena is bad terrain for her."

"Why's that?"

"As you can see, the Seven Stars Battle Festival arena is an open ring with no obstacles whatsoever. There's nowhere for Vermillion to hide or any chokepoints for her to try and take her enemies on one at a time. Her opponents can take full advantage of their superior

numbers here. That further widens the gap between her and her foes."

"And that's why you think this result was inevitable?"

"Vermillion was overconfident," Muroto responded with a nod. "It was reckless of her to try and fight four people at once. Even if she's a Rank A knight, her opponents are also highly skilled Blazers."

Shizuku frowned as she listened to Muroto's commentary.

"Just what is that woman doing?!"

"Shizuku..."

"She sounded so confident when she asked for a four-against-one that I thought she must have gotten insanely strong after training with Saikyou-sensei. I'm an idiot for expecting anything from her. What good is training if you're going to let your guard down?!"

"True. I can only say she was careless to let the Beast Tamer get behind her so easily."

"Exactly!"

Shizuku was understandably angry at Stella. Not only had she stolen away the position of Ikki's girlfriend, a position Shizuku so dearly wanted, but she'd then run off to go train and hadn't said a word to anyone in a week. On top of that, she'd put on this shameful display after coming back late. Worst of all, she was the one who'd asked for the lopsided match that had led to this pathetic outcome. She was reaping what she'd sown. Even though she'd promised to fight Ikki in the finals, and even though Ikki had fought so hard to make sure he'd be able to keep up his half of the promise, here Stella was, throwing it all away.

"If she loses here... If she breaks her promise to Onii-sama, I'm going to go down there and kill her myself!" Shizuku shouted, clenching her tiny fists.

Kurono frowned slightly as she heard Shizuku say that.

You really shouldn't say that in front of a teacher, you know.

She didn't say anything, though. She knew just how obsessed Shizuku was with her brother, so she was willing to let Shizuku rant all she wanted about her brother's overconfident girlfriend. Though Kurono herself didn't think Stella was being overconfident at all.

"Don't be so hard on Vermillion, Kurogane."

“Why not? Look how easily she let herself get thrown out of the ring.”

“If anything, Vermillion’s teacher is responsible for her overconfidence, not her.”

“You mean Saikyou-sensei?” Shizuku asked, cocking her head to one side. She couldn’t understand how this was Saikyou’s fault. “Do you mean to say that Saikyou-sensei was a bad teacher?”

“Seeing as Vermillion’s ended up as sloppy as Nene, I think yeah, we can say she’s a bad teacher,” Kurono answered with a playful smile. “That being said, this didn’t happen because Kazamatsuri managed to catch Vermillion off guard. It’s because she was getting bored of dodging, that’s all.”

“Huh?”

A second later, there was another thunderous boom, and the pile of rubble Stella was underneath—which must have easily weighed a full ton—flew high into the air.

“What?!”

Shocked, Shizuku looked back down at the ring. Naturally, it was Stella who’d sent all that rubble flying. In her raised right hand was the biggest of the rubble pieces. She casually tossed it aside and hopped back into the ring, making it right as the referee’s count reached eight. She looked completely unharmed even though she’d taken a chainsaw to the stomach and a lion’s tackle to the back. She brushed the dirt off of her uniform, then looked over at Tatara and Kazamatsuri.

“I see. So this is how strong you are,” she muttered, nodding to herself.

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“Wh-Wh-Wh-What the?! Despite taking clean hits from both Crawling Centipede and King’s Charge, Stella’s come back to the ring at the count of eight, looking no worse for the wear! H-Her clothes are a little cut up, but otherwise, she’s completely unharmed! Just what is going on?!”

However, Tatara had been expecting this. She’d understood what

had happened the moment her attack had landed. When Crawling Centipede had made contact with Stella's stomach, she hadn't felt it cut into flesh. The jagged blades of her chainsaw had shredded Stella's clothes, but they hadn't made it to her skin. They'd been blocked by Stella's mana.

Mana could be used as a barrier against impacts, which was why Moroboshi Yuudai had crafted armor out of his mana in his battle against Ikki earlier. The strength of the barrier was proportional to the total amount of mana a person possessed, and Crimson Princess Stella Vermillion possessed perhaps the largest mana pool in the world. The mana barrier she passively deployed around herself was ridiculously strong—strong enough to nullify both Tatara and Kazamatsuri's attacks. Stella had realized that as well, which was why she'd decided to stop dodging. There was no point in dodging attacks that couldn't hurt her. But naturally, that confidence pissed Tatara off even further.

"You bitch... Stop underestimating us!"

"Please don't glare at me like that. I can't help it. I was fighting nonstop matches against the strongest Blazer in the Pacific Rim until just yesterday," Stella said plainly.

Indeed, Stella wasn't trying to make light of her opponents. It was just hard for her to feel a sense of urgency. For the past week, she'd been fighting against none other than the Demon Princess. Saikyou Nene was one of the world's strongest Blazers, and as a gravity user, she could call meteorites down from outer space and slam them into people at escape velocity. Compared to that, Tatara's and Kazamatsuri's attacks didn't even register as threats to Stella. As a result, she simply didn't care enough to dodge them.

That was what Kurono had meant when she'd said that, in a sense, Saikyou had been a bad teacher. However, there was one other, far more important reason that Stella had let herself get hit by her opponents' attacks.

"Plus, I wanted to be sure of something before I went on the offensive."

"Yeah? What's that, bitch?"

"I wanted to see just how powerful you were." That was

something Stella had absolutely needed to ascertain. “After all, if I went all out without checking first, I might accidentally kill all of you.”

“Rgh!”

Stella knew just how strong she was. She knew her powers were more than most people could handle. If she wasn’t careful, she could easily kill someone. That was why she always took the utmost care when using her powers, so that she didn’t literally burn her opponents to a crisp by accident. Even if her opponents were scum who’d hurt her friends.

“I’ve got a score to settle with you guys from Akatsuki, and I intend to make you all pay for what you did. But I don’t want to kill any of you.” In part because it would leave a bad taste in her mouth, but there was a more important reason. “After all, none of you are worth taking that seriously. You all seem intent on killing me, but there’s only one knight in the world that I want to go all out against. There’s only one person who’s worth fighting with everything I’ve got, even if that means I end up killing him.”

For Stella, someone had to be truly special for her to be willing to forgo the responsibility she carried as someone possessing overwhelming strength and fight without holding back. And right now, there was just one man capable of igniting that passion within her.

“That’s why I had to make sure I knew how strong you guys were. That way, I’d know how much of my strength to use to break you guys without killing you.” After that last exchange, Stella had more or less grasped how strong these two were. By her calculations, if she dropped her strength down three levels below max, that would be enough. She mentally put the limiters on her own strength and said, “Now it’s my turn to attack.”

She summoned Lævateinn, and in an instant, the air around her grew hotter, blurring her form slightly. It was as if a sun had suddenly appeared in the arena. The pressure she exuded was far greater than that of other knights. However, Tatara wasn’t intimidated.

“Interesting... Let’s see if you can really beat us that easily!”

Tatara kicked off the ground, rushing Stella once more. She'd been trained well enough that this wasn't just a reckless attack being launched out of anger. The more heated she got, the more calmly she was able to analyze the situation she was in. She knew that her previous attack hadn't been capable of even scratching Stella. That had been a bit of a surprise, but the world of Blazers was full of people who defied common sense. This wasn't Tatara's first time fighting a Blazer she couldn't damage through conventional means. Besides, Tatara herself was a Blazer who couldn't be taken down by regular attacks. But in the same way that she could be defeated, so too could Stella. And Tatara knew exactly how.

My chainsaw might not be able to hurt you, but what about your sword?!

All Tatara had to do was reflect one of Stella's attacks back at her. Because she was so strong, there was no way she'd be fine after taking one of her own full-power swings. If nothing else, the recoil would definitely shatter both of her arms. After she was weakened that badly, Tatara would be able to slowly whittle her down one way or another. But first, she needed to lure Stella into attacking. Tatara had charged forward seemingly recklessly precisely in an attempt to bait out one of Stella's attacks.

In response, Stella raised Lævateinn with one hand and said, "I suppose I'll take you up on that, then."

Despite knowing it was a trap, Stella nevertheless stepped toward the charging Tatara. She swung Lævateinn diagonally downward, aiming for Tatara's shoulder. Tatara couldn't have hoped for a better slash. If she reflected that with Total Reflect, Stella was liable to cut her own face. But things didn't go as planned.

Huh?

Just as she was about to activate Total Reflect, her honed assassin senses warned her that something was wrong. Since Crawling Centipede couldn't hurt Stella, the only viable strategy would be to reflect one of Stella's attacks. However, Stella wasn't stupid; she should have been aware of that as well. So then why was she still attacking?

Upon straining her ears, Tatara could tell that the sound

Lævateinn made when cutting through the air was light. The answer came to Tatara immediately: *This is a feint.* Her swing was fast, but it had no power behind it. Considering how massive Stella's sword was, the fact that she was swinging it with just one hand was unnatural. Reflecting this wouldn't cause any real damage to Stella. At best, it would knock her off-balance a little.

If the right's a feint, that means the real attack's coming from the left!

Thanks to her superior senses and trained battle instinct, Tatara was able to read through Stella's feint. Hiding in the shadow of her sword was Stella's left fist, pulled back for a punch. If Tatara reflected Stella's slash, her right side would be pushed backward. But if Stella rolled with that momentum, she'd be able to turn her left side toward Tatara and hit her with a punch to the gut powered by the centrifugal force generated by her own reflected attack. There wouldn't be even a second's worth of time between the two attacks, allowing Stella to break through the defense provided by Tatara's Total Reflect. It seemed Stella had already figured out that there was a short time lag between activations.

It was a good plan, but now that I've seen through it, it's useless!

Once a surprise attack was seen through, it could be used to the defender's advantage to launch a counter surprise attack. Tatara purposely decided to do as Stella was expecting and deployed her Total Reflect barrier just as Stella's sword swing reached her. Lævateinn bounced backward, the force of the rebound pushing the right side of Stella's body back as well. Just as Tatara had expected, Stella let herself roll with the force, bringing her left fist around to try to punch Tatara in the moment where her barrier faded and before she could deploy a new one.

If Tatara took that punch to the liver, she'd be out of commission for sure. But because Tatara had been fully prepared, she was ready with her second Total Reflect barrier as the first one faded away. Chances were that having a full-strength punch reflected would break the bones not only Stella's left hand but probably her entire arm. But just as Tatara grinned, certain that she'd seen through Stella's feint, she felt a powerful impact and cried out in pain as a

number of her ribs cracked.

"Gah!"

Even though Tatara's barrier had been active, Stella's fist had still slammed into the side of her torso.

"That's one down."

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Tatara's body bent at an awkward angle as Stella's fist plowed into her, and she dropped to the ground, coughing up blood.

"That was one nasty punch! Tatara's down! And seeing as she's not getting back up, I think she's out cold! Stella took Tatara out with just one blow!"

"Whoa, did you hear that crack?! That was nasty!"

"Unmovable's whole body is bent at a weird angle... Just how strong is the Crimson Princess?"

"The audience is stunned by the power of Stella's iron fist! But I don't understand. From my perspective, it looked like Tatara read Stella's feint and prepared a second Total Reflect for her fist as well... How was Stella able to evade Tatara's protective barrier?"

It was once again Muroto who provided the answer.

"She didn't evade it."

"Huh?"

"Take a look at the Crimson Princess's left hand."

"M-My god!" The announcer let out a horrified scream as he started at Stella's left hand. "Th-That's gruesome, all right! Stella's left hand looks like it's been in a blender! Wait, does that mean..."

"It's exactly what you're thinking. The Crimson Princess didn't counter Tatara's Total Reflect. Just as she was hoping, Vermillion's left hand has been terribly shredded. Tatara made just one miscalculation. She didn't expect the Crimson Princess to keep pushing forward no matter how badly her hand got damaged!"

Humans were at their most vulnerable the moment everything went exactly as they had planned. Tatara was no exception. She'd been confident she'd be able to destroy Stella's arm, and upon doing just that, she'd let her guard down. But that had proven to be a fatal

mistake. Stella's true aim had been that very moment. She'd twisted her body even further, and continued to plow forward with her punch, hitting Tatara through her Total Reflect.

There'd been no fancy technique or strategy behind Stella's attack. She'd just broken through with brute force. What was impressive about that was how she'd managed to knock Tatara out with one blow despite how battered her fist had become. It had been with a body blow no less, which was even harder to knock a person out with than punches to the head.

She's crazy! Icy Sneer Tsuruya Mikoto thought, shivering. She'd watched the whole thing up close and could still scarcely believe her eyes. *She's crazy* and *strong!*

Stella had blown through all of Tatara's tactics with overwhelming force, taking her down in just one punch. It required an immense amount of willpower to enact a strategy you knew would cause you great pain. Stella's physical and mental fortitude were both off the charts. Not only did she have a body of steel, but she had a mind of steel too. She was as tough as diamond.

She's in a completely different league from me... But I still need to beat her. This was the Seven Stars Battle Festival. A single loss meant you were out of the tournament. Tsuruya knew she had to keep trying even if she was up against the worst possible opponent. That was why, despite knowing that it was shameful to gang up on a single opponent, she immediately came to the rest of the Akatsuki members' aid. If she lost despite fighting with the odds stacked this far in her favor, it'd be an even bigger embarrassment. Her pride refused to let her lose here. *Besides, if I can make it through this, I have a shot at dominating the B block!*

Tsuruya was confident she could beat all of her other opponents in this block as long as she could get past the massive hurdle that was Stella.

"Don't worry, we can still win this," said the Jester, Hiraga Reisen, in a calm voice from behind Tsuruya.

"Do you have a plan of some sort in mind? She's so much of a monster that our Devices can't even touch her," she replied sharply, turning to him with a dubious look on her face. There was

something about him that struck her as fishy, and she didn't get the feeling that he was on her side at all.

Hiraga didn't seem to mind Tsuruya's glare, and he smiled softly.

"Heh. I admit that it was a surprise to see that Tatara-san's Crawling Centipede couldn't even scratch the Crimson Princess after a direct hit. But ultimately, that just means her mana barrier is strong, nothing more. Her actual Blazer abilities don't possess any innate defensive powers, which means we can still take her down. In fact, I'm certain my trump card can finish her off in one blow."

"I'd appreciate it if you'd just go ahead and use it, then."

"I'd love to, but I'm afraid this particular Noble Art takes some time to activate," he replied, shaking his head.

"Some help you are."

"Heh heh, my apologies. However, this means that as long as you can buy me some time, I will absolutely bring down the Crimson Princess for you. I'm sure you wish to advance further into the tournament, and her presence is an obstacle to Akatsuki's goals, so our interests are aligned, no? It would be in both of our best interests to work together right now. Especially since we're fighting on the same side at the moment."

Tsuruya frowned silently at Hiraga. She didn't like the way he talked. It was as if he found everything to be a joke and looked down on everything and everyone around him. Every word out of his mouth annoyed her. That being said, everything he'd just told her was true. They were on the same team at the moment, and it would be in their best interests to cooperate.

He said he can defeat Stella-san with his Noble Art. I know none of my techniques are capable of harming her, so I have no choice but to rely on him.

That alone was a good enough reason for her to do as he wanted.

"Fine. But I can't promise I'll be able to buy you that much time."

"You're surprisingly pessimistic."

"If I had more faith in my abilities, I wouldn't be relying on a shady group like you Akatsuki members to earn my first win."

As she said that, Tsuruya swept her left palm across her right

eye. A second later, there was a silvery monocle covering that eye. That monocle was Icy Sneer Tsuruya Mikoto's Device.

"Done with your strategy meeting?" Stella asked, glancing over at Tsuruya and Hiraga, her flaming hair shooting sparks everywhere.

"I'm surprised you were willing to wait for us."

"It's the least I could do since I came late. Besides, even if you did agree to this, I still feel bad that I'm making you go along with my temper tantrum, so I owe you this much," Stella said with a smile.

"Why, that's very generous of you. Would you be willing to do me another favor and forfeit as well?"

"Heh. I honestly admire the way you doggedly chase after victory, no matter how ignoble it makes you look. But I'm afraid I can't do that. It's very important to me that I win this match."

"Well, you can't blame me for trying."

"Not at all. This is all the time I'm willing to give you, though. I'll be going on the offensive immediately this time, so if you want to surrender, now's your chance. Once I get going, there's too much force behind my sword to stop mid swing!"

Stella kicked off against the ring, leaping toward Tsuruya.

"Ngh!"

Though it had cost Stella her arm, she'd still managed to take Tatara down in one punch. Tsuruya knew she wouldn't be able to withstand even a single one of Stella's swings, especially if she wasn't concerned with how much damage she took in return. It would almost certainly hurt like hell too. If Stella didn't hold back enough, Tsuruya might even die.

The fear was debilitating, but even so, Tsuruya had made it to the top eight in the previous year's tournament. She was one of Japan's strongest student knights. She wouldn't have made it this far if she were the kind of person to let fear paralyze her. In an instant, she focused her gaze on Stella through her monocle. Her Blazer powers allowed her to drop the temperature of everything within her rather unique Device's line of sight to absolute zero.

"Thirteen Eyes of the Reaper!"

A beam of cold, blue light shot out of her monocle. The greatest

advantages of Tsuruya's power were she could activate it the moment she had a visual on her target and that the beam itself traveled at the speed of light, making her attacks nigh impossible to dodge. In quite literally a nanosecond, the area around Stella began to freeze, the temperature of the surrounding air dropping to absolute zero. Liquid nitrogen, which was famous for being able to freeze almost anything on contact, was still stored at a temperature of negative two hundred degrees Celsius. Absolute zero was another seventy-odd degrees below that, so naturally, no part of the human body could come out unscathed upon coming into contact with such extreme temperatures.

Tsuruya's power was potent enough to freeze bones all the way to the marrow and stop a person's heart. Furthermore, she could activate it instantly, and it had a significantly long range. When it came to battles against other humans, her ability was top class. She'd shown just how powerful it was in the prior year's Seven Stars Battle Festival. Stella was in a league of her own, though.

"Empress Dress!"

Tsuruya's ice powers may have been top class, but Stella was arguably the strongest fire user in the world. She immediately wreathed herself in a cloak of flame, heating up the water vapor in the air around her and bringing the temperature back up to the point where the air started to steam.

"I suspected that would happen..."

Tsuruya had predicted this outcome from the start. Thirteen Eyes of the Reaper was a Noble Art that manipulated air temperature. However, fire users could simply heat up the air around them in the same way she could freeze it, which made it difficult for her to use her abilities against them. Ultimately, whether her ability or her opponent's won out depended on who had the larger mana pool. And Stella Vermillion had the biggest mana pool of any Blazer in the world. From the start, Tsuruya had known she didn't stand a chance against Stella. But she had at least managed to slow Stella down for the briefest of moments.

That's all I was tasked with doing!

"Bare thy fangs at all who oppose us, Sphinx!"

"Roooaaar!"

In the split second that Stella had stopped to activate her Empress Dress, Kazamatsuri had bounded over to Tsuruya and activated her lion's King's Pressure against Stella once more. As long as there was even the tiniest of openings, Kazamatsuri could take advantage of it to bind her.

While Stella was frozen, the lion leaped forward, aiming to bite through her neck. The fact that its earlier tackle had failed to damage her had hurt its pride as the king of all beasts. It would have tried to tear through her neck regardless of Kazamatsuri's direction. And not even Stella, with her immense mana barrier, would be unscathed by a bite from a lion the size of an elephant, especially with Kazamatsuri channeling all of her mana into it. Tsuruya began to hope that perhaps the match would be decided then and there.

"Graaaaah!"

But then, Stella let out an equally deafening roar at Kazamatsuri's black lion, and it stopped in its tracks.

"Huh?!" Kazamatsuri stared down at her lion, dumbfounded. It was as if it had been hit by King's Pressure as well. "S-Sphinx?! What's wrong?! Why have you stopped?!"

Kazamatsuri desperately tried to spur her lion into action, but it refused to move. The reason was simple: Animals had far more honed survival instincts than humans. They lived in a world where survival of the fittest was the norm, and before this lion had been picked up by Kazamatsuri, it, too, had lived in that world. And right now, its survival instincts were telling it that the girl in front of it was incredibly dangerous. It could see the illusion of a winged dragon rising up behind her, definitively telling it that she was the predator and it was her prey.


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In the same way a cat couldn't hope to intimidate a dragon, the lion knew it couldn't hope to intimidate this girl. No matter what creature it was, once an animal realized it was prey, there was only one course of action it could take—running away.

"W-Wait! Ah!"

"Huh?! Eek!"

"Oh my! The Beast Tamer should have had absolute control over her lion thanks to her Binding Collar, but it seems it's been overwhelmed by Stella's aura and is running away with its tail tucked between its legs! It even threw its master off, and now, Stella is bearing down on the defenseless Kazamatsuri!"

Stella swung Lævateinn diagonally down at Kazamatsuri with her one good hand. It was a wild swing with more power than technique behind it, but Kazamatsuri was sitting on the ground in shock and in no position to dodge. The sword sliced straight through her and even gouged out a good chunk of the ground below her. It was clearly a decisive strike, but Stella didn't count her second enemy as being downed.

A second later, everyone realized why she hadn't, as Kazamatsuri's voice could clearly be heard from within the dust cloud Stella's sword had kicked up.

"Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine you would press me so hard, Crimson Princess. To think I would have to unveil the overwhelming might of my blazing black right arm this early in the tournament. Bear witness to the almighty dark power of my true knight, branded by sin and steeped in the power of oblivion itself!"

"What my mistress means to say is 'Thank you for saving me, Charlotte!' Of course you're very welcome, milady. I am, as always, your maid, your sword, and your shield."

As the dust cleared, everyone was able to see that Stella's sword had not actually sliced through Kazamatsuri. A girl in a white apron and maid outfit, Charlotte Corday, had appeared between the two combatants, and was holding Lævateinn back with just her left index finger, though the force of Stella's swing had pushed her into the ring so deeply that there were craters around her feet.

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"U-Unbelievable! One of the Blazers in the audience has jumped into the ring to save Kazamatsuri!"

"Isn't that the maid we've seen accompanying her everywhere?"

"Ref, that's clearly illegal! Hurry up and call a time-out!"

Ordinarily, the referee would immediately halt the match and discuss with the Management Committee what should be done. But to the announcer's surprise, the referee remained quiet.

"Wh-What's going on?! The referee isn't interfering!"

There was a good reason for the lack of arbitration, however.

"Of course he isn't. The Beast Tamer hasn't broken the rules, after all."

"What do you mean, Muroto?!"

"Take a closer look at that maid's neck."

The cameras around the arena zoomed in on Charlotte's neck. A second later, everyone realized what Muroto was talking about.

"Th-That's the same Binding Collar that was on the Beast Tamer's lion! D-Does that mean..."

"Indeed. Just like the lion, that girl is also technically considered the Beast Tamer's Device. That's why the referee isn't stopping the match."

"I-I see. I'm impressed the referee was able to spot that so quickly."

"Most referees are knights who've had considerably illustrious careers, so they're quite perceptive."

Moreover, most Blazers could see the mana surrounding other Blazers and their Devices. Charlotte wasn't a Blazer, but she had the same aura that Kazamatsuri's lion had possessed, proving that she was being powered by the Beast Tamer's mana as well. Even if she hadn't been able to see the collar, Stella would have immediately realized that Charlotte was one of Kazamatsuri's weapons just from the mana she was emitting.

"I see... I had a feeling you were no ordinary maid, but I didn't realize you were Rinna's strongest Device. The lion was just a warm-up, I guess."

“Greetings. I am Charlotte Corday. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

Charlotte flicked Lævateinn aside before lifting up her skirt slightly to do a proper curtsy.

“Thanks for the introduction!” Stella shouted in response, then swung Lævateinn down on Charlotte again.

“Bloom, my Flower Shield,” Charlotte said, and there was a loud metallic clang as she blocked Stella’s sword with her hand again. Her hands weren’t actually made of steel despite how sturdy they looked, though. No, this was the power of Kazamatsuri’s mana.

Kazamatsuri’s Device, Binding Collar, allowed her to turn animals and regular humans into Blazers. Charlotte was using the Blazer powers she’d manifested via her master’s mana. After two swings, Stella had figured out what exactly those powers were too.

“It’s like I’m striking a plate of steel. But even though it looks like you’re blocking my swings with your hands, I can tell there’s a millimeter of space between the edge of my blade and your palm. I see. You obtained the power to manifest barriers with Rinna’s mana, didn’t you?”

“Very perceptive of you,” Charlotte said with a nod. The space between her palm and Stella’s blade began to glow pink, and a tiny flower shield bloomed in that gap. “Your powers of observation are astounding, Crimson Princess. Few others have seen through my ability after just two blows. But there’s one thing you’re mistaken about.”

“What’s that?”

“My Flower Shield’s powers aren’t only useful for defending.” Charlotte pushed Lævateinn back and said, “Sprout new thorns, Agave Blade!”

A sword-shaped barrier grew out of Charlotte’s hands, and she swung it down at Stella.

“Ngh!”

Having just had her sword pushed back, Stella was still a little off-balance. Under normal circumstances, she wouldn’t have been able to evade Charlotte’s swing. But she quickly realized that she wouldn’t be able to fix her stance in time, so instead, she let herself lean

farther back and backflipped away from her opponent's slash. Her dodge was just a little too slow, though, and Charlotte's sharp barrier grazed her cheek as she backflipped away.

The barrier actually split Stella's skin, which was something not even Tatara's chainsaw had managed to accomplish. Furthermore, Charlotte's offensive didn't end there. She leaped forward, intent on keeping the pressure on Stella. Stella swung Lævateinn horizontally to try to push Charlotte back. She was expecting one of two responses. Either Charlotte would stop her rush and back off, or she would once again turn her barrier into a shield and block Stella's swing. Either way, Stella was expecting this to put an end to Charlotte's offense, which was all she needed. But to Stella's surprise, Charlotte instead opted to leap over her slash.

No, "leap" wasn't quite the right word to explain what she did. She created platforms underneath her feet using her Flower Shield and climbed into the air to go over Stella's slash. Then, once she was directly overhead, she wrapped her right foot in a barrier and somersaulted down, aiming to incapacitate Stella with a perfectly executed heel drop kick.

Stella had just finished executing her horizontal slash, which meant she wouldn't be able to bring her sword back up in time to block. Instead, she forced her battered left arm up with the strength of just her shoulder muscles and blocked the kick with her upper arm, which was comparatively less damaged than her hand and wrist. Charlotte's barrier was exceptionally hard, and the force of her kick was enough to break the bones in Stella's upper arm.

"Rgh."

"As you can see, this barrier is tough enough to withstand the might of your swings, and I can freely reshape it into a deadly sharp blade or a hammer capable of bludgeoning you through your mana barrier. As I said, I am milady's sword and shield," Charlotte said with a flat expression, though a little pride had crept into her voice. But of course, Stella wasn't the type to back down just because she'd broken a few bones.

"Empress Dress!"

While Charlotte had been able to get a solid hit on Stella, it had

been a mistake to come into such close contact with her. Using one's body to directly attack her was tantamount to suicide. Stella raised the output of the flames enveloping her to the max. They quickly traveled up her arm and onto Charlotte's foot, then engulfed her entire body.

Stella's flames were no ordinary flames. They were made of mana. That meant they wouldn't disappear unless she died, fell unconscious, or chose to dispel them. Charlotte had made a huge mistake in letting Stella's flames reach her.

Wait, they're not working?!

A second later, Stella realized that Charlotte wasn't being burned by her fire. Indeed, her expression remained nonchalant as Stella's flames licked across her body. It appeared her barrier was capable of repelling more than just physical force and had a strong resistance to heat, electricity, and other forms of energy as well. As a result, Charlotte was able to withstand even the white-hot flames of Stella's Empress Dress.

"Oh, and one more thing," Charlotte said, kicking off of Stella's broken arm and launching herself into the air. "My barrier can become a gun as well."

She created a few dozen very long, very thin barriers in her hands and launched them at Stella in a fan-shaped spray.

Now she's using her barriers like shuriken!

Stella already knew how deadly the cutting edge of Charlotte's barrier could be, and she didn't want to get cut up any more than she already had.

"Yaaah!"

She flipped Lævateinn so that the flat of the blade was vertical, then swung it horizontally to create a shock wave of wind powerful enough to knock away the shuriken. It was the kind of thing that took an immense amount of arm strength to do, but Stella had the strength needed to pull it off. However, something unexpected happened once again. All of the shuriken that Stella had blown away ended up flying into the spectator stands.

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"Wh-Whoa! Holy shit, they're coming toward us!"

"Everybody run!"

The crowd jumped up from their seats and got ready to run. Their panic was understandable. Charlotte's Flower Shield was sharp enough to cut even Stella's mana-hardened skin. It would slice right through normal humans.

"Please don't move, everyone. It'll be more dangerous for you if you do," Shinguuji Kurono said in a calm voice, getting up from her seat.

The Seven Stars Battle Festival was a tournament where a bunch of Blazers with crazy superpowers went at each other without holding back. Naturally, the committee organizing the tournament had taken steps to ensure that the audience wouldn't be harmed by any accidental collateral damage. They'd stationed some of the Federation's strongest Mage-Knights in each section of the stands to protect the spectators.

Charlotte's shuriken had flown into the area assigned to the director of Hagun Academy, World Clock Shinguuji Kurono. She summoned her white pistol, Ennoia, in her right hand and pointed it at the approaching projectiles.

"Clock Draw."

There was the sound of just a single gunshot, but a second later, every single one of the shuriken created by Charlotte's Flower Shield were slammed into the ground or the wall protecting the stands.

"What?! What just happened?!"

"That was the World Clock's signature move, Clock Draw! She stops time for a brief moment and rains bullets down on all of her targets while everything's standing still! Look at her feet!"

"Whoa, you're right! There's a bunch of empty bullet casings on the ground!"

"That's crazy!"

The audience started applauding Kurono's impressive sharpshooting. Just then, Kurono heard a voice she recognized well.

"No wonder you used to be third in the KOK's overall rankings."

She turned around to see the Worst One, Kurogane Ikki, walking over to her, clapping softly.

"You haven't gotten rusty at all even though you've been retired for a while," he added.

"It'd be a problem if I had. Staying on top of your game is part of a teacher's job."

As Kurono said that, all of Ikki's friends noticed that he'd arrived.

"Ikki!"

"O-Onii-sama! Are you sure you should be up and about already?! What about your wounds?!"

"Don't worry, Shizuku, I'm fine. I had the Blazers in the infirmary heal me up."

"You had people use healing magic on you instead of using an iPS capsule? If that was all you were going to do, you could have just asked me. I would have healed you up instantly," Kiriko said, pouting a little.

"I'd feel bad asking you since you've got a match coming up, Yakushi-san," Ikki replied, scratching his head awkwardly. Even if Kiriko considered herself a doctor first and a knight second, Ikki still didn't feel comfortable asking someone who had a battle waiting for them to use their mana to heal him.

"But Onii-sama, you used Ittou Shura during your match, didn't you? Shouldn't it be hard for you to even stand?"

"In truth, staying upright is pretty hard right now. But I really didn't want to miss this match. I wouldn't be able to sleep anyway, so I figured I'd come back out."

Ikki walked over to Kurono and looked down at the ring. There was no way he could miss his beloved girlfriend's match, especially not when they'd promised to fight each other in the finals. Shizuku understood his feelings, which was why she didn't push him to rest even though she really wanted him to.

"By the way, Kurogane, what's your take on this match so far?"

"Things are unfolding about as I expected. We knew the Icy Sneer's powers wouldn't be a threat to Stella, and while Reflector-type Blazers are strong against fighters who rely on pure power like Stella, she's not so weak that she'd let something like that stop her. That being said..." Ikki turned to look over at the Jester, Hiraga Reisen. For the past few minutes, he'd been standing stock-still at

the edge of the ring, staying well clear of Stella's battle. It was obvious that he was up to something. "Depending on what he's up to, things could get dicey. I don't like his aura in the slightest. While I have no idea what exactly he's doing, I can tell he's concentrating really hard. Ideally, Stella manages to take him down before he finishes whatever he's trying."

Everyone else nodded in agreement. They had also sensed Hiraga's ominous aura, and thanks to their elevated vantage point, they were able to get a good grasp on everyone's movements. It was clear that from the start, everyone including the Icy Sneer had been trying to protect Hiraga. He was without a doubt their team's trump card. That being the case, Stella really needed to take him down before he could complete whatever he was working on. Naturally, Stella was aware of that as well.

"But it won't be easy for Vermillion to get to him," Kurono mused.

"Why's that, Director?" Alisuin asked.

"Take a look." Kurono pointed over to the edge of the spectator stands. One of the Flower Shield shuriken that Kurono had shot down with Clock Draw was embedded deep into the wall below the stands and was still glowing faintly. "I shot those shuriken down, but look. My bullets weren't able to even scratch them. They're extremely tough. I've never seen anyone capable of making barriers this sturdy, not even in the A league. I doubt Vermillion will be able to break that barrier with just one working hand. It's possible that maid might even be able to withstand her Karsalitio Salamandra."

Very soon, everyone saw that Kurono had been right to worry.

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"Stella tries to press the attack, but she's repelled time and time again by the Beast Tamer's true powerhouse, Charlotte Corday! At the same time, Charlotte's counterattacks keep landing, and she's slowly but surely whittling Stella down!"

"She might have been able to overpower that barrier with brute strength if her left arm wasn't in such a sorry state, but with only her right being in good shape, it seems she can't generate enough

force. The Crimson Princess is in quite the pickle."

Just as Iida and Muroto had said, all of Stella's attacks so far had been blocked by Charlotte's Flower Shield. Meanwhile, Charlotte's counterattacks were slowly piling damage onto Stella. Everyone watching could tell that Stella was at a disadvantage. After yet another fruitless exchange, Stella shrugged her shoulders and let out a long sigh.

"Jeez, you sure are tough. I can't believe your barrier hasn't even cracked after all those hits. One arm really isn't enough for this."

Repeating pointless actions sapped one's mental energy more than their physical stamina. But being mentally exhausted was more draining than being physically tired. Hearing Stella complain felt like more of an accomplishment to Charlotte than any of the damage she'd managed to inflict thus far. She had a feeling that with just a bit more effort, she'd be able to get Stella to break. There was no need for her to wait for the Jester to finish preparing his Noble Art.

"As milady's shield and sword, it's only natural that I be unbreakable. I exist solely to protect her and bring down her enemies. Crimson Princess, I'm afraid your sword will never reach my master. So long as I draw breath, I will not allow you to lay even one finger on her."

"I didn't know your loyalty was so absolute. I respect that, honestly."

Charlotte said nothing in response to that. She already knew that her loyalty to Kazamatsuri was stronger than anything else in the world. After all, from the moment that Kazamatsuri Rinna had rescued her from the hellish life she'd been living, she had sworn to dedicate the rest of her life to her savior. Everything from her body to her heart to her soul belonged to Kazamatsuri and Kazamatsuri alone.

From the moment Kazamatsuri had taken her in, Charlotte had spent every day by her side, protecting her from any and all dangers. When Kazamatsuri had asked for a cat, she'd become a cat for her, and when she'd wanted a dog, she'd become a dog for her. In truth, Charlotte had been disappointed when Kazamatsuri had started keeping her pet lion, Sphinx, because it had meant she

hadn’t been a good enough cat or dog. She’d been so jealous of Sphinx, in fact, that at one point, she’d tried to kill the lion and turn him into a stew.

I still recall what milady said to me that day. “I need you to remain human for me. I cannot have my right hand become a lowly cat or dog. So please stop following me around on all fours and eating cat food.” Kazamatsuri had also returned the clothes Charlotte had stopped wearing so as to better act as a pet. *Oh, milady! You truly are far too kind! To think you would so highly value someone of such lowly birth as myself!*

Charlotte was determined to live up to her master’s expectations. As Kazamatsuri’s most loyal servant, she couldn’t afford to lose this fight. Her loyalty was as firm and unbreakable as diamond, and so her barrier had to be as well. It was that unwavering belief that gave her the confidence to face any threat without fear.

“Though...I’m sorry, but it’s too much for you,” Stella said with a sad shake of her head, almost as if she were pitying Charlotte.

“What do you mean? What is too much for me?”

“The duty you bear. You won’t be able to protect your master.”

Upon hearing that, Charlotte chuckled.

“Now that’s unexpected. You’ve failed to pierce my Flower Shield even once, yet you say I cannot protect my master? Even you admitted that you cannot break my barrier. There’s no point in acting tough. It only makes you look weak.”

“My, you seem to be forgetting something, little maid.”

“Hmm?”

“I didn’t say I can’t break it, I said that one arm won’t be enough.”

As she said that, the flames of Stella’s Empress Dress began to coalesce around her broken left arm.

What is she doing?

Charlotte’s confusion turned to shock as she watched Stella’s left arm start to move again amid the flames.

“What?!”

It was no longer bent oddly, and Stella started flexing her fingers, curling them into a fist and then stretching them back out again. As

the flames of her Empress Dress faded, her left arm looked to be completely functional again, and she grabbed Lævateinn in both hands.

Lævateinn was a greatsword and could only be wielded effectively when held in both hands. But Stella shouldn't have been able to do that with her left arm broken. The fact that she was settling into a two-handed stance meant that she must have healed her arm somehow, though a fire user like her was incapable of using healing magic.

After a few seconds of stunned shock, Charlotte suddenly realized what must have happened. The possibility that occurred to her was so extreme that she couldn't believe anyone would actually do what Stella had done.

"Impossible! D-Did you seriously weld your bones back in place with the heat of your flames?!" she screamed, unable to fathom just how much pain Stella must have endured if she'd truly done that.

In response, Stella just grinned. That ferocious grin told Charlotte everything she needed to know. Stella had indeed welded her shattered bones back together with her flames. With both arms functional again, there was nothing left limiting her strength.

"Flames of purgatory, pierce the azure sky above."

The Crimson Princess raised her blade high and started chanting the incantation to her strongest Noble Art. A pillar of flame shot up from Lævateinn, scorching the very sky. As the flames grew hotter and hotter, the fire turned from red to blue. But Stella kept increasing the temperature of her flames, transforming them into a pillar of white-hot light. After a few seconds, she'd completed her five-meter-long blade of pure heat and flame.

"What now, little maid? I'm going to fire this Karsalitio Salamandra at your master, but you're not technically a combatant. If you wanna run, I'll give you the chance to get out of the way."

"Ngh!"

The weight of Stella's statement was almost palpable. Charlotte knew this was the only warning she'd get. If she didn't back down now, she'd face the full brunt of the Crimson Princess's blazing sword. There'd be nothing left of her if her barrier wasn't able to

withstand the attack.

"I have no need for your mercy!" Charlotte shouted, steeling herself. She stood resolutely in front of Kazamatsuri and prepared to deploy her Flower Shield. "I told you, I won't let you lay a finger on my master!"

"Glad to hear it!"

Both sides moved at once, like gunmen in an old western.

"Karsalitio Salamandra!"

"Bloom bright, Thousand Petals!"

Stella swung Lævateinn down with all her might, intent on cutting down Charlotte and Kazamatsuri both with one attack. In response, Charlotte poured all of her mana into her strongest barrier, increasing its durability exponentially. As sword and shield clashed, a shock wave of heat and light and wind engulfed the entire stadium.

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"Haaaaah!"

"Aaaaaaah!"

"Charlotte's sturdy shield, which has managed to repel Stella so far, and Stella's ultimate Noble Art have clashed! A torrent of mana is swirling around the arena! It's so thick that it's actually visible to the naked eye! Neither side is backing down an inch! Who will win, the unstoppable force or the immovable object?!"

As the old saying went, an unstoppable force and an immovable object couldn't exist simultaneously. One or the other would have to give at some point. As the seconds passed, the scales finally began to tip to one side.

It's so heavy...and hot...

Charlotte was the one slowly being pushed back. Her Thousand Petals was a barrier that literally had a thousand layers to it, but the power of Karsalitio Salamandra was so great that her petals were being burned away one after another. As the layers began to thin, Charlotte became incapable of fully shutting out the heat Stella's blade was emanating. The ring beneath her feet began to bubble and melt. The heat started to reach her skin, burning it. She was still

holding back the blade itself, but the residual heat surrounding it was so great that it alone was damaging her. Stella's might was truly unbelievable.

At this rate...she'll break through.

However, Charlotte still had a duty to protect her master.

"Milady, please retreat!"

To her surprise, though, Kazamatsuri shook her head.

"I refuse."

Instead, Kazamatsuri wrapped her arms around Charlotte's waist and pressed her body weight against her.

"Huh?! M-Milady?! What are you doing?!" Charlotte exclaimed, confused.

"I will not leave you, my loyal retainer," Kazamatsuri replied, smiling confidently at her. "Besides, what reason would I have to flee? Standing in front of me right now is my most loyal servant, my jet-black right hand, Charlotte Corday. My sword, my shield, my knight will never be defeated. Is that not true?"

Kazamatsuri pressed herself even harder against Charlotte's back. Charlotte could feel her master's warmth, as well as the absolute faith she had in her.

"Yes, milady!" Charlotte shouted, squeezing out every last drop of strength that she could.

A bit of light returned to her wilting Thousand Petals. They started to perk up, as if they'd finally been watered after a drought, and slowly began forcing away the heat from Stella's sword. Little by little, Charlotte started to push Karsalitio Salamandra back.

"It looks like...Thousand Petals is winning! Charlotte's shield is so sturdy that it can repel even Rank A knight Stella Vermillion's strongest attack, Karsalitio Salamandra!"

"Ngh."

Sweat dripped down Charlotte's forehead as she struggled to repel Stella's blade, and she placed her hands on her knees to keep herself from collapsing. She was panting heavily and clearly nearing her limit. The tips of her hair even started to burn away, but nevertheless, she persevered. Then, finally, Stella's flames began to fade.

I did it. I protected my master.

Indeed, Charlotte had managed to take Stella's ultimate trump card head-on. She smiled, feeling her master's steady heartbeat thumping against her back. There was no greater joy for her than knowing that she'd successfully fulfilled her duty. In this moment, she was completely and utterly fulfilled.

"Karsalitio Salamandra!"

But a second later, Charlotte's joy turned to despair as Stella fired off another Karsalitio Salamandra.

"No...way..." Charlotte watched on, dumbfounded, as the red-haired girl in front of her swung down another pillar of white-hot light without taking so much as a second to catch her breath. *She can fire these off...consecutively?!*

"Like I said, you won't be able to protect your master."

From the start, Stella had known that a single Karsalitio Salamandra might not be enough to break through Charlotte's ironclad defenses. But that was hardly a problem. If one swing wasn't enough, she'd hit Charlotte with two, or even three. After the grueling training she'd gone through, she was capable of firing off twelve Karsalitio Salamandras in a row. Meanwhile, Charlotte didn't have any mana left with which to defend.

"Charlotte!" Kazamatsuri screamed.

"Mi...lady..." Charlotte croaked as Stella's scorching flames engulfed her.

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"Th-That's a direct hit! Charlotte just barely managed to defend against Stella's first Karsalitio Salamandra, but she didn't stand a chance against the second! She's down for the count, as is the Beast Tamer!"

"Neither of them is going to be getting back up after that. Even if they do miraculously find the strength to stand, they're in no shape to fight. Charlotte expended all of her strength and mana to defend against that first Karsalitio Salamandra."

"And that's two down," Stella said, turning her attention to the

remaining two combatants. There was nowhere for them to run, and neither of them appeared to have the ability to defend against her attacks. As long as she got rid of the Jester before he finished whatever he was preparing over in the corner, her victory was all but assured. But as she watched a smile spread across his face, she muttered, "Doesn't look like I made it in time for that, though."

"That's right. Corday-san did a wonderful job of keeping you busy. And now, all of my preparations are complete," Hiraga Reisen replied. A second later, a shadow fell over the entire stadium.

"Huh? Did the forecast call for rain?" one of the spectators asked, confused.

"No way, I didn't bring my umbrella... Wait, what the hell *is* that?!"

But then, as everyone looked up, their confusion turned to shock. It wasn't clouds that were blotting out the sun but rather piles and piles of debris raining from the sky. They all fell into the center of the arena, piling on top of each other in a giant heap of metal and stone.

"Wh-What's going on?! Chunks of buildings, cars, and even trains are falling into the ring! Were they blown here by a tornado or something?!"

While it was reasonable to assume that only a tornado could have ripped up such massive objects, a natural disaster wasn't what had brought them to the stadium. If that were the case, a lot of the rubble would have been falling into the stands. Instead, however, it was all dropping neatly into the arena.

Hiraga Reisen sneered at the crowd's confusion as he waved his hands, dropping the last few pieces of rubble into place. He'd stretched his threads outside the stadium and pulled in all of the abandoned buildings, trains, and cars he could find. All so that he could create his masterpiece.

"Wh-What on earth?! The pile of rubble is starting to connect into the shape of...a person?! It's as if everything's being magnetically attracted together to create one giant doll!"

We've seen that before! Kurogane Ikki and Stella Vermillion thought at the same time.

Indeed, the creation looked strikingly similar to the golem they'd fought in Okutama. This was the power of Hiraga's Noble Art, which allowed him to freely connect things with his threads and remotely control his creations.

"Behold the power of my Deus Ex Machina. Heh heh, don't you think my giant robot's cool?" Hiraga said as he put the finishing touches on his fifty-meter-tall doll made of metal and concrete. This was his trump card, as well as the reason he had a second nickname —the Dollmaker.

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Stella clicked her tongue as she looked up at the rubble giant.

"So you really *were* behind that attack on the training camp. I had a feeling it was you."

"Heh heh heh, I hope you enjoyed playing with my dolls back then." Hiraga's voice was coming from inside the giant doll. It seemed he'd placed himself there while building it up. The fact that he was controlling it from the inside made it seem a lot like a mecha. "Thunderbolt smashed that poor golem, but this Deus Ex Machina is made from far sturdier stuff than mud. It's much larger too! I bet not even you can survive a punch from this guy, Crimson Princess!"

The giant doll lifted its left arm, which was made of a bundle of metal pipes, and pulled a set of eight linked train cars out of its shoulder. It then swung the train cars like a whip down at Stella. They smashed into the ring, pulverizing it and causing the entire stadium to shake.

"My god! Deus Ex Machina's train whip just blasted apart a quarter of the ring! Look at that dust cloud! Is Stella still alive in there?!"

The train cars were made of stainless steel, which was a relatively lightweight building material. However, they still weighed a few tons each, and there was no way a human could survive one falling on top of them. They'd be crushed to the point that their remains wouldn't even be recognizable as human.

"I definitely won't survive being hit by that, but your giant whip's

so slow, I'd have to be asleep to get hit in the first place!" Stella shouted, shooting out of the dust cloud looking no worse for the wear. Not only had she easily managed to dodge the impact, she'd used the shock wave it had created to bolster her jump height.

She landed softly on the giant doll's right arm and started running up to its shoulder. Once there, she slashed at its neck, which was made of an amalgamation of large delivery trucks. Lævateinn sliced cleanly through the metal trucks, and the giant's head tumbled to the ground. The cars, traffic signals, and metal canisters that had made up its head shattered into countless pieces as they slammed into the ground. Then, Stella jumped down, landing amid the scattered rubble.

"Too bad for you, but I'm gonna turn this doll you spent so much time making into scrap metal in less than a minute," she said, pointing Lævateinn up at the doll with a grin. However, the Jester simply laughed in response.

"Aha ha ha ha ha!"

"What's so funny?"

"Oh, it's just hilarious how misguided you are. I've had this particular Deus Ex Machina ready since well before you started fighting Corday-san. The puppet I spent all that time on was something else entirely."

"Ah?!" A shiver ran down Stella's spine as she suddenly felt a wave of overwhelming pressure. It wasn't coming from the giant doll in front of her, though. No, it was coming from directly behind her. *What's this feeling?! I don't know what's going on, but I need to move!*

Trusting her instincts, Stella kicked off the ground with all her might. She kept running forward, not caring about maintaining her stance or avoiding anything the doll might throw at her. A second later, the area she'd been standing in, including the air, was frozen solid.

"That was..." She turned to look back at the ice pillar blooming in the arena. There was only one person in this ring capable of freezing air. "Icy Sneer's Thirteen Eyes of the Reaper!"

Tsuruya Mikoto was standing a good distance behind the shocked

Stella, her monocle glowing with pale blue light and emitting far more mana than it had been earlier.

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Anything and everything within Tsuruya's field of vision was a valid target for her magic. The beam of absolute zero frost she emitted traveled at the speed of light, meaning you had to already be moving if you wanted to dodge it—much like Stella was doing. She dashed across the arena while Tsuruya created a line of ice pillars behind her.

"What a surprise! Icy Sneer's going on the offensive once more! She just keeps firing off Thirteen Eyes of the Reaper over and over while Stella has to keep running around to try and stay out of Tsuruya Mikoto's sight! Fortunately, it seems the Crimson Princess's speed is top class as well, and she's managed to stay safe for now! That said, she easily stopped Thirteen Eyes of the Reaper with her Empress Dress earlier! Why isn't she doing the same thing this time?!"

"It's because Icy Sneer's attacks are much stronger than before. The Icy Sneer I know is capable of freezing everything within a three-meter radius of the focal point she's chosen, but look. Now she's freezing everything within her line of sight, not just a small area around her target. Her Noble Art has gotten much stronger. I had no idea she was hiding her true strength... Frankly, I'm amazed. With this much power, she might actually be able to freeze the Crimson Princess through her flames!" Muroto exclaimed.

Just then, Tsuruya was blessed with the perfect opportunity. Stella had been so focused on staying out of her sight that she hadn't realized she'd run into a corner and was surrounded on three sides by ice pillars.

"Uh-oh, Stella's trapped now! Is this the end for her?!"

Tsuruya focused her gaze on Stella and launched yet another beam of absolute zero light. But of course, Stella wasn't one to give up so easily. She transferred the flames of her Empress Dress onto Lævateinn and swung her fiery sword at the deadly attack.

"Haaaaah!"

"Sh-She blocked Thirteen Eyes of the Reaper with her sword! The Crimson Princess really is something else!"

"But look at what's happened to her Device!"

"Huh?"

At Muroto's words, everyone turned to look at Lævateinn. A second later, the audience gasped.

"O-Oh my god! Stella's Lævateinn has been...f-frozen?!"

"H-Holy shit!" one of the spectators shouted.

A flame user's Device, like the center of the sun, was where their heat was the most concentrated. Freezing one wasn't something an average ice user could do. Even Stella was surprised by the turn of events.

You've gotta be kidding me...

She focused her energy into Lævateinn and tried to melt the ice with her flames, but it didn't work.

"Th-The ice isn't melting even after being bathed in Stella's flames! Just how powerful is Icy Sneer?!"

Not even my flames can melt it?!

Cold sweat poured down Stella's back as she turned to glare at Tsuruya.

"I never knew you were the type to hide your power level, Tsuruya-san. I guess you're craftier than you look."

Tsuruya said nothing in response. At first, Stella thought it was because she wasn't interested in responding to backhanded praise from an opponent, but then she realized that there was something wrong with Tsuruya's expression.

"Hmm?"

Stella had thought Tsuruya would be sneering triumphantly or something, but her expression was completely blank. There was no light in her eyes, and her body was completely slack. It was as if she were a corpse. Or rather...a doll.

"This is what I spent so much time working on!" Hiraga crowed from within his giant doll.

"Ah!" In that moment, a terrible thought ran through Stella's mind. "Hiraga, don't tell me you..."

“Aha ha ha ha. That’s right, I did exactly what you’re thinking,” he shouted. The doll he’d spent so much time perfecting was none other than Tsuruya Mikoto. While Stella had been distracted by Charlotte, he’d carefully inserted his Device, Black Widow, into Tsuruya’s brain and nervous system through her ears. He’d been so stealthy about it that even the girl herself hadn’t noticed. He’d then stolen away her autonomy and turned her into his doll. This Noble Art of his was his real trump card. “Marionette. It’s a pretty basic ability, but sometimes basic is best.”

Marionette didn’t just let Hiraga control whoever he’d turned into his living doll. Since his Device was connected directly to their brain, he could send the electrical signals needed to make them turn off their limiters and draw out their full power regardless of the damage it might cause to their bodies. That was why Tsuruya had suddenly gotten so much stronger.

“Unfortunately, humans aren’t built to withstand the burden of using their full strength,” Hiraga added with an evil grin. As he said that, blood began to spill out of Tsuruya’s eye.

“Tsuruya-san?!”

“If you keep resisting, that eye of hers might burst from the strain. Well, modern medicine can easily fix a popped eye, but...my strings have invaded her brain as well. Isn’t it sad? This girl has nothing to do with Akatsuki or your revenge, but if you keep making her fight, she might push herself so hard that she ends up a brain-dead vegetable.”

“Is that supposed to be a threat?”

“Oh, absolutely.”

“Your friends may have been scum, but they still came at me head-on and fought with pride. But you... You don’t have any intention of fighting fairly, do you?!”

“Nope! Not one bit!”

“Rgh!”

Stella ground her teeth in rage. This man, Hiraga Reisen, wasn’t a mere criminal like Tatara and the others. He was pure evil.

As royalty, Stella had seen many different kinds of people from all walks of life, and she knew just how subjective good and evil really

were. To some people, Rebellion's goal of creating a paradise for Blazers was a noble one worth fighting for. Most people labeled criminals by society were just those whose values didn't align with the majority's or who had their own extenuating circumstances that justified—to them, at least—their "evil" acts. But this clown was different. He found joy in other people's pain and reveled in their suffering. He was truly evil.

"From the very start, our goal wasn't to gain fame or honor from this tournament. We've been hired to win. Only a second-rate mercenary cares about the methods he uses to achieve victory. A true pro completes his job no matter what it takes. That's why I won't hesitate to use underhanded tricks, and I won't show any mercy to anyone who gets in my way. You better step carefully, Crimson Princess, because I always make good on my threats. So, what will you do now?" Hiraga asked gleefully, and Stella's fury rose to a fever pitch. But at the same time, she knew she had no choice.

"You scumbag..." she spat, dropping Lævateinn. As her sword clattered onto the arena's stone floor, Hiraga let out a triumphant scream.

"Hyaaaaaaah!"

This time, the doll's train whip landed a clean hit on Stella.

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Everything's going according to plan.

Hiraga Reisen had that thought from inside his Deus Ex Machina as he ordered the doll to slam its train whip into Stella over and over. In truth, he'd been sure of their victory since the moment this fight had started. When she'd asked for a four-against-one battle as her penalty for being late, he'd immediately figured out that she wanted revenge for Akatsuki's attack on Hagun.

Heh. Taking a disadvantageous fight just to get revenge for your friends is a beautiful display of friendship for sure. If I cared about morality, I'd even respect you for your noble heart. Problem is, the more kindhearted a person is, the easier they are to manipulate!

He didn't even need his strings to make a person with a strong

conscience dance to his tune. He'd known from the start that anyone with as kind a heart as Stella's wouldn't be willing to sacrifice Tsuruya for the sake of their revenge. That was why his true trump card had been taking Tsuruya hostage and forcing Stella to drop her sword. From the start, he'd been planning to end things this way. And Stella had played along with his script perfectly.

"Deus Ex Machina is raining down a barrage of blows on Stella! Is she okay down there?! There's so much dust that I can't tell from up here! Also, why did Stella drop Lævateinn right before he started attacking?! What could she have been thinking, letting go of her weapon in the middle of a battle?!"

"I don't know what prompted her to do that, but she's in danger," Muroto said. The referee seemed to be thinking the same thing, and was looking for an opportunity to jump in and end the match.

Seeing that, Hiraga let up on his assault and decided to wait for the dust to settle. He'd felt the train whip hit flesh through his strings, so he knew he'd landed at least a few clean hits. Stella definitely hadn't dodged this time, so he didn't need to go any further. His goal wasn't to kill Stella but to win this tournament. And if the referee saw Stella lying in a bloody heap on the ground, they were sure to call the match.

Finally, after half a minute, the dust cloud began to clear.

"The dust's finally thinning. How's Stella—" The commentator's jaw dropped open, and he stared dumbfounded at the ring. The audience looked equally shocked. Stella wasn't lying on a bloody heap on the ground at all. While she was bleeding from a rather large gash on her head, she was still on her feet, staring defiantly up at Hiraga's Deus Ex Machina. "U-Unbelievable! Stella let those trains hit her without dodging or blocking, but she's still standing! Just how sturdy is that body of hers?!"

The ring had been completely pulverized, and there were deep craters in the red soil underneath it, which spoke to the power behind Deus Ex Machina's blows. Hiraga clicked his tongue in annoyance.

"You're even tougher than I gave you credit for. But this match is over, so hurry up and collapse!"

Stella cocked her head to one side and gave Hiraga a questioning look.

"What do you mean this match is over?"

"What are you talking about? You're the one who dropped your sword. Doesn't that mean you've surrendered?"

Hiraga was certain that there was nothing Stella could do anymore since he'd taken Tsuruya hostage. After all, that was the scenario he'd written out in his head. Unfortunately, he'd miscalculated the caliber of the knight known as Stella Vermillion.

"Dumbass," she said with a nod, a snide sneer on her face. She hadn't thrown her sword away because she'd given in to Hiraga's threats. "I only dropped my sword, the manifestation of my soul, because you're not worthy of being cut down by it. A knight's sword is something they wield in battles they take pride in. You're not worthy of that honor!"

"Ngh..."

"Honestly, I didn't want to use this technique because it means relying on the strength of others, but I guess I'll show it to you."

As she said that, a giant, crimson dragon made of pure flame arose behind Stella, towering over even Hiraga's Deus Ex Machina. It wasn't a real dragon, just an illusion created by the intimidating aura Stella had wreathed herself in, but it still left Hiraga and the audience speechless. The fact that her mana could create an illusion this overwhelming was terrifying in its own right.

"Since Tsuruya-san's here, I'll be kind enough to hit you with this in phantom form. So you don't need to worry about dying."

Stella sucked in a deep breath, and Hiraga could tell he was in trouble. His honed criminal instincts were telling him that if he let her finish whatever she was about to do, he was done for.

"Marionette!" he cried, using his Black Widow to make Tsuruya fire off another Thirteen Eyes of the Reaper.

Tsuruya's eyes turned to Stella and froze her solid. Despite that, the pulsating dragon remained. Its crimson eyes continued to glow brightly from within the massive ice pillar Tsuruya had created.

"Bahamut Soul!"

Responding to Stella's shout, the dragon let out a deafening roar.

A second later, there was a flash of light so brilliant that it leached the color out of everything around it. The flash was followed by a gust of blazing heat that enveloped the entire arena, including Tsuruya and Hiraga, who was still inside his Deus Ex Machina. The blast of heat stopped just before the spectator stands and rose upward, turning into a pillar of fire so hot that it was like looking at pure light.

After a solid twenty seconds, the light and heat began to fade, and everyone looked down to see that the ring had been completely melted. The lawn surrounding the ring had been turned to ash, and the ground itself was burnt to a black crisp. It was as if a volcanic eruption had hit the stadium. Deus Ex Machina, which had been close to the center of the blast, was a shell of its former self. All of the concrete had sloughed off in a melted pile, and the steel frame that made up the doll's skeleton was charred beyond recognition. After a few seconds, the remains of the doll crumpled to the ground in a soot-stained heap.

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"Well...I guess this means I've failed," Hiraga muttered, lamenting his lack of foresight.

The power Stella had just used had been overwhelming. Had she used that at the start of the match, it would have been over in an instant. In other words, Stella could have won the match anytime she'd wanted. There was only one reason she'd waited until now to use Bahamut Soul: It was simply too powerful. It had enough force to encompass far more than just the hundred-meter space that was the ring; the entire Bay Dome and even the buildings around it could have been swallowed up. Even in phantom form, it wasn't the kind of technique that was safe to use in a public match with spectators nearby.

Phantom form made a Blazer's powers harmless to other humans, but not the rest of the environment. Bahamut Soul was so powerful that Stella couldn't fully control it, and she'd been worried that using it might destroy the stadium. If the damage had been too great, it

might have even put a stop to the Seven Stars Battle Festival as a whole. That was why she had said that using it meant relying on the strength of others. She'd been hoping that the people the Management Committee had sent to keep the audience safe would be able to contain her powers to just the ring and keep her flames from damaging anything else. Without their help, there was no way Stella could have used an attack like that.

Relying on people who weren't participating in the match went against her creed as a knight, however, hence she had opted not to use it for so long. She'd fought using only techniques she knew she could control so that she wouldn't have to rely on others to keep the audience safe. But Hiraga Reisen had done something so heinous that it had superseded her desire to fight in accordance with her creed. Using his Marionette to hold Tsuruya hostage had crossed a line, at which point she had stopped treating the match like a duel. By then, she'd just been taking out the trash.

I shouldn't have done anything that freed her from the restrictions she'd placed on herself. That was a grave mistake. Hiraga knew that was why he'd lost.

A shadow fell over Hiraga, and he looked up to see Stella standing over him, the blazing summer sun at her back. She was looking down at him like he was garbage. He knew why she was so disappointed in him. The body she was looking down at, Hiraga's body, wasn't human. It was a doll made of metal and resin.

From the very start, Hiraga Reisen himself had never set foot in the ring. He'd sent in one of his dolls that looked exactly like him instead. Naturally, there was no way someone willing to take hostages like him would ever boldly show himself in public. Nor would he ever put himself in a position of danger if he could help it. Stella had figured that out at some point too, which was why she wasn't surprised as she looked down at the doll in disgust.

"It seems you were a bit too unruly to turn into one of my puppets. I concede victory to you, Crimson Princess," he said, though his praise was nothing more than empty flattery.

Stella mercilessly stomped down on his doll's blackened face, crushing it. She had nothing to say to him, nor was she interested in

hearing anything he had to say. He was the worst kind of scum imaginable, and she didn't want to waste any more of her time thinking about him.

With that, Stella became the only fighter still standing, bringing a conclusive end to the final battle of the B block.

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"Wh-What a turnaround! After dropping her sword and being bashed in by Hiraga's Deus Ex Machina, it looked like she was on the verge of defeat, but then she unleashed a blast of fiery light so powerful that it literally reduced the entire arena to ashes! Stella's the only one still standing! Even the referee was taken down by that attack! To think she was still hiding this much of her strength!"

"She wasn't hiding it. I think she just didn't want to use it," Muroto cut in.

"What do you mean?"

"That technique she just used, Bahamut Soul, is a very basic one. All she did was unleash as much mana as she could in one giant blast. For the non-Blazers out there, think of it like yelling as loudly as you can."

That was why she'd been able to activate it pretty much instantly, as well as why it had been so powerful. But it was also the reason she'd been unable to control the attack and had knocked out the referee. If the knights waiting in the stands hadn't all leaped forward and erected a barrier, everyone in the audience would have been knocked out too, and the entire stadium would likely have been destroyed.

In general, knights did their best not to use Noble Arts that might harm innocent bystanders. After all, the Mage-Knights' creed was "Those with power must protect those without."

"I-I see. So the reason she used it was because the Jester backed her into a corner?"

"No... I don't think that's it either," Muroto replied with a shake of his head. He looked down at Stella in awe. Earlier, when she'd unleashed her Bahamut Soul, he'd been able to sense the feelings

she'd poured into her mana. "I think she was trying to gauge our ability."

"Our ability? What do you mean by that?"

"More specifically, the strength of the Management Committee and the knights they've stationed to protect the audience. She wanted to see if she could go all out in this tournament without the risk of destroying everything. And I guess she's gotten her answer. She really is one hell of a girl. This is the first time I've ever seen anyone test the people running the tournament like this."

Muroto's guess was right on the mark. Stella always unconsciously held back some of her strength to avoid getting the spectators involved or accidentally killing her opponent. Because she'd been born with overwhelming power, she'd always been cautious about how she used it. Saikyou Nene had realized that as well, and before she'd sent the girl off to Osaka, she'd given her a warning.

"Somewhere early on during the tournament, you're gonna need to undo those shackles you've put on yourself. Don't worry, though. This time around, Kuu-chan will be part of the crew that protects the audience. She isn't so weak that she needs a kid like you holding back on her account."

So Stella had done as Saikyou had asked and unleashed her full power for just an instant with that Bahamut Soul. And indeed, not a single audience member had been harmed. The moment Stella had activated it, all of the Blazers in the audience had leaped into action and deployed a multilayered barrier around the stands. Now Stella knew for certain that she didn't need to hold back out of fear of hurting innocents. With how skillfully those Blazers had erected their barriers, she knew that even if she went all out for an extended period of time, they'd be able to handle any incoming collateral damage. The Management Committee had chosen some of the strongest Mage-Knights in the Federation to serve as bodyguards for this tournament, after all. There was one thing that had surprised her, though.

"I didn't think you'd be the first to move to protect the audience, Ouma."

The Gale Emperor, Kurogane Ouma, had been the fastest to react to Stella's Bahamut Soul, creating a wind barrier to direct her flames upward and away from the stands. She had no idea why he'd moved to help her, but she didn't like it one bit. Not just because she owed him now, but also because he'd been able to perfectly redirect her full strength without breaking a sweat. She glared up at Ouma, who was watching from the highest point in the stands.

Well, whatever his reasons are, this means I don't have to worry about the audience.

With that thought, she turned and made her way out of the scorched arena, her flaming red hair fluttering behind her.

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"Thank you. Blocking power of that level is a feat only a Rank A knight like yourself could have accomplished. Knowing there's youngsters like you out there gives me hope for our great nation's future," Japan's Prime Minister and the director of Akatsuki Academy, Tsukikage Bakuga, said, turning to Kurogane Ouma and giving him a small round of applause. The two of them were on the top floor of the VIP room of the stadium. "But even if you hadn't done something, I'm sure Shinguuji-kun would have stopped the Crimson Princess's flames. Shouldn't you be conserving your strength for your upcoming matches?"

"I didn't want there to be even the slightest chance that anyone got hurt," Ouma replied, not even turning to face Tsukikage. "It would make for a very boring match if she felt guilty about unleashing her full strength and restricted herself in her battle against me."

Ouma's gaze was fixed on the red-haired knight glaring up at him from the arena. There was a surprising amount of bloodlust in her gaze, but not an ounce of fear despite the fact that he'd defeated her once before. Her eyes were full of confidence and burning with fighting spirit. Upon seeing that look in her eyes, Ouma smiled—a rarity for him.

"I'm getting fired up now."

Her aura was completely different from when he'd faced her a week ago. It seemed she'd grown quite a bit stronger in that time.

All in order to defeat me.

That was exactly what Ouma wanted. He was the pinnacle she should strive to reach, not some lowly charlatan like the Worst One. So long as she was chasing after Ikki, her talent would never bloom. And if that was all she aspired to, there wasn't much point in defeating her. Ouma wouldn't get his wish if he beat her while her sights were set so low.

Keep looking at me. Focus only on overcoming me. That's how you'll become stronger...

And so, the final B-block match ended with Stella defeating three Akatsuki members and Tsuruya Mikoto—and the referee to boot. As a result, there was no one to declare the victor. But Stella's majestic figure as she alone walked across the scorched arena toward the gate was enough to tell everyone watching who had won.

Though officially she'd only won her first match, she had effectively conquered the entire B block with how overwhelming her victory had been. And that was indeed how things ended up working out. Stella's second match would have been against Tatara Yui, but the doctors said she was in no state to fight. Meanwhile, Kazamatsuri Rinna voluntarily withdrew from the tournament, and since the last remaining fighter, Hiraga Reisen, hadn't actually stepped into the ring for his match, he was disqualified. In the end, Stella Vermillion became the first person to reach the semifinals.

Hagun Academy Bulletin

Character Intros — Journalist: Kusakabe Kagami

Tatara Yui

■PROFILE

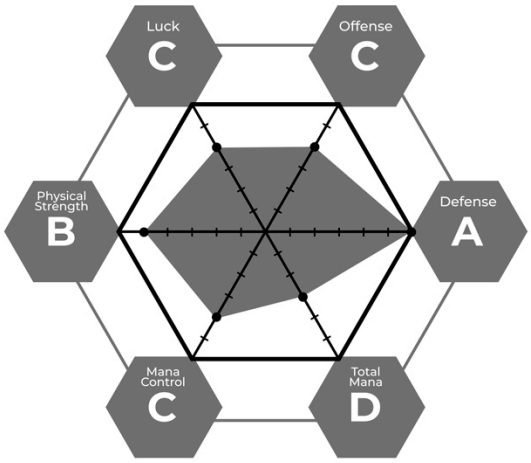
Affiliation: Akatsuki Academy First-Year

Blazer Rank: B

Noble Art: Total Reflect

Nickname: Unmovable

Summary: One of Rebellion's Assassins.







Kagamin's Thoughts!

She's a very powerful Reflector who can reflect not only physical attacks, but magical attacks that rely on heat or electricity as well. Her baseline physical prowess is pretty high too, and her perception and reaction time are both top-notch. As a result, it's nearly impossible to catch her off guard, making her a very difficult foe to deal with... though there's a certain someone who blew past her with brute force.

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Chapter 6: The First Round Ends

After Stella left the arena, Alisuin leaned against the railing and let out a long sigh.

"Whew. I was worried there for a second, but I'm glad she managed to win."

"Good grief. Onii-sama's match was bad enough. She didn't need to give us a scare as well."

"Sorry about worrying you guys," Ikki said with an awkward smile.

The three of them were smiling, happy that Stella had made it to the next round. But for Yakushi Kiriko, who didn't know Stella, the outcome of the match had come as quite a shock.

"That was a crazy technique. Not only was she able to cover the entire arena and the lawn outside of it in an instant, but she burned everything within that radius to cinders too. If I tried to avoid that by turning my cells into water vapor, they would likely just get vaporized."

"Agreed," Shizuku said. "It seems Azure Reincarnation won't be an effective counter to Stella-san."

Likewise, it was impossible to use martial arts techniques to guard against Stella's Bahamut Soul. Shizuku turned to Ikki and let out a sigh.

"I see now why she was so confident about fighting a four-against-one battle. She's gotten unbelievably strong after her training with the Demon Princess, Onii-sama. Bahamut Soul is quite an impressive technique."

But to her surprise, Ikki shook his head.

"No, I don't think so."

"Huh?"

Specifically, Ikki didn't think that Bahamut Soul was the true nature of the strength she'd gained after her week of training.

"Bahamut Soul isn't a technique Stella learned while she was with Saikyou-sensei. I'm pretty sure she could use it even when she first came to Hagun Academy."

"R-Really?! But I've never seen her use it before!"

"That's not surprising. It isn't something she'd feel safe using when there's people close enough to be watching her."

"I agree," Kurono said, nodding. "Besides, just like Muroto-senpai said, Bahamut Soul is basically like trying to yell as loud as you can. There's no semblance of control, and frankly, anyone can do that with their mana. You can't even really call it a Noble Art since 'Noble Art' implies that there's an element of technique and finesse to what you're doing. There's no need to train to do something like that. In a sense, you can say she's grown because she's finally become bold enough to trust others to keep her full strength in check. But if that's all she learned over the past week, that in and of itself is a problem."

"Does that mean her week of training didn't bear fruit?" Shizuku asked, and Ikki once again shook his head.

"No, I'm pretty sure she learned a lot. I could sense a newfound confidence in her when she walked into the arena. She had way more vigor than she did after losing to Ouma-niisan a week ago, which means she must have learned enough from Saikyou-sensei's training that she's overcome the shock of losing. It's just that whatever she learned isn't Bahamut Soul. In other words, we've still only seen a fraction of Stella's full strength."

Everyone shivered as Ikki said that. They thought back to the illusory dragon they'd seen for a moment before Stella had activated Bahamut Soul. Considering how overbearing that dragon had been, it was hard to dismiss Ikki's words as unfounded optimism. Normally, that would be something to rejoice over, but since they would have to fight Stella in the tournament, it was a nightmare.

Shizuku and the others frowned, daunted by the prospect of being Stella's opponent. But Ikki was smiling slightly.

You really are the perfect rival.

It was true that finding a way to fight her without being instantly obliterated was getting harder and harder, but that just made Ikki happy. Especially since it seemed like Stella had regained her

confidence and come back stronger than ever.

"I never realized just how painful being weak feels." He never wanted to hear such despondent words from her again. Stella was at her best when she was shining brilliantly like the stars in the night sky, always aiming for ever-greater heights. That was the version of her that Ikki wanted to overcome.

I guess it's pretty selfish of me to want to stay by her side while also hoping she'll go to faraway heights that I have to chase after her to reach.

"All right, everyone, it looks like we'll be taking a twenty-minute break while the tournament organizers rebuild the ring," the announcer said, interrupting Ikki's thoughts. "Once everything's ready, we'll start the D-block matches. In the meantime, we request that the fighters in the D block make their way to the waiting room."

"Well, kids, that's my cue. They'll probably need my help to repair the ring," Kurono remarked, getting to her feet. She took a drag of her cigarette and jumped down into the scorched arena.

Shizuku and Kiriko then stood up as well. They were both fighting in the D block.

"Shall we get going too, little sister?" Kiriko asked, turning to Shizuku.

"Yes. I was getting tired of waiting."

The two of them looked down at the ring, their brains switching into battle mode. Stella's match had really motivated them—their eyes were blazing with fighting spirit.

"Good luck to you both. We'll be cheering you on from here," Alisuin said.

"Thanks, Alice. But you should rest, Onii-sama. If you keep pushing yourself to stay awake, you won't be in top form for tomorrow's matches."

"Don't worry, Shizuku, I'll be fine. There's nothing to do except wait when it comes to getting my mana back, and I was able to rest my body enough during Stella's match that I'm fine physically. Besides, there's no way I'd miss my beloved little sister's match. I'll be cheering you on from here with Alice."

"Thank you..."

Shizuku smiled softly at Ikki. Meanwhile, Kiriko gave him an exaggeratedly hurt look.

"Oh, but you won't cheer for me?" she asked. "I see, so that's how little you care about me, Kurogane-kun."

"I mean, we did only just meet yesterday... But I *am* looking forward to watching your match, Yakushi-san. I've heard you're as amazing a knight as you are a doctor—don't they call you the Doctor Knight?"

Ikki wasn't just saying that to flatter Kiriko; he really did think highly of her abilities. Up until now, she had refrained from entering the Seven Stars Battle Festival because she'd wanted to focus on being a doctor. The general consensus, however, was that she would have easily made it to the top four if she'd taken part. People had felt that way even back when she'd been a first-year.

Having seen how she'd handled the Akatsuki members at the welcoming party, Ikki was inclined to agree with that claim. He was excited to see exactly how she'd fight. And there was one more reason he wanted to keep a close eye on her match.

"I'm really curious about your opponent as well, Yakushi-san."

"You mean Shinomiya-kun? He's one of the Akatsuki guys, right?"

Ikki nodded. Indeed, the final match of the D block was between Yakushi Kiriko and Shinomiya Amane, the member of Akatsuki who gave Ikki the nastiest vibes.

"Hmm. He didn't particularly stand out when Akatsuki made their big splash. Is there a reason he's got your attention?" Kiriko inquired.

"I... I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know?"

"Exactly that. I'm super intrigued by him, but I have no idea why."

"Maybe you've got a crush on him?"

"D-Definitely not!" Ikki shouted, spluttering. "How do I put this... It's like he gives off this extremely ominous aura. I'm not really sure how else to describe it."

"'Ominous,' huh?"

If he was being honest with himself, Ikki even felt an instinctual

hatred for Amane. He couldn't put his finger on the reason, though. Were it something as simple as the fact that Amane was part of Akatsuki and had attacked Hagun, that would have been nice, but Ikki had felt that way since before he'd even learned that Amane was with Akatsuki. In fact, he'd hated Amane from the moment he'd first met him. And it was precisely because he couldn't figure out why the boy felt so creepy to him.

"Well, you're probably the most skilled person here when it comes to understanding a person's true nature, so it's entirely possible that Shinomiya-kun possesses some hidden trait we're incapable of noticing. I'll take your warning to heart just in case."

"Yeah, be care—"

Just then, someone hugged Ikki from behind.

"Aha ha ha! I finally found you, Ikki-kun!" the newcomer said in a high-pitched, almost girly voice.

"Whoa?!"

Ikki turned around, shocked. The young boy with light blond hair who'd hugged him was none other than Shinomiya Amane. He looked up at Ikki with an innocent smile on his face.

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Though the referee had been knocked unconscious and was therefore unable to make a final call, the display board above the stadium immediately updated to declare Stella the winner. Naturally, the Management Committee also let all the broadcasting stations know that Stella's victory was official, so everyone watching all over the country knew that she'd won for real. That included Touka and Kanata, who'd been watching from Touka's infirmary room.

"I suppose we should have expected no less from her. I was a fool for thinking our weakness had forced her into a fight she wasn't ready for," Kanata said while smiling and shaking her head in amazement.

"In hindsight, that was completely one-sided," Touka replied. "You can tell she still had some strength left after using Bahamut Soul too. She really is something else."

"Do you think she'll be able to win all of her matches that easily?"

Touka shook her head in response to Kanata's question.

"I doubt it'll be that easy going forward. You saw how the Gale Emperor completely nullified her Bahamut Soul, didn't you? She's certainly one of the favorites to win the tournament, but I wouldn't say her victory is guaranteed."

"Do you think it'll come down to an ultimate confrontation between the two Rank A knights?"

"Their battle will definitely be worth watching, but I don't think those two are going to be the only highlight of this tournament. There's also the Doctor Knight, Lorelei, Panzer Grizzly, and of course the Worst One. Frankly, I wouldn't be surprised if any one of them won the tournament."

"It sounds like this year's tournament is going to be quite an interesting one."

"Definitely. I wish I could have taken part..." Touka added with a sad smile. She thought she'd come to terms with her loss to Ikki, but it seemed she still had some lingering attachment to the Seven Stars Battle Festival. *I guess I still hate losing, huh?*

"Why not challenge him to a duel once the tournament's over?" Kanata asked, reading Touka's thoughts.

"Heh. I think I might just do that."

As the two of them were chatting, they suddenly heard a groan from the bed next to Touka's.

"Mrrrgh..."

Touka and Kanata turned to see Misogi Utakata, Hagun Academy's student council vice president, slowly rise to a sitting position. He'd been knocked out just like Touka, though he'd stayed unconscious for a few hours longer.

"Uta-kun?!"

"Tou...ka?"

"Yer finally awake! Thank god. Do ya hurt anywhere?!"

"Uh...no... I'm fine."

Touka was so relieved that she'd accidentally slipped back into her rural accent. Though Utakata had said he was fine, he still looked a little out of it, and it seemed he hadn't fully grasped where

he was.

"Am I...in a hospital bed? What am I doing here?"

"Uta-kun... Ya don't remember what happened?"

Utakata stared blankly back at Touka.

"Though he was attacked in phantom form, he's been asleep for over a week. It's possible the damage was great enough that his memories are a bit muddled," Kanata said.

"Yeah, could be."

If that was the case, there wasn't anything to worry about. Attacks in phantom form did no physical damage whatsoever, meaning Utakata's brain itself hadn't been damaged. Those memories were still there, they just needed a trigger so he could recall them. All Touka needed to do, then, was explain things.

"We fought against the members of Akatsuki who attacked our school and lost. Don't you remember?" Touka asked in a gentle voice, swapping back to her usual Tokyo accent.

"Akatsuki...Academy..." Utakata blinked a few times. But then his eyes shot open as recognition flashed through his mind. Panicking, he turned to Kanata and asked, "Kanata! You said I was asleep for over a week! Is that true?!"

"Y-Yes, I'm afraid so."

"Looks like you recalled everything. That's great."

"Oh, yeah. Thanks. But what about the Seven Stars—"

"We're in the middle of the first day. Kurogane-kun and Stella-san already won their first matches. The D block's going to be starting soon. Shizuku-san took Kana-chan's place in Hagun's lineup, and her match is up next."

Touka figured Utakata would be happy to learn that Ikki and Stella had won their matches, but to her surprise, he instead went pale.

"Oh no!" he shouted, throwing aside the covers on his bed and leaping to his feet. However, while he wasn't physically injured in any way, he had still spent the last week unconscious. His legs refused to work correctly, and he fell onto the sterile linoleum floor. "Agh!"

"U-Uta-kun?!"

"Please don't push yourself! You've been asleep for over a week, so your legs won't work right for a while!"

"But I have to tell them! Ah, my handbook! Where's my student handbook?!"

Utakata started rifling through his pockets, indifferent to the fact that his nose was bleeding. It was rare to see him this flustered; he was usually the most composed out of everyone in the student council. Something serious was clearly going on.

"Uta-kun, why are you in such a hurry? What is it you need to tell, and who do you need to tell it to?" Touka asked, her expression turning grim.

"They can't fight him!" he cried, his voice hoarse.

"Huh?"

"Akatsuki's Shinomiya Amane! They can't fight him! If they do, they'll be ruined forever!"

Both Touka and Kanata knew Shinomiya Amane. He was one of the Akatsuki students who'd attacked Hagun.

Come to think of it, Uta-kun was the one who was paired up against him!

Touka had been so focused on her battle with Ouma that she hadn't really paid much attention to Utakata's fight.

"Is he that strong?!" she asked, shocked. However, Utakata shook his head.

"He's not strong per se...but that's not the problem here. He's in a completely different dimension."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"When I was fighting him, I thought his Blazer ability let him predict the future. But I was wrong. That's not what his power is. It's something far, far worse! We can't let anyone fight him! They won't be able to win! I'm sure of it!"

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"Long time no see, Ikki-kun! Congrats on making it past the first round!"

"A-Amane-kun..." Ikki muttered, his expression stiff. While he did

have his misgivings about the boy, he felt bad that he'd basically been bad-mouthing him behind his back. Amane wasn't aware that had happened, though, and he looked up at Ikki, his eyes sparkling.

"I saw your match earlier! You were sooo cool! I was looking all over for you so I could congratulate you!"

"Th-Thanks."

"If anything, *I* should be thanking *you*! I finally got to see you fight in person, Ikki-kun! It's the greatest thing a fan could hope for! And what a fight too! I never imagined you'd be able to steal even Twin Wings's techniques! I always thought your battle with the Hunter was one of your coolest, so I figured Blade Steal wasn't as impressive as your Perfect Vision, but I couldn't have been more wrong! Also, that afterimage you created with...what did you call it? Flicker Mirage? That was amazing. I knew about the move because I saw a video where you used it, but it must've been an unofficial match because the video quality's real bad and it's super blurry. Seeing it in person was totally different! I can't believe you can do that without the help of magic! It's amazing!" Amane shouted, panting heavily and looking up at Ikki with puppy dog eyes.

"O-Okay, okay, just calm down..." Ikki said, recoiling. It never ceased to amaze him how much he seemed to dislike Amane despite how much Amane seemed to like him. He didn't like knowing that he could harbor such twisted emotions either.

Ikki was dying to simply tell Amane to go away. But he couldn't do that. Not because he found it too awkward. No, it was because his moral creed rebelled against the idea of being cruel to someone without a good reason. Especially when that someone clearly liked him a lot.

"Stop being rude," Shizuku said, kicking Amane off of Ikki.

"Ouch!"

Unlike Ikki, Shizuku had no reservations about being mean to people she didn't like, even if she didn't have a good reason for disliking them. She stepped protectively in front of Ikki and glared down at Amane.


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“What did you do that for?” Amane grumbled, rubbing his side where Shizuku had kicked him. There were tears in his eyes, but Shizuku showed him no mercy, laying everything bare without hesitation.

“Stay away from Onii-sama. He doesn’t like you. In fact, he finds you disgusting. You’re bothering him by trying to act so friendly.”

“I-Is that true, Ikki-kun?”

“Sh-Shizuku...”

Ikki stared at his sister, pale-faced.

“Onii-sama, you hate yourself for hating someone else for no reason. I really love that about you, but you don’t need to waste any of your kindness on a guy like this. Save it all for me instead. Besides, it’s disgusting that he has the gall to call himself your fan after attacking our school. You have to be firm with clingy guys like him or they’ll never leave you alone.”

“Well...”

Shizuku’s argument was so sound that Ikki couldn’t refute it. As far as she was concerned, Amane’s participation in the attack on Hagun made hating him more than warranted. Of course, Ikki had disliked him since before that, but now that he’d done something indisputably deserving of hatred, Shizuku was right about there being no reason to be nice to him. He was their enemy, and he’d already harmed their friends.

Unfortunately, Ikki was too straitlaced to tell off someone who was trying to be nice to him. Luckily for him, Shizuku was there to say what he couldn’t.

“There you have it. Now get away from Onii-sama. They’ve called all the D-block fighters to the waiting rooms anyway—don’t you have a match to be preparing for? If you don’t know the way, how about I take you there? You might not be in one piece by the time we arrive, though.”

Shizuku glared at Amane, her eyes glowing with jade-green mana. Ikki couldn’t tell if Amane had been intimidated or not, but when he got back up, he didn’t try to hug Ikki again.

“Ugh... I suppose I can’t blame him. I *did* deceive him, after all. I’m sorry about that.”

Amane bowed his head to Ikki.

"Well, you're not forgiven," Shizuku said flatly.

"Um, I was apologizing to Ikki-kun, not you..."

"I won't allow you to apologize to Onii-sama either. Never talk to him again."

"Th-That's too cruel! Besides, why are you being so mean to me, Shizuku-chan? Have I done something to make you hate me? I feel like we've barely even spoken before..."

"I don't like how you're trying to seduce Onii-sama with that girly face and girly voice of yours."

"But I'm not?!"

"Really, though, all of that is trivial. What's important is that Onii-sama hates you, which is more than reason enough for me to hate you as well."

"You just flat-out won't listen, will you?"

"Did you just call me flat?!"

"You're *trying* to twist everything I say into an insult, aren't you?!"

Once Shizuku deemed someone an enemy, there was no negotiating with her. Amane seemed to have realized that as well, and he turned pleadingly toward Ikki.

"Even if Shizuku-chan won't forgive me, I really am sorry for what we did, you know," he said. "I genuinely just wanted to congratulate you on winning your first match. Also, I did come to apologize."

"Really?" Ikki asked.

"Yep. I want to make it up to you...and I think you'll like this a lot."

I will?

"What exactly did you bring me—"

"To all D-block fighters, there are only ten minutes left until the start of the first match. Please make your way to your respective waiting rooms."

Ikki's curiosity had been piqued, but before he could finish his question, the announcer had cut in. Glancing down, Ikki saw that the ring had already been rebuilt. Kiriko, who'd been watching silently the whole time, finally opened her mouth.

"Shinomiya-kun, I know none of this involves me, but it looks like

it’s almost time for our matches. If we don’t head to the waiting room, we’ll get scolded by the teachers. Do you think you could save this conversation for some other time?”

“Hmm?” Amane gave Kiriko a confused look, then asked something truly outrageous. “Um, who are you?”

Kiriko’s eyes nearly popped out of her skull. It was unthinkable not to know the face of your opponent in a tournament as high-profile as this one.

“And here I thought I was pretty famous... Hello, I’m Yakushi Kiriko, a third-year at Rentei Academy. I also happen to be a doctor.”

“Oh. Sorry, I didn’t mean to be rude. I just don’t know much about knights who aren’t Ikki-kun.”

“Surely you must have at least heard my name somewhere. If nothing else, I’m your opponent in today’s match.”

“Oh, I see. Yeah, I don’t care that much about my matches,” Amane said with an awkward smile. It seemed he really didn’t know who Kiriko was. Naturally, she didn’t take that too kindly.

“You sure seem confident in your abilities,” she said in an ice-cold voice, narrowing her eyes at the boy. “I only entered this tournament because the director kept begging me, but now I’m getting fired up. I wonder if you have the skills to back up that confidence.”

It was obvious that she was angry. She wasn’t planning on showing Amane any mercy now. However, Amane didn’t seem the least bit intimidated by Kiriko’s wrath.

“Oh, uh...I don’t think you’ll be able to find out,” Amane replied, still wearing that awkward smile.

“And why not?”

“Because, um...you said your name was Kiriko-san, right? You’re not going to get to fight, Kiriko-san. That’s also why there’s no need for me to go to the waiting room.”

Everyone stared at Amane in confusion. They had all seen the tournament lineup, and Kiriko’s name had been on it. Her match was definitely coming up, so what Amane was saying made no sense.

“What are you talking—”

Just then, Kiriko’s student handbook began to ring. Normally, she

would have ignored it and continued to press Amane, but the ringtone was the sound of an ambulance siren. That particular ringtone meant it wasn't a friend or family member calling her, but rather the hospital she worked at. It was a call she couldn't ignore.

"One sec, I need to take this," she said, turning away from Amane. "Hello? What is it? My match is about to start."

"Doctor, i-it's awful!"

The voice that had come through the phone loudly enough for everyone to hear belonged to Kajiwara Mio, the vice-director of Yakushi General Hospital. She'd been left in charge while Kiriko went to fight in the Seven Stars Battle Festival. The fact that she was panicking meant something seriously bad must have happened back at the hospital.

"What's going on?!"

"Th-The patients suddenly went into critical condition!"

"What?!"

Kiriko was in disbelief. When she'd finally agreed to take part in the Seven Stars Battle Festival, one of her conditions had been that all of her patients were stable. As a doctor, there was no way she could participate if the people under her care were in critical condition. The fact that she was here meant she'd made sure everyone was fine. She was the best doctor in Japan, and she'd been certain that no one's condition would degrade for the duration of the tournament.

Did I make a mistake in my diagnosis?! Worry gripped Kiriko's chest, but she didn't have time to dwell on past mistakes. If things were this bad, she needed to act now to save lives. She pressed the phone against her ear and asked Kajiwara, "So who exactly is in critical condition?"

What Kajiwara said next made the blood drain from Kiriko's face.

"Every single patient in the hospital!"

"Wh-What?!"

"We're doing everything we can, but we don't have the doctors or the facilities to handle this crisis! What's worse is that we don't know what caused everyone's conditions to suddenly deteriorate this badly! Also..."

In that instant, Kiriko knew this wasn't a failing on her part. It was possible that she might have overlooked a patient or two, but there was no way she would have misdiagnosed every single patient in her hospital. There was only one explanation for what might have happened.

"Got it. I'll head back immediately. Send a helicopter to the stadium."

"One's already on the way! It should be there in less than ten minutes! I'm so sorry! I know how much you were looking forward to the tournament!" Kajiwara said, bursting into tears.

"It's okay, don't cry. I told you to call me if anything serious happened, after all. Besides, it's not your fault all the patients went into critical condition. Just try and hold on until I get back, okay?"

"W-We can do that, at least!"

"That's the spirit. I'm counting on you."

Kiriko hung up, then turned to Amane, a deadly look in her eyes.

"What did you do, Shinomiya-kun?" she asked, her tone harsh. If she hadn't made a mistake, that meant a third party was the cause. "What did you do to my patients?"

"N-Now that's just not fair. How could I possibly have done something to people in Hiroshima when I'm all the way here in Osaka?"

If her patients were in critical condition, Kiriko had no choice but to forfeit her match. Her opponent had a clear incentive to get rid of her, and he had even said something very ominous seconds before Kiriko had received this devastating news. However, Amane held his hands up in surrender and professed his innocence.

It was true that a person in Osaka doing something to people in Hiroshima should have been impossible. Even if he had a collaborator, there was no way they could have messed with every single patient when so many people Kiriko knew and trusted were keeping an eye on things. Assuming, of course, that the person in question was a regular human.

As he listened to their conversation, Kurogane Ikki thought back to something Kusakabe Kagami had told him a few days before they'd headed to Osaka. *"Senpai, remember how you told me to*

look into Shinomiya Amane from Kyomon Academy? I did some digging, and it turns out that he won all six of his mock battles at school by default. As in, all of his opponents forfeited before the match. It's honestly really creepy." In that instant, everything came together.

"Ah, I see now. That explains everything," he said.

"Onii-sama?" Shizuku asked.

"I know what your true power is now."

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"Ikki-kun, what are you talking about? What do you mean, my true power? You should already know my Blazer ability is to predict the future. I just knew ahead of time that Kiriko-san would be forfeiting. I didn't actually do anything to—"

"No, that's not possible," Ikki interjected, shaking his head. "She might have overlooked a single person, or maybe two, but there's no way someone of her caliber would fail to properly gauge the condition of *all* of her patients. It's impossible to predict a future that can't come to pass."

"Aha ha. C-Come on, Ikki-kun, you're making some serious accusations without any evidence. Even the greatest doctors can make mistakes. Besides, you've seen me predict the future right in front of you, so you should know that's what my power is..."

Indeed, Amane had shown Ikki that he'd predicted both that the man on the street would suddenly start attacking and that Alisuin would betray Akatsuki. This situation, too, was something Amane had predicted. However, Ikki didn't buy it.

"No, your powers aren't prediction, Amane-kun. The order of cause and effect is backward."

"Ah..."

In that instant, Amane's plastered-on smile disappeared, and a shadow fell over his face.

"What do you mean by that, Ikki?" Alisuin asked.

"We should have realized it when Vice President Misogi lost to Amane-kun. His Noble Art, Black Box, is also one that interferes with

fate. It's a powerful one too—it can warp events that have already happened. Of course, how much he can change is restricted by what he's physically able to accomplish, so it's not particularly useful as an offensive ability, but when it comes to defense, it's nigh unbeatable. After all, he can even come back from having his head cut off. And yet, he lost to Amane-kun. Amane-kun, who has no martial arts training and supposedly only has the power to predict the future. Do you think future sight alone would be enough to beat the vice president?"

"Now that you mention it..."

"It's not possible, right? Not unless you have the power to interfere with fate to such a degree that Black Box would deem it impossible for Vice President Misogi to do anything to change the outcome. A power that, for example, can alter reality to make whatever it is you want to happen, happen."

"Ah!"

"This explains everything. Amane-kun isn't *predicting* the future, he's *creating* it. Everything he 'figured out,' like knowing that the man on the street was going to attack people, or that you were going to betray Akatsuki, Alice, or that your patients were going to collapse, Yakushi-san, he figured out because he altered reality to play out that way. Am I wrong, Amane-kun?"

Ikki turned to glare at Amane. The whole time, Amane hadn't said anything and had just listened quietly to Ikki's explanation. But after being asked a direct question, he finally looked up.

"Haaah..." He shrugged his shoulders and let out a sigh. Then, with a resigned smile, he said, "I guess I should have expected as much from you, Ikki-kun. There's nothing left for me to explain. I was actually planning on telling you what my true power is as part of my apology, but you figured everything out first. You really are amazing. My pathetic act is nothing before your powers of observation, Another One."

Amane confirmed everything Ikki had said.

"I thought so. And that means you really *did* do something to Yakushi-san's patients, didn't you?"

"Ah, hold on a sec! That's not quite right!" Amane's smile finally

vanished, and in a panicked voice, he explained, "I guess I'm technically the one who did it, but let me make something clear. You're right, my power isn't the ability to predict the future, but it's not as all-encompassing as you think either. I'm not a god. You see, all I do is make wishes."

"You 'make wishes'?"

"Yep. That's all. I'm not actively altering people's fates the way you think I am. For example, I just wished, 'I'd like to have a dramatic meeting with Ikki-kun,' and that whole thing with the guy with the knife happened. Or I wished, 'I hope the attack on Hagun Academy goes off without a hitch,' and that's how I learned we'd be betrayed. This time around, I just wished, 'I really don't want to fight this match.' The point is, whenever I make a wish, the world rewrites itself without my knowledge to make that wish come true. I don't actually know what's going on, I just know that in the end, my wish is going to be granted. That's the true nature of my Noble Art, Nameless Glory, and why my nickname is 'Bad Luck,'" Amane said with a flourish.

Ikki's expression froze.

"Wh-What?! That's insane!" Alisuin sputtered.

"Excuse me? Does that mean you could even make the moon crash into the earth if you wished for it?" Shizuku asked with a frown.

"Don't say such scary things. I'd never wish for something like that. After all, it'd be bad if that wish actually came true, right? And so far, there hasn't been a single wish of mine that hasn't."

A shiver ran down everyone's spine. It was clear that he really thought he could make the moon crash down if he wished for it. This boy was far more dangerous than they'd realized.

After a few seconds, Kiriko stepped forward and broke the heavy silence.

"In other words, you're blessed with endless luck. Is that right, Shinomiya-kun? Your power basically grants all of your wishes?"

"You can think of it that way, yeah. One way or another, everything I wish for happens. I don't get to control *how* it happens, but it always does. That's why I couldn't have known that all of your

patients would suddenly go into critical condition. Sorry about that."

Amane pressed his hands together and apologized in such an insincere tone that it was clear he didn't feel the least bit guilty about what he'd done. In fact, he didn't even feel responsible for it. All he'd wished for was to not have to fight Kiriko. He hadn't wanted to hurt any of the patients in her hospital, so this wasn't his fault. That was how he saw things. Needless to say, that only served to anger Kiriko even more.

"In that case, if I killed you, the fates you altered would go back to normal, wouldn't they?"

Three scalpels suddenly appeared in each of Kiriko's hands. Her tone was no different from usual, but her eyes were brimming with rage. However, Amane just shrugged his shoulders.

"It's true that my powers would vanish if I died, but I wouldn't recommend trying to kill me," he said in a casual tone. "I'll just wish, 'I don't want to be killed here.' So far, every time I've made that wish, it's made whoever tried to attack me unable to fight in some form or another. For example, in this situation...there's a lot of people around, so if there was an earthquake, there'd be a ton of casualties. At that point, you'd be more worried about helping the wounded than fighting me, right?"

"You're saying that's what you'll do?"

"I don't want to cause an earthquake either, you know. But I can't be held responsible for what happens when I make a wish, so I'd rather you not test me."

"Tch..."

Clicking her tongue, Kiriko unsummoned her scalpels. She didn't know whether Amane was telling the truth. There was no proof that he could make anything he wished for happen, but there was also a nonzero chance that if she pushed him, what he'd suggested would really come to pass. As someone who prided herself on being a doctor first and a knight second, that was a risk Kiriko wasn't willing to take. It was one line she wasn't going to cross, and in seconds, her fighting spirit deflated.

"And now you know why I don't have to bother going to the waiting room. So I'd like it if you'd let me finish apologizing to Ikki-

kun.” Amane turned away from Kiriko and back toward Ikki. Ikki was filled with such disgust that he didn’t even want to look the boy in the eyes, and he frowned. Amane didn’t seem to mind, though, and said, “Like I said earlier, part of my apology was going to be explaining my true power to you, Ikki-kun. I really do feel bad about deceiving you. But since you guessed my power before I could say it, telling you won’t mean anything anymore. Still, since I lied to you for so long, I know just telling you my powers won’t be enough of an apology. So I started thinking about what else I could do to make you happy. What wish could I make that would bring you the most joy?”

Amane smiled as he spoke. Ikki felt goose bumps rise on his arm, and he suddenly had a terrible feeling about what Amane was going to say next. He really didn’t want to hear it, but obviously, Amane wasn’t going to stop.

“That’s when I remembered! You won’t be able to graduate unless you win the Seven Stars Battle Festival! That’s so cruel, don’t you think? I can’t believe the Federation’s refusing to acknowledge someone as strong as you. As your biggest fan, there’s no way I can let that slide. So that’s why I decided I’ll gift you the title of Seven Stars Sovereign!” Amane declared with a beaming smile.

“Wh-What?!”

“What are you saying?!”

Shizuku and Alisuin stared at Amane, aghast.

“Is it really that surprising?” Amane asked, cocking his head. “I can cause earthquakes and bring the moon down. Making someone win a tournament will be a cakewalk.”

He turned back to Ikki, his eyes sparkling, and continued.

“Aren’t you happy, Ikki-kun?! All I have to do is wish for your victory, and you’ll easily win the whole tournament! Isn’t it great? You’ll finally be rewarded for all your hard work. Don’t worry, not even the Crimson Princess or the Gale Emperor can stop my Nameless Glory! I’ll mess up every other participant in this tournament, and then you’ll easily be able to claim victory! I’m sure Rebellion won’t be happy about it, but that’s not a problem. If it’s for you, Ikki-kun, I don’t—”

Without warning, there was a loud thud as Ikki sent Amane flying into the railing.

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"O-Onii-sama?!"

"Ikki-kun..."

Everyone, including Amane, stared at Ikki in shock. No one had expected such a sudden display of violence from him. But from Ikki's perspective, his response had been perfectly rational. After all, he'd finally figured out why it was that he'd instinctively hated Amane from the moment he'd first laid eyes on him.

"I was never able to say it because no matter how hard I thought about it, I couldn't figure out the reason I felt this way. But now I understand, so I'll say it clearly." Ikki stared contemptuously down at Amane. "I despise you."

Amane's eyes widened in shock, and he started trembling. Considering he'd offered to gift Ikki victory, it was understandable that he'd be surprised by Ikki's reaction. But it was precisely because he'd made that offer that Ikki had been able to put together why he hated Amane—because he was trying to steal away the thing Ikki cared most about. Namely, the effort he had put in to climb his way to the top and what that effort meant to him. Not only that, Amane was also attempting to take away the promise Ikki had made with the girl he loved above all else. In truth, Ikki didn't think he'd realized that from the start, so strictly speaking, it didn't explain why he'd felt the way he had at the beginning. Even so, he at least had a concrete reason to lay his hatred bare now.

"Don't you *dare* interfere with any of my fights. I'll make you wish you'd never been born," he spat.

Amane silently got back to his feet. His bangs hung over his face, making it impossible to discern his expression. For all Ikki knew, he might have been crying.

"Okay, got it," he said, turning his back to Ikki and the others. But a second later, he twirled back around and gave Ikki a huge smile. "If that's not what you want, then I won't wish for it. I promise!"

Ikki was so stunned by that reaction that he was at a loss for words. He'd assumed Amane would change his attitude after being rejected so harshly, but the boy was the same as always.

There was something about the way Amane spoke that disgusted Ikki. It just felt off somehow. Though his tone and expressions were as friendly as they had been earlier, it felt like there was something fundamentally different about him now.

"I guess you won't be satisfied unless it's a victory you've earned with your own strength, huh? You really are cool, Ikki-kun. I'm an even bigger fan of yours now!"

It was his eyes. That was what was different. Or rather, there had been something off about his eyes all this time, and Ikki was only realizing it now.

Because Ikki hadn't been able to figure out why he felt such disgust for Amane, he'd been too embarrassed to look him in the eye whenever they'd met before. But now that Ikki felt justified in hating Amane, he was able to finally meet the boy's gaze, and he could tell what emotions truly lay in the depths of those eyes that seemed to glimmer with excitement every time they caught sight of Ikki. Shinomiya Amane's eyes were a whirling mass of darkness, filled with every negative emotion imaginable.

"No matter how naturally gifted your opponent might be, you bring out every ounce of strength you can to seize victory against all odds. You really are the coolest. I wish I could be like you. Even though you're less talented than every other Blazer, you try harder than everyone else to win. And you've kept pushing forward no matter how big a toll it takes on your body and soul. That's why no matter how beat up you get, you never regret your actions! That's how the Worst One should be! You know, Ikki-kun, I really love that about you!"

Hatred. Anger. Loathing. Malice. Despair. Those were the emotions making up the vortex of darkness that lay within Amane's eyes. Every negative emotion possible had mixed together to the point that it was impossible to tell which was which. It was as if Amane hated every living thing in this world. He smiled cheerfully at Ikki, his smile now as ominous as the grim reaper's.

"And you know what? That's exactly why I need you to keep getting hurt. Spill more blood. Get beat up even more. The worse things get for you, the harder I'll cheer you on! I want to see you fight fate again and again and again until you finally break!"


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"Ngh!"

For the first time, Ikki was scared of Amane. Not disgusted or repulsed by him, but genuinely, truly terrified of him. Those eyes that seemed to hate everything in the world were focused squarely on Ikki now, and it was horrifying.

"So...good luck!" Amane said, his words ringing hollower than ever, and walked off with a cheery wave. The whole time, his smile had never wavered. But now that Ikki knew the truth that lay behind that smile, he couldn't help but shiver.

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Although the Doctor Knight had suddenly pulled out of her match, giving Amane a win by default, the rest of the D block had gone smoothly, boasting no momentous events like the ones in the C block, where a Rank F knight had defeated the reigning Seven Stars Sovereign, and the B block, where the Crimson Princess had emerged victorious from a four-against-one battle. In the third match, Lorelei Kurogane Shizuku had showcased her overwhelming might as the only Rank B Blazer in the D block. She'd defeated her opponent without getting so much as a scratch on her.

Everyone from Hagun had advanced to the second round, marking a perfect start for the school team. However, Ikki's expression was dark as he sat nose deep in the bath that evening.

"*Blub, blub...*"

The hotel had a large bath on the ground floor, which he had decided to make use of rather than showering in his room. Occupying his thoughts was none other than Shinomiya Amane.

While the D-block matches were happening, Toutokubara Kanata had called Ikki and told him that both Toudou Touka and Misogi Utakata had awoken. She'd then turned the phone over to the vice president, who'd told Ikki about his fight against Amane, proving without a shadow of a doubt that Amane hadn't been lying when he'd unveiled the specifics of his abilities. He really did have the power to make his wishes come true. It was an extremely difficult power to deal with, but it wasn't the nature of Amane's abilities that

was bothering Ikki.

Those eyes... I'm sure of it. The swirling vortex of negative emotions. The gaze that looked down on everything in the world with pure hatred. They had struck Ikki in more ways than one. *I recognize that gaze... I've seen it somewhere before, a long time ago...*

Ikki closed his eyes and started sifting through his memories. It was like jumping into a dark well, but he nevertheless kept his mind's eye peeled as he pushed deeper and deeper into his past. Finally, near the bottom of the well, he found what he was looking for. A silhouette so dark that it stood out even in the darkness stared up at Ikki. Its eyes were filled with hatred and despair, cursing anything and everything that existed in this world. Ikki was overcome with disgust and an even stronger sense of fear.

I knew it. I met him somewhere in the distant past.

The reason he'd hated Amane on sight had something to do with whatever had happened when they'd met in the past. He was certain of it. That first meeting was the root of everything. He needed to recall when they'd met and what had happened when they had.

What could have possibly made me hate him this much?

Ikki tried to peer even deeper into his memories, but he was unable to recall anything else. All he could see were those turbid eyes staring up at him.

"Why's the hero of the day, the man who defeated the Seven Stars Sovereign, looking so glum?" Alisuin said, sitting on the edge of the bath and dipping her legs into the hot water. "I mean, he certainly was a creepy guy, but you'll just wear yourself out trying to figure out what he's thinking. If you're having trouble clearing your mind, how about I show you so much ecstasy that you can't think about anything anymore?"

Alisuin gave Ikki a seductive smile, and he hurriedly shook his head.

"N-No thanks."

"Ha ha, I'm just joking. I'd rather not be killed by Stella-chan and Shizuku."

I'd rather you didn't joke about that either.

Though he was in a warm bathtub, a chill ran down Ikki's spine, and he lost any desire to keep looking through his memories. Alisuin gave him a thoughtful look.

"Besides, you don't need to worry about Amane anyway," she said. "The only way you'll fight each other is if you both win your next two matches and meet in the semifinals. But Amane's in the D block, which means he'll have to beat Shizuku to make it that far."

"You're saying I don't need to worry because Shizuku's going to beat him?"

"Exactly. Heh, it's true that Bad Luck's ability is bad news, but he made a mistake in revealing the details of how it works to us. Thanks to that, Shizuku was able to come up with a strategy to counter Nameless Glory."

"Wait, really? What is it?"

"Unfortunately, she hasn't told me. Well, even if she had, it wouldn't be fair to tell you since you're both fighting in the same tournament. But you and I both know that Shizuku's not the kind of girl to say she has a plan when she doesn't. She must have noticed something we overlooked."

"Makes sense."

As Alisuin had said, Shizuku wasn't the type of person to act tough or bluff. Ikki knew that better than anyone. She must really have come up with some kind of plan.

"You'd be better off thinking up strategies to beat Shizuku rather than Amane," Alisuin added.

"You might be right about that..."

Naturally, Ikki also wanted Shizuku to come out on top. He fervently hoped that whatever plan she'd come up with was enough to beat Amane.

"I see you're already thinking about the semifinals, Another One," an unfamiliar voice said from behind Ikki. He turned around to see a narrow-eyed man standing at the entrance to the men's bath. "That's some confidence you've got, considering you only just won your first match."

Ikki recognized the speaker after looking at him.

"B-Byakuya-san!"

"Good evening, Kurogane-kun. We haven't met since the welcoming party."

He was none other than Jougasaki Byakuya, a third-year at Bukyoku Academy and one of Moroboshi's friends. He'd placed second in the previous year's tournament and was Ikki's next opponent.

"Congratulations on winning your first match. I won't say I never would have imagined Yuu could lose, but...it was still a surprising result," Byakuya said.

"Th-Thank you very much," Ikki replied. "You seemed to win your match with ease, Byakuya-san. I was impressed."

"I happened to be blessed with an opponent I had a good matchup against. As an aside, you're Hagun Academy's Black Sonia, Alisuin Nagi-kun, correct?"

"Oh, you know about me?"

"You were initially going to be one of Hagun's representatives, so I did some research on you. I'm a big fan of the saying, 'If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles.' Though all of my research on you ended up wasted."

"I'm sorry about that, but I had my reasons for backing out of the tournament."

"I know a bit about your situation, but ultimately, it's up to you how you feel. It's not my place to say anything about your decision. That aside..." Byakuya turned back to Ikki, a slight frown on his face. "You must be confident you'll be able to beat me without any effort if you're already coming up with simulations of what you'll do in the semifinals, Kurogane-kun."

"Urk!" Ikki hurriedly got to his feet, wrapped a towel around his waist, and hurried over to Byakuya, an apologetic look on his face. "Oh, n-no, that's not it! I'm not underestimating you in the slightest, Byakuya-san! It's just, I met someone who I really don't like, and they've given me a lot to think about, so..."

Ikki wasn't lying; he honestly wasn't underestimating Byakuya. He could see how it might have come off that way given how focused he'd been on Amane, though, and he felt bad for making

Byakuya feel slighted. But after seeing Ikki's panicked response, Byakuya just smiled.

"Ha ha, I was kidding. I know you're not the kind of person to look down on your opponents, Kurogane-kun. I'm sorry for teasing you."

"I-It's fine. I'm just glad you understand."

Ikki breathed a sigh of relief, glad to know it hadn't been a serious misunderstanding.

"Incidentally, I thought this when we first met at the party as well, but you truly have an amazingly toned body. No wonder you were able to perform those superhuman movements in today's match. It takes a lot of patience and willpower to build your body up to this level. I truly respect you for managing to do it."

"It's not that amazing... All I have is my sword, so I have to do everything I can to make it more effective."

"No need to be humble. Few people could accomplish what you have."

"Bwuh?"

Ikki let out a surprised gasp as Byakuya's fingers suddenly ran down his chest.

"After touching your muscles, I can tell. Every fiber has been meticulously built up to be strong yet flexible. Tough but light. They're truly splendid muscles. Furthermore, there's no excess fat on your body, nor have you wasted time building up muscles that are just for show and have little functional utility. You've honed your body for one purpose and one purpose only—to swing a sword. Indeed, your build is a reflection of your own earnest nature. It's truly beautiful. I'd love to explore it more deeply."

"What?!"

Byakuya traced the lines of Ikki's muscle fibers with his fingers as he looked passionately into Ikki's eyes, which gave Ikki goose bumps.

Am I in trouble?

Fearing for his chastity, Ikki turned back to Alisuin, hoping to make his escape before it was too late.

"Hey, Alice, we should probably get—"

"Oh, is it time for a threesome?"

"Someone help!"

He had hoped Alisuin would be there for him, but it seemed Ikki actually had enemies on both sides. Just as he began to sweat, a savior appeared.

"Cut it out, you perveeert!" Moroboshi Yuudai shouted, appearing behind Byakuya and kicking him into the bath.

"Moroboshi-san!"

"Yo, Kurogane. It just me, or is this pretty similar to how we met last night?"

Moroboshi flashed Ikki a friendly smile. Meanwhile, Byakuya got out of the bath and glared at Moroboshi.

"What was that for, Yuu?" he asked. "Don't you know it's dangerous to get rowdy in the bath?"

"Yeah, well, what you were doing was way more dangerous! You were about to turn the bath into a gay paradise!"

"How rude. I'll have you know I prefer women, and my heart is set on Momiji. I was simply examining Kurogane-kun's body from a warrior's perspective. My respect for him is one hundred percent platonic."

"Look, *I* know that, but think about how your actions come across to other people! Can't you tell you're creeping Kurogane out?!"

"Oh, my apologies. I didn't mean to scare you. I genuinely just wanted to get to know you on a deeper level."

"Huh?"

"This is why I keep saying ya gotta choose your words more carefully!" Moroboshi turned back to Ikki. "Sorry about that, Kurogane," he said, apologizing for his friend. "But while he says some crazy stuff, I promise you he's straight, so don't worry. He just accidentally says suggestive stuff all the time."

"A-Aha ha ha... Well, I'm glad it was just a misunderstanding," Ikki said, breathing another sigh of relief.

With that misunderstanding resolved, the mood grew awkward. Mostly because Ikki didn't know what he should say to Moroboshi. While their match had been a fair one, in the end, Ikki had won. He didn't feel guilty about that, but he wasn't sure how to interact with

someone he'd just knocked out of the tournament. Even if Moroboshi wasn't showing it, Ikki was sure he was still devastated by the loss. Alisuin could tell that was weighing on Ikki's mind from a single glance.

"Shall we get going, then, Ikki?" she said in a casual voice.

"Sounds good. Let's grab a drink from the vending machines on the way back." Ikki jumped at the opportunity to gracefully remove himself from the situation.

"Oh? Leaving already?" Byakuya asked, turning to the two of them.

"I've already spent a long time in here thinking about stuff," Ikki answered with a nod. "If I stay any longer, I'll probably pass out."

"What a shame. I was going to offer to wash your back as an apology for making you feel uncomfortable."

"N-No thanks. I'm good."

"In that case..."

Byakuya snapped his fingers. A second later, a bottle of green tea appeared in Ikki's empty right hand, and a can of black coffee appeared in Alisuin's.

"Oh?"

"Was that..."

"Take this as a token of my apology instead."

So saying, Byakuya turned his back to Ikki and Alisuin and headed over to the shower section with Moroboshi to wash his body before he got into the bath.

"Shiro. You paid for those drinks, right? I work at a restaurant, so I'm not gonna let you shoplift." Moroboshi said to Byakuya as they started walking.

"How rude. I made sure to teleport money into the vending machine as well," he replied.

Ikki and Alisuin left the bathroom. It was only after they'd closed the door behind them that Alisuin brought up the drinks that had teleported into their hands.

"Ikki, was that...his Blazer ability?"

Ikki nodded.

"Yeah, it was. Jougasaki Byakuya's nickname is God's Eye, and his

Noble Art is God Hand."

God Hand was an ability that let Byakuya teleport any object within fifty meters of him to any point within that radius. It wasn't particularly flashy, but it was strong, especially in tournaments like the Seven Stars Battle Festival, where you could win matches by knocking your opponent out of the ring. As a matter of fact, he'd won his first match by teleporting his opponent far enough away that they couldn't make it back to the ring in time.

"That's going to be a pretty tricky ability to deal with."

"For sure. But while his ability's powerful, it has some restrictions on how he can use it. Anything that's not moving, he can teleport with ease, but when it comes to teleporting a moving person, he always marks them with his Device first. I'm guessing he needs to do that to lock onto a target whose coordinates are constantly changing."

"In other words, you'll be fine if you can dodge all of his hits. There's ways to deal with him, then."

"Yep. But the real dangerous thing about Byakuya-san is his more mundane strength, which is also the reason his nickname is God's Eye."

"And what would that be?"

"What drink did you get?" Ikki asked, holding up his bottle of tea.

"Coffee. It's just what I was craving after a nice, long bath."

"Same here. I was hoping to relax with some green tea after our bath."

Alisuin didn't say anything in response, so Ikki went on.

"If we'd both been craving the same drink and gotten that particular drink, it might've just been a coincidence, but the fact that he gave us both the exact drink we wanted means it wasn't pure chance, right?"

"The odds are quite slim, at least. Is this the other strength of his you were alluding to?"

"Yeah. Byakuya-san is famous for collecting as much data on his opponents as he can before he fights them. And not just data about how they fight either. He looks up as much as he can about their regular lives as well."

"Come to think of it, he did mention he'd researched me. Is there any point in learning details like what kind of drinks your opponent enjoys, though?"

"It's probably useless to us, but Byakuya-san gets value out of it. It seems he combines all the information he gathers ahead of time with everything he gleans during a fight to completely analyze a person's thoughts and what motivates them to act in the ways they do."

Alisuin knew of a very similar ability to that.

"Wait, isn't that the same as your Perfect Vision?"

"It sure is. The way he goes about collecting his information is different, but you can think of them as identical abilities. If anything, Byakuya-san's version is superior. My Perfect Vision relies solely on information I've gathered during a battle, whereas he does extensive research even before the fight in order to deconstruct and fully analyze his opponent. That's how he manages to achieve so many flawless victories. His superb insight and perception are what earned him the nickname 'God's Eye.'"

His game plan was to use his godlike perception to find an opening to land one hit with his sword so that he could freely teleport his foe however he wanted. To that end, the reason he'd touched Ikki's body earlier was to get a more accurate sense of Ikki's build. He was already preparing for the upcoming battle tomorrow.

Byakuya-san's right, I shouldn't be worrying about the semifinals when I haven't even gotten there. Having seen Byakuya's powers in action, Ikki had been thoroughly reminded of just how daunting his opponent was. This was the Seven Stars Battle Festival, Japan's most prominent tournament for student knights. There wasn't a single Blazer in the tournament he could afford to take lightly. *I need to focus on tomorrow's match. I can worry about everything else once I've given my all to beat Byakuya-san.*

Ikki mentally steeled himself, putting Amane out of his mind for now.

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After they left the bath, Ikki parted ways with Alisuin and started walking up the staircase, heading for his room on the tenth floor. He chose not to use the elevator since he wanted to rehabilitate his injured thigh a little bit. The bath had done wonders for his exhaustion, and Byakuya and Alisuin had helped him stop worrying about Amane, so he had a new spring in his step. He was sure he'd sleep soundly tonight. It was about time for him to get to bed too. However, as he was going up the stairs, he stopped on the seventh floor—the floor Stella was staying on.

I got to talk with her after my match, but only for a bit.

They hadn't spoken at all since then. She'd gone into a capsule after her match for healing, and he'd been swarmed by reporters wanting an interview with the man who'd defeated the Seven Stars Sovereign.

I really want to talk with her more... Now that he was free from thoughts of Amane, his desire to see Stella began to grow. *But this is the first night of the tournament. Will she think I'm frivolous for coming to see her when I should be focused on my upcoming matches?* That worry suddenly ran through Ikki's mind. *No, it's best not to jump to conclusions.*

He recalled the fight they'd had at the pool and shook his head. Back then, the two of them had kept their distance because they were worried they'd scare the other party off by coming on too strongly. Ikki had sworn to himself after that not to hide anything from Stella. Besides, there was nothing wrong with wanting to talk to your girlfriend after not seeing her for a week.

"All right, let's go."

Ikki walked into the seventh-floor hallway and started heading toward Stella's room. Once there, he rang the doorbell. After a minute of silence, he rang it again, but there was still no response.

"Maybe she went out..."

Ikki's shoulders slumped. Considering the time, it was entirely possible she'd gone down to take a bath as well.

It'd be pretty weird to wait in front of her room for her...

Disappointing as it was, it seemed the best course of action was to simply go back to his room and sleep. To that end, he turned

around and headed back to the staircase. But when he reached his room, he was treated to a surprise.

"Sh-Should I really have come? What if he thinks I'm a frivolous woman for coming to see him during the tournament? But we barely got to talk today, and..."

Stella was mumbling to herself while standing in front of Ikki's room, debating whether to ring the doorbell.


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Wow, she's literally me.

Ikki smiled, glad to know she'd been thinking the exact same thing he had. The reason she hadn't been in her room was that she'd gone to his to see him. He opened his mouth to call out to her, but then he stopped, a playful grin spreading across his face.

Stella had her back to him and hadn't noticed that he was there. This was the perfect chance to play a prank on her and surprise her. He couldn't believe he still had such childish urges inside him, but at the same time, he was excited about sneaking up on her and tapping her on the shoulder.

If he called out to her, it would be just a regular old reunion. She'd greet him with a smile like she always did. But if he surprised her, he'd get to see some expressions he normally didn't. Even if she got mad, that would be cute in its own way. In fact, that was the preferable outcome. Thus, as stealthily as he could, Ikki snuck up behind Stella.

"Boo!" he shouted right as he was about to tap her on the shoulder.

"Don't sneak up behind me, you— Aaaaah!"

"Whoa?!"

Before Ikki had so much as touched her, Stella turned around and launched a perfectly executed roundhouse kick on pure instinct, aimed squarely at Ikki's head despite the fact that she shouldn't have been able to see him. Only then had she realized what she'd done, and her irritated voice had turned into a scream. Ikki had barely managed to duck out of the way, but anyone else would have had the lights knocked out of them.

"Sorry, my training kicked in and I... Are you okay? Wait, I-Ikki?!"

"Ha ha ha ha... Hey, Stella," Ikki said, his expression stiff. It seemed she'd only just realized who it was she'd tried to kick.

I never thought I'd nearly be killed for trying to play a prank. I promise not to mess with people ever again.

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"I see, so you were trying to surprise me... Hee hee, I didn't

know you had such a childish side to you, Ikki," Stella said, sitting down on Ikki's bed next to him. He'd invited her in after the confusion had been resolved. Ikki had been regretting his hasty actions, but then Stella smiled warmly at him, and he decided that maybe it had been worth nearly losing his head for that smile alone. "I just kicked on instinct, but are you okay?"

"Yeah... I managed to dodge in the nick of time."

"I'm glad you were the one behind me. That probably would have killed anyone else."

"Ha ha..." Considering how sharp that kick had been, it really might have killed anyone else. "I'm amazed you were able to react to that so quickly. I thought I'd completely silenced my footsteps, but I guess not."

Stella had perfectly aimed a fatal kick at a target she hadn't even been looking at. That wasn't something she'd been capable of before her training.

"Did Saikyou-sensei teach you how to do that?" Ikki asked, and Stella nodded.

"Sort of. She's always able to be in my blind spot without me realizing it, so I learned how to deal with that— Oh."

"What's up?"

"Someone on the floor below us dropped a ten-yen coin."

It's incredible that you were able to hear that, but somehow, it doesn't even surprise me now.

"You were amazing in your match too, Ikki. Well, I know the only person you'll ever lose to is me, but I didn't think you'd pull out those crazy techniques to win. You must have stolen them when you went to rescue Alice, right? You never go down without a fight, do you?"

Stella smiled, sounding prouder of Ikki's accomplishments than her own. But Ikki frowned.

"I can't really say I've mastered those moves, though," he said.

"Really?"

Ikki nodded.

"Yeah, I'm still making too much noise. When I fought Twin Wings, all of her slashes were as silent as the grave. None of her

power was being lost to air resistance, so you didn't hear the sound of her swords slicing through the air. I can't replicate that just yet."

Indeed, Edelweiss's swordsmanship had been a far cry from what Ikki had copied with his Blade Steal. It wasn't because he'd failed to fully grasp the nature behind her technique, however. He could perfectly recreate what she'd done in his head, and he knew what muscles he had to move to do the same. The reason he couldn't replicate it perfectly was that he still wasn't able to fully control the flow of power within his body.

"I thought I was top class when it came to controlling the various parts of my body, but it looks like I've still got a long way to go," he continued. "I'm reminded of that every time I try to copy her techniques."

Ikki clenched his hands into fists. It had been a long time since he'd failed to replicate a technique he'd stolen, and that frustrated him.

"Hee hee, that's just like you, Ikki," Stella said with a smile.

"What do you mean?"

"You hate to lose, even if it's to the best swordsman in the world."

To most Blazers, Twin Wings was a symbol of fear and awe. She was closer to a god than a person in their eyes. No one believed that they were on even close to the same level as her. As a result, no one seriously thought that they could defeat her. After Stella explained all that, she added, "But you're actually mad that you're not able to match up to her swordsmanship."

That meant Ikki saw her as a rival to be defeated rather than a god. It was quite something, considering he was still just a student. Most people would call him arrogant for thinking that way, but not Stella.

"But that's what I love about you," she said, smiling at him again.

Something Ikki had only come to notice after he'd started dating Stella was that dimples formed on her cheeks whenever she smiled from the bottom of her heart. It seemed she was self-conscious about them and usually tried to avoid smiling that broadly, but when she was with Ikki, she dropped all pretenses and was her honest self. In other words, her dimply smile was something special just for

him. That made his heart skip a beat.

"Stella..."

As he thought about how long it had been since he'd last seen that smile, Ikki gently caressed Stella's cheeks—an action she didn't shy away from. In fact, she welcomed his touch. She enjoyed feeling Ikki's body heat through his fingers. It made her feel like they were connected.

The knowledge that Stella had accepted him completely enough to allow this sort of contact warmed Ikki's heart. He loved everything about her, from her flaming red hair to her ruby eyes to her soft, inviting lips.

"Mmm..."

Ikki pressed his lips against Stella's as if it were the most natural thing in the world. It was a soft, gentle kiss, which she reciprocated immediately. There was no greater feeling, Ikki thought, than loving someone with all your heart and knowing that they loved you back just as much.

Eventually, they broke the kiss off to take a breath, and then Stella moved in to kiss Ikki again. They kissed over and over, making up for the time they'd spent apart. After a few moments of pure bliss, Stella pulled away, a slight blush on her face.

"Hey, Ikki? Were you lonely while I was gone?" she asked, looking up at Ikki with a hint of guilt in her eyes. She was worried that her selfish decision to go off and train had hurt him.

"Yeah, I was real lonely." Ikki knew that he should have said no to make her feel at ease, but he had promised to be completely honest with her. "You know, I actually went down to your room to visit you earlier."

"Really?"

"Of course. I wanted to spend more time with you. I thought you might think I'm frivolous for coming to see you during the tournament, but I rang your doorbell anyway. Well, you'd gone to visit me, so you weren't there, but still."

Maybe it wasn't manly of Ikki to talk about how lonely he'd been, but he didn't care. It just proved how much he'd been thinking about her in the week they'd been apart.

“I’m really happy right now,” Ikki said, wrapping his arm around Stella’s back and hugging her tightly.

“I see...” Stella said, leaning into him. The time they’d spent apart had made this reunion all the sweeter, so in a sense, Ikki didn’t even hate that they hadn’t been able to see each other for a bit. “Then I guess you better punish me, Ikki.”

“Huh?”

Ikki’s thoughts ground to a halt.

“Wait, what? Sorry, did I hear you wrong? Did you just say ‘punish me’?” he asked.

Stella nodded, blushing. But that only confused him even more.

“Wait, are you talking about, like, spanking you?”

“What else would I be talking about?”

“I mean, I just don’t get *why* I need to punish you.”

“B-Because you’re going to be my husband eventually, right? Only a bad wife would make her husband lonely! That’s why you need to punish me!” Stella said as she balled her hands into fists, her expression dead serious.

“I-I really don’t mind that much!” Naturally, Ikki wasn’t nearly as enthusiastic about the idea of doing something cruel to his girlfriend over something he perceived as minor. “You needed that week to focus on your training. I know you’ll need time to yourself sometimes, and I don’t want to become the kind of abusive boyfriend who tries to monopolize his girlfriend!”

“Well, even if you don’t want to punish me, I won’t be satisfied until you do!”

“Uhhh...”

Suddenly, Ikki recalled the time Stella had barged into the bathroom while he was bathing and offered to wash his back, claiming that it was her duty as his servant following her loss in their duel. Her expression right now was the exact same as it had been back then. Because of how prideful and earnest Stella was, she was quite strict with herself. She tried to keep her promises at all costs, and she was willing to go to any length to make up for her mistakes. At the same time, though, she was so determined to make amends for what she saw as a mistake that she didn’t stop to think about

whether the other party actually wanted an apology of any kind.

I shouldn't let Stella take the initiative here. Ikki knew from experience things would only get worse if he did that. Stella was normally easily embarrassed, but when she felt she needed to do something, she could become quite bold. If he let her keep going, there was no telling what kind of crazy things she'd offer to do as a means of apologizing. *If she asks me to start spanking her for real, things are going to get out of hand.*

Ikki quickly came up with a plan.

"Okay, fine. I'll punish you now, Stella, so don't resist."

Ikki placed his hands on Stella's shoulders and pulled her toward him. He intended to kiss her on the cheek and call that her punishment.

"O-Okay, but no kisses. Something that nice isn't a real punishment," she said, foiling his plan. Just as he understood her quite well, she also understood him well.

"O-Okay..."

Ikki knew that he still had to find an alternate means of escape or Stella would suggest something far worse. After a few seconds, he came up with a backup plan and brought his face close to Stella's cheek. But not to kiss her. Instead, he pulled her even closer, bringing his mouth past her cheek.

"This is your punishment, so it's going to hurt a little bit," he whispered into her ear.

"Huh?"

A second later, he bit her earlobe. It was soft, and slightly cooler than the rest of her body. The coolness was pleasant after the hot kisses they'd just shared. He didn't bite down on it super hard, but he also didn't bite so softly that it was a play bite. Ikki knew he had to put at least a little bit of force into it or Stella wouldn't consider it a fair punishment. It was at least a hard enough bite to leave marks on her ear.

"Hyaaah?!"

"Whoa!"

Stella let out a high-pitched scream and jumped out of Ikki's grasp.

"S-Sorry. Did it hurt that much?" Ikki asked, surprised, but Stella then hugged him and shook her head. *So it* didn't *hurt. In that case...*

Ikki looked down at Stella and saw that she was blushing brightly and trembling like a twig. Wanting to test his theory, he bit down on the nape of her neck this time.

"Eeeek!"

Stella let out another scream, but this time, she kept clinging onto Ikki. Upon seeing her reaction, Ikki became certain.

I see, so Stella likes a little pain.

It was kind of embarrassing to have discovered one of his girlfriend's fetishes in this way, but at the same time, it made things easier. After all, he wasn't actually trying to punish her. The last thing he wanted was to genuinely hurt her, but if she was a masochist, then everything worked out. Or so Ikki thought at first, but things quickly escalated.

"Haaah...haaah... I'm so happy."

"Stella?"

Ikki stopped biting her neck and turned to look up at her. She was staring down at him, her skin flushed and naked desire burning in her eyes. She gently brushed Ikki's bite marks with the back of her hand, her expression turning ecstatic.


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"You ate me up, Ikki..." she muttered, sounding happier than ever. She looked so seductive in that instant that Ikki felt a wave of dizziness come over him.

This isn't good...

His "punishment" had totally turned her on. He'd been hoping that some light biting would get her off his case about needing to punish her, but instead, he'd created a much worse problem. At this rate, the two of them would cross a line Ikki had promised himself he wouldn't until after meeting her parents. Though he was ashamed to admit it, Ikki knew his self-control wouldn't hold out for much longer. That being the case, he grabbed Stella's shoulders again and pulled her off of him.

"O-Okay, that's enough punishment! We're done now!"

"Ah..."

Ikki knew he had to stop before he completely lost control. Unfortunately, in his panic, he'd been slightly more forceful than intended, and when he'd pushed Stella away, he'd accidentally torn open her yukata as well. The yukata had already been somewhat revealing, but now, one of her breasts was fully visible. Of course, that meant her nipple was too.

"Hngh..."

Ikki was so stunned that he couldn't even form proper words. His mouth suddenly felt dry, and his heart was beating a million times a minute. He knew he should apologize and look away, but he was completely paralyzed. Seeing Stella like this had fried his brain. And unfortunately for him, she wasn't resisting.

"I don't mind..." she said seductively. Her brain had long since been fried. "You can bite me all you want, Ikki."

Smiling, Stella gently stroked his cheek. He was the only thing reflected in her eyes, and in that moment, he knew she'd let him do anything he wanted. His mind went completely blank, and he started acting on autopilot. Slowly but surely, he brought his mouth closer to Stella's bare nipple. She watched with bated breath, bringing her hand around to the back of his head as if to invite him in.

Just then, the doorbell to Ikki's room rang.

"Aaaaaaah!"

Snapping back to reality, the two of them screamed in unison.

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Ikki and Stella scurried toward opposite corners of the bed, both blushing to the tips of their ears. Now that they'd returned to their senses, they realized just how embarrassing their actions had been. At the same time, the thought of how far they might have gone had the doorbell not rung ran through their minds. That made them even more embarrassed, and it was a few seconds before they could bear to look at each other.

"Ha ha... I don't know if I should call that perfect timing or terrible timing..."

"Y-You can say that again... Oho ho ho..."

Stella let out an uncharacteristically high-class laugh as she straightened out her yukata. It was probably her way of hiding her embarrassment, but Ikki honestly wasn't sure how to respond to that. Instead, he decided to change the subject.

"I-It looks like someone's here to visit, so let's just cool our heads and..." he said, trailing off.

"Y-Yeah, that sounds good."

Ikki jumped off the bed and headed toward the door, breathing a heavy sigh of relief.

Th-That was close... Had they kept going, he would have broken his promise and had sex with Stella before meeting her parents. *I never thought I could be so easily swayed... Then again, with how pretty Stella is, it might not have been possible for* anyone *to maintain their self-control in that situation.*

Either way, Ikki truly had been saved by this nighttime visitor. He was eager to welcome them in since it felt like being alone with Stella right now was too dangerous.

Now that I think about it, though, who'd even visit me at this hour? Ikki opened the door and said, "Yes? Who is it?"

"Good evening. As promised, I came here to draw your nude form."

Ikki slammed the door shut immediately and turned the lock.

"Wh-Who was it, Ikki?!" Stella asked, surprised.

"An annoying door-to-door salesman."

"But we're in a hotel!"

From her vantage point, Ikki had been blocking the doorway, so Stella hadn't actually seen who it was. Naturally, the only person who'd make a comment like that was Sara Bloodlily. And as always, all she'd been wearing was an apron and a pair of jeans.

Sara had been interested in Ikki ever since Akatsuki had attacked Hagun, and she'd approached him during the welcoming party for the Seven Stars Battle Festival participants. That was when she'd first asked him to be her nude model. At the time, Ikki had thought it was some kind of joke, but it appeared she was serious. Either way, this was one guest he couldn't welcome into his room—for one thing, he didn't want to model for her.

While desperately trying to think of a way out of this situation, Ikki pressed his back against the door. That was when the wall next to him swung open.

"Excuse me," Sara said, stepping into the room.

"Wh-What?! H-How'd you get in?!"

"Through the wall."

"Yeah, I saw that! How did you make the wall open?!"

"I put a doorknob on it."

Ikki looked down and saw that there was indeed a doorknob on the hallway side of the wall. *Is this just how hotel walls work?*

"Wait, no, there's no way!" Ikki shouted. Sara must have used her Blazer ability. "I don't know what kind of power you used to get in here, but why do you keep stalking me?!"

"Like I said, I came here to draw you in the nude like I promised," Sara said bluntly. The look in her eyes made it clear that she was serious. But Ikki was just as serious about not getting naked for her.

"Well, I never promised I'd let you do that."

"But I promised I'd draw you nude."

"That's not a promise! Promises are made between two people! You just decided to do this without my consent!"

"You're surprisingly stubborn. Very well, if you insist, then—"

"You'll give up?"

“I’ll strip for you in exchange.”

“No! I don’t need that! Like I keep saying, just stop trying to get me to model for you and leave!” Ikki cried, a hint of desperation entering his voice.

“That’s not happening.” Instead of backing down, Sara took a step closer to Ikki and leaned against his chest. “You’re the only thing I can think about now. Ever since I touched your body that day, my mind’s been filled with thoughts of you. You’re the only one who can satisfy me now. Take responsibility for that.”


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"S-Sara-san, please choose your words more carefully!"

Ikki paled, and a second later, Stella's hand clapped on his shoulder. He turned around to see her smiling threateningly at him.

"Um, Ikki? Could you explain what's going on here? Why's this pervert from Akatsuki visiting your room? Also, I heard something about nude modeling. It seems a lot happened while I was away."

"W-Wait, Stella! Calm down! You don't know the whole story!"

"Aha ha ha. What are you talking about, Ikki? We're on the tenth story."

Oh god, she's so mad that she's not hearing right!

In fairness, the way Sara was dressed invited misunderstandings, and Stella was the kind of person who even got jealous of Shizuku. There was no way she'd be fine with some random girl visiting Ikki's room in the middle of the night. Ikki knew he should just explain the situation honestly since he wasn't at fault here.

"We're not even friends, Stella! It's just that during the welcoming party for the knights in the tournament, she asked me to n-nude model for her!"

"N-N-N-N-N-Nude model?! Y-You can't do that! Even I haven't seen you nude yet, so there's no way you can show someone else your naked body!"

"Wait, *that's* your problem?"

"Yes, that's my problem! Anyway, I won't allow it! Also, get your hands off of Ikki, you pervert!"

Stella ripped Sara off of Ikki and flung her away. Sara landed softly on the bed and glared at Stella.

"Why are you deciding this for him, Crimson Princess? This has nothing to do with you."

"Oh, it has *everything* to do with me! I'm Ikki's girlfriend!"

"I don't see the problem, then. I'm not particularly interested in dating him, nor do I want to make him mine. You can have his heart, I just want his body."

"Well, his body's mine too."

"Huh?"

"B-Besides, you said you just want to draw him nude, but who knows if that's all you're after! I bet you're just a pervert who wants

to ogle Ikki's naked body!"

"Hmph."

Sara shot Stella another angry look. It seemed that last comment had wounded her pride as an artist.

"Fine. If you're that suspicious, I'll introduce myself. Though I'm sure the Vermillion royal family is already familiar with the name I use for my aboveboard activities." Sara pulled a notepad and ballpoint pen out of her pocket, wrote something down, tore the page off, and handed it to Stella. "Does this name look familiar?"

"Let me see... What?! No way!" Stella's jaw dropped as she examined the signature Sara had given her. "*You're* Mario Rosso?!"

"Is that a video game character?" Ikki asked. He didn't recognize the name at all, but he assumed from Stella's reaction that it was a famous one.

"It's the pseudonym of the most famous painter in the world. Their most expensive piece sold for 1.4 billion."

"S-Seriously?! That much?!"

"Yep. And not yen either. American dollars. Anyway, they're known for valuing their privacy and never showing their face in public, so I'd never met them in person until just now."

"But if no one knows their true identity, maybe Sara-san is lying about being them?" Ikki suggested, but Stella shook her head.

"Not possible. This signature's the real deal. We have a Mario painting hanging in our dining hall, and the signature on it looks identical. It's a very striking painting, so I remember it well. I never knew Mario was a member of the criminal underworld, though. That explains why all the journalists who tried to sniff out your true identity went missing."

"As long as you understand," Sara said, seemingly satisfied. "Now you know I'm not some pervert. I just want to draw Another One's perfectly sculpted body. He's the absolute pinnacle of the male form. So stop getting in my way."

However, Stella remained standing protectively in front of Ikki.

"That does prove you're a first-class painter, and I'm honestly curious what a portrait of Ikki drawn by Mario Rosso would look like, but it's clear Ikki doesn't want to do it, so it's not happening!"

"Stella!"

I'm so lucky to have such a caring girlfriend!

When Stella had initially misunderstood the situation, Ikki had been worried for a second, but thankfully, she'd remained calm. If the two of them both said no, surely Sara would finally give up. Ikki breathed a sigh of relief.

"If you agree not to get in my way, I promise I'll draw a fresco of the two of you happily in each other's arms on one of the walls in the Vermillion Palace. I'll even put you in wedding attire if you want."

"You know, Ikki, maybe you *should* let her draw a commemorative portrait of you. It'll be a good memento of the Seven Stars Battle Festival."

"I can't believe how easily you got bribed!"

"It's okay. You're doing this for art, so there's nothing to be embarrassed about!"

"You've gotta be kidding me!"

Now it was Ikki who was outnumbered two to one. He jumped through the open wall-door to his room and started running down the hall.

"Wait, Ikki!" Stella shouted, chasing after him.

"I finally found the perfect model. I'm not letting you get away!" Sara exclaimed, following after him as well.

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Though Ikki had managed to give Stella and Sara the slip temporarily, the hotel's floor plan was very basic, meaning there were no good places to hide. Unlike in the battle arena, he couldn't keep running away forever. He'd also had to think about where he was going to sleep. There was no way he could camp outside, as that wouldn't give him the quality rest he needed for his upcoming matches. At the same time, he couldn't return to his room. His only hope was to sleep in someone else's room.

Initially, he'd thought about going to Alisuin's room, but he'd figured Stella would know where that was, so it wouldn't be safe. Shizuku's room was even riskier, and there was a strong chance that

Shizuku herself would try something funny. Unfortunately, he had no other friends here whom he was close enough with to just barge into their room in the middle of the night.

"So that's why you came here?"

"Yep. I figured that if I was going to impose, it'd be best to impose on family." After carefully considering his options, Ikki had chosen to hide out in his brother Ouma's room. "I doubt Stella and Sara-san will think I came to your room, so it should be safe. And that's why I want you to let me sleep here."

"Go back to your room."

"If I could, I wouldn't have come to this depressing place."

"If all you're going to do is complain, then definitely leave."

Ouma was his older brother by only a year, so Ikki didn't feel any need to stand on ceremony with him. If anything Ikki felt like he deserved to be a bit sarcastic considering that Ouma was currently working with terrorists and had attacked him on multiple occasions.

"Just go to someone else's room. Don't tell me you don't have any friends."

"Like you're one to talk."

"Didn't anyone teach you to respect your elders?"

"Ha ha, I never thought I'd hear a joke from you. Anyway, why would I respect someone who disappears for a few years and then comes back as a gofer for a terrorist organization? I've lost so much respect for you that there's none left. Or what, are you going to tell me to stand out in the hallway as penance?"

"I didn't know you hated me that much..." Ouma said, raising an eyebrow. It seemed he was aware that his actions deserved that kind of ire, though, since he didn't complain any further. With an annoyed scowl, he added, "Fine, but only for tonight."

The hotel rooms they'd been given were quite big, and Ouma had long since stopped sleeping on beds anyway. It didn't matter to him if someone else took his empty bed.

"Thanks a lot."

Ouma stepped out of the doorway and let Ikki inside. His lights were off, which made Ikki think he'd been asleep until just now. Ouma took a bottle of mineral water out of the fridge and turned to

Ikki.

"Want anything to drink?"

"Nah, I'll be going to sleep soon."

"I see. Feel free to use the bed. I don't sleep on beds anymore."

"If you say so..."

Ikki sat gratefully down on the bed. Meanwhile, Ouma sat down on a mat he'd lain on the floor and leaned back against the wall.


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"So, what did you *really* come here to do?" he turned to Ikki and asked, his eyes glinting in the darkness. "If all you wanted was a safe haven, you wouldn't have come here."

"Fair enough," Ikki replied. Ouma was of course correct. Ikki did genuinely want to hide from Sara and Stella, but there were safer places he could have chosen for that. After all, Ouma had literally tried to kill him the night before. Despite that, Ikki had come here. He had his reasons, of course. "We've only met on the battlefield the past few days, so we haven't been able to have a proper conversation. I wanted a chance to sit down and talk with you one-on-one."

Ouma said nothing, but he also didn't chase Ikki out of the room. Ikki took his silence as permission to keep talking.

"You know, I always respected you, Nii-san. You were always stricter on yourself than anyone else, and you always lived up to the huge expectations our family set on you. You were my hero—the only person in the Kurogane family that I genuinely wanted to be like. When you vanished after graduating elementary school, I wasn't worried. I thought that since it was you, you were probably just traveling the world, training. That you'd found Japan too boring and were seeking even greater challenges."

By the time Ouma had disappeared, no one in his age range, either in Japan or abroad, was even a threat to him. He'd already won the Under-12 World Cup tournament held by the main body of the International Mage-Knight Federation, and frankly, there hadn't even been any middle schoolers who were a match for him. In fact, there had been rumors that he was stronger than the Seven Stars Sovereign at the time, so even high schoolers had been unable to hold a candle to him. But Ouma was a man who kept pursuing ever-greater heights, so he must have found regular middle school stifling.

He'd probably found the rules and regulations that bound student knights stifling as well. Federation rules stipulated that Blazers fighting in elementary and middle school tournaments could only bring their Devices out in phantom form. There was no way Ouma would be happy with such toothless duels. To him, a battle wasn't

real unless you put your life on the line. Duels fought in phantom form were mere games, not true battles. No matter how many hundreds of them he fought, he wouldn't attain true strength. That was something Ikki believed too, so he knew Ouma must have felt the same way.

Ouma's disappearance hadn't come as a surprise to Ikki. On the contrary, he'd been expecting it. He'd known Ouma wouldn't be satisfied with the no-stakes tournaments middle schoolers fought in. Though Ikki hadn't known where Ouma had gone, he'd still respected his brother for setting off to challenge yet greater heights.

"But that's exactly why I was so shocked when you came back with a group of terrorists," Ikki said, turning to glare at Ouma. "Tell me, Nii-san, why are you with Rebellion?"

The reason Ikki had come here was to ask Ouma that question. The Ouma Ikki knew wasn't interested in petty political schemes. He was a warrior through and through, whose only purpose in life was pursuing the pinnacle of strength. Ikki needed to know what had caused Ouma to change.

"To be clear, I'm not actually a part of Rebellion," Ouma answered after a short silence. "It just so happens that I'm working with them right now as a favor."

"A favor for who?"

"I didn't think you were this slow on the uptake. Who's at the center of this whole commotion?"

"Prime Minister Tsukikage?"

"That's right. I'm working for him, not Rebellion. And the reason I'm working for him is that Itsuki asked me to."

"D-Dad did?!"

"Is that really so surprising? If Japan leaves the Mage-Knight Federation, the old samurai order that used to manage Japan's Blazers will come back. And it's the Kurogane family who helmed that old organization. Both sides want the Federation gone for their own reasons—Tsukikage wants to reclaim Japan's old prestige, and Itsuki wants to be free of the Federation's yoke. It's only natural that they'd join forces."

That much was true, and Ikki had considered that possibility, but

he hadn't wanted to believe his straitlaced father would take part in what was essentially a coup. However, if Ouma was saying that he was, then there was no doubt it was true. That wasn't the only thing that had surprised Ikki, though.

"I didn't think you'd actually listen to a request from Dad."

If anything, that part was more surprising than Itsuki supporting a coup. Ouma wasn't the kind of man to care about family ties.

"I know what you're thinking, and you're wrong," Ouma said, frowning at Ikki's insinuation. "I cut all ties with the Kurogane family years ago. Helping Itsuki and joining up with Akatsuki was simply the best way to open the Crimson Princess's eyes. All because *you* put some stupid ideas in her head."

"Maybe you just don't want to admit you still respect Dad?"

"Keep saying that and I'll kick you out."

"Has Prime Minister Tsukikage told you why he's doing this?"

"No. And I don't care enough to ask either," Ouma said flatly.

Ikki knew he was telling the truth and didn't care about what Tsukikage was planning. It seemed Ouma really was helping out solely because his interests happened to align with Akatsuki's for the moment.

"I see... Now it all makes sense."

Honestly, Ikki was relieved. It was reassuring that his brother was still the same Ouma he knew, uninterested in criminal plots or political machinations. All he cared about was having a satisfying duel with Stella, and he was willing to do whatever it took to get it.

"That being said, I'm surprised you're so focused on Stella in particular. You attacked me over her last night too," Ikki said. Indeed, Ouma had said he was going to kill him because he was making Stella weaker. "I thought you might try and kill me again today. What changed?"

"There's simply no need for me to anymore."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Exactly what I said. You saw her match today. She's not the same Blazer she used to be. She's far more powerful. The only reason she would have gone out of her way to get notably stronger in such a short period of time was if she'd felt it was absolutely

necessary in order to defeat me. In other words, she's no longer blinded by the charlatan's tricks you showed her. She understands who it is she truly needs to compete against. I'm glad. If she's not aiming for ever-greater heights, then no matter how much talent she has, she'll never grow."

Ikki frowned. Stella had gone to train because she'd wanted to fulfill her promise to fight Ikki in the finals, so he didn't like Ouma's assertion that she was doing it all for him. But at the same time, it was her loss to Ouma that had triggered her desire to train, so it wasn't like Ouma was completely wrong either.

"Okay, that explains why you're not attacking me anymore, but I still don't get why you're so obsessed with Stella. There's plenty of Blazers in Japan right now who are stronger than her, like the War God or the Demon Princess. Wouldn't it make more sense to challenge them if you want a tough fight? Why are you going out of your way to do something as roundabout as pushing her to grow stronger just so you can fight her?"

As Stella's boyfriend, that was what Ikki was most interested in.

"Heh... As always, you're missing the point."

"Huh?"

"You fundamentally misunderstand what a knight's true strength is. That's why I call you a charlatan. Listen up, because I'm only going to say this once," Ouma said in a sharp voice. "What makes a Blazer different from a regular person? The mana they possess. And what does that mana let them do? It lets them bend the laws of the universe. You could even call it the power to impose one's will onto the world. A person's total mana pool, their Aura, is something that's set at birth and can never change. In other words, from the moment they're born, the level to which they can influence the world and leave their mark on history is set in stone. That's the true nature of what people call 'fate.'"

Ouma continued his explanation.

"A knight's true strength lies in their ability to crush the fate of other people and impose their own fate on the world. And Crimson Princess Stella Vermillion is the Blazer with the largest mana pool in the world. As someone seeking ultimate strength, she's the perfect

opponent."

The common belief among people was that magic was indeed the power to impose one's will, their fate, onto the world. In truth, every Rank A Blazer had left their mark on history in one way or another, even if some had been great heroes and others heinous criminals. It was hardly surprising that in the world of Mage-Knights, a person's overall mana pool was considered the most important factor in evaluating their strength. Ouma was simply stating what most people accepted as fact.

"But that's just referring to latent talent," Ikki rebutted. "At present—"

"The Demon Princess is stronger? True enough. But that just means I need to force the Crimson Princess to surpass her. I need to instill in her a desire to get stronger so that she trains until she's eclipsed the Demon Princess. And it seems I've already succeeded in that regard. You saw that dragon that appeared behind her in the battle this afternoon too. That's the true potential of the Crimson Princess. The War God and Demon Princess can't hope to compete with that. Also, you seem to be misunderstanding that it's not like I specifically want to fight a battle where the odds are stacked against me. If I merely wanted to challenge strong opponents, the Demon Princess would certainly suffice. However, I've already experienced countless life-or-death battles over these past five years."

"You have?!"

"It's not that I want a hard fight against the Crimson Princess. What I need is a battle where my opponent has so much more mana than me that the difference is overwhelming, that there's no hope whatsoever for even a Rank A knight like me to overcome her through brute force. And the only person with that much more mana is Stella. Only by defeating an opponent like her...will I finally be able to stop trembling."

As he said that, Ouma grasped his right wrist. Ikki looked down and saw that his hand was indeed trembling furiously. It was the type of trembling that only came from an overwhelming sense of fear. And while Ikki had no idea what it was that Ouma was so terrified of, the raging fighting spirit emanating from him despite it

made Ikki happy.

You really haven't changed at all...

Because of how shocking their reunion had been, Ikki had been worried that Ouma had become a different person. However, it seemed that wasn't the case. Ouma was the same upstanding warrior Ikki had looked up to.

"I take it back. I still respect you a little after all, Ouma-niisan," Ikki said.

"Exactly how much respect did I earn back?"

"Enough that if you told me to go stand in the hall, I might do it."

"You never stop joking, do you?" Ouma glowered, then closed his eyes. "That's enough talking. I'm going to sleep. You'd better get some rest too."

"Don't worry, I will."

Ikki had asked everything he'd wanted to. He was curious about what Ouma was so deathly afraid of, but they weren't close enough yet that he could ask. Thus, Ikki closed his eyes and let sleep take him. His match had been quite draining, and he hadn't gotten a lot of sleep the night before, so it was easy for him to fall fast asleep. Right before he fell completely unconscious, however, he heard Ouma mutter something.

"You've caught the attention of quite a troublesome guy. Things are going to be rough for you going forward. I hope you're prepared."

Just as Ouma had predicted, the next morning brought with it new trials. The Seven Stars Battle Festival Management Committee had sent out an important notice to everyone participating in the tournament.

This morning, we were informed that Akatsuki Academy first-years Tatara Yui and Kazamatsuri Rinna have officially withdrawn from the tournament. Fellow Akatsuki first-year Hiraga Reisen was found to have broken the rules of the tournament and has also been disqualified. With all other fighters in the B block having forfeited, Stella Vermillion has

moved on to the semifinals.

As a result of this, there will be fewer matches than initially planned, and we have been forced to adjust the schedule for the tournament. All matches in both round two and round three will take place today so that the semifinals can be held tomorrow. We realize this will place an undue burden on the affected fighters, but we must nevertheless ask for everyone’s cooperation.

Hagun Academy Bulletin

Character Intros Journalist: Kusakabe Kagami

Kazamatsuri Rinna

■PROFILE

Affiliation: Akatsuki Academy First-Year

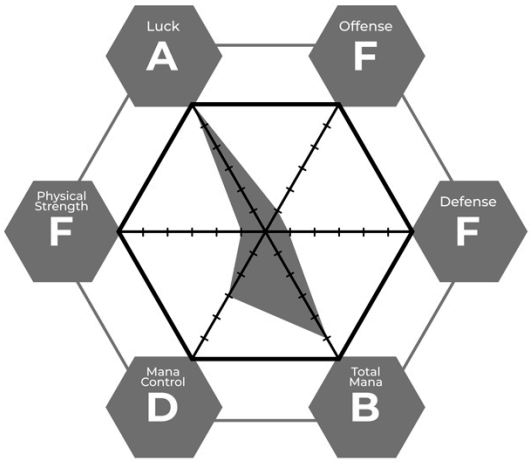
Blazer Rank: C

Noble Art: Binding Collar

Nickname: Beast Tamer

Summary: A daughter of the prestigious Kazamatsuri family.





Kagamin's Thoughts!



One of the few Akatsuki members whose identity isn't a mystery. The Kazamatsuri family is one of Japan's big families, like the Toutokubara family. I have no idea why their daughter's in Akatsuki, but I suspect it has something to do with Prime Minister Tsukikage and not Rebellion. Her Binding Collar is a Device that turns anything she subjugates with it into her Device as well. The abilities of that new Device are dependent on the latent abilities of the animal or person she's turned into her familiar. Kazamatsuri-san herself is quite weak in combat.

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Chapter 7: The Second Round Begins

Everyone was shocked by the sudden change in the tournament schedule, and none more so than the Blazers who'd be fighting two matches in one day. In the past, each person had only ever had to fight one match per day. There was no precedent for something like this. The first round of matches would start at 9 a.m. and the second at 6 p.m., so there would be a break in between for the fighters to rest, but it wouldn't be a long one.

Unsurprisingly, many people protested the sudden change. Not just the players either—many of the spectators who'd bought tickets to see five days' worth of matches were demanding refunds, and the vendors who'd set up stalls under the assumption that they'd get five full days of business were sending in complaints as well. But the Management Committee staunchly refused to change their stance, nor did they explain why they absolutely had to move the schedule up.

The second day of the tournament began with everyone utterly shocked and confused. It was around the time the A-block matches were finishing up, with Gale Emperor Kurogane Ouma and Panzer Grizzly Kaga Renji having won their respective matches, that Kusakabe Kagami arrived at the spectator stands to let Ikki and the others know what was going on with the Management Committee.

"Ah, there you guys are! Heeey!"

"Oh, if it isn't Kagami," Alisuin said lightly.

"Hello, Kusakabe-san," Ikki said.

Kagami ran over, her face flushed with excitement.

"Congrats on winning your first match, everyone! I didn't think all of Hagun's students would make it to the second round! That's a first for our school! Honestly, I wanted to congratulate you all last

night, but I was so busy finishing up the articles I needed to send back to the newspaper club that by the time I was done, the sun was rising again."

"You're surprisingly energetic for someone who pulled an all-nighter," Alisuin said with a smile, and Kagami puffed her chest out proudly.

"'Course I am! A single all-nighter won't get this journalist down! I even got to write a feel-good article about how all of our students made it to the second round, so of course I'm in high spirits! I heard from Oreki-sensei that everyone back on campus had a huge party to celebrate and drank till they dropped! They're all probably nursing hangovers right about now."

"Back before fifteen was the age of majority for knights, I bet you never would've seen high schoolers getting drunk on campus."

"Aha ha, tell me about it. But hey, you guys all made it, so I can't blame them for wanting to cut loose. I mean, Stella-chan even won a four-on-one! And that match had an eighty-two percent viewership rating across Japan! Not even KOK A-league finals matches do numbers like that! The New Year's specials the major news channels run don't either! It's crazy! Hmm, hang on." Kagami cut herself off as she looked over at Stella. She was leaning against the railing and groaning to herself. "Why's Stella-chan look so down? Is it that time of the month for her?"

Alisuin smacked her on the back of the head.

"She's depressed because her beating four people at once is why Ikki has to fight two matches in a row," she explained.

"Aaah, I see," Kagami replied, nodding in understanding. "That makes sense. Senpai's at a huge disadvantage if he has to fight multiple battles in such a short time..."

Both Ittou Shura and Ittou Rakshasa consumed all of Ikki's mana. It took a day of rest before he could recover enough mana to use either of them again. If he had to fight two battles on the same day, it meant his options would be heavily limited for at least one of them.

"I told her it's not her fault," Ikki said. "Besides, I'm not the only one who has to fight consecutive matches. Honestly, no one could

have predicted the Committee would do something so unprecedented anyway."

With how much effort had gone into scheduling all of the security and reserving the stadium for the tournament, it would normally have been unthinkable for the Committee to adjust the timetable. Furthermore, the Seven Stars Battle Festival was one of the most hotly anticipated tournaments in the country. This would have a huge impact on the TV stations broadcasting the tournament and the various vendors who set up stalls during it.

Never before had the Management Committee pushed up the schedule just because the number of matches had unexpectedly gone down. It was obvious that this wasn't Stella's fault. If anything, Ikki blamed her more for siding with Sara the night before than for what was going on right now—not that he was particularly angry about that either.

"Kusakabe-san, is there anything you've learned about why the Committee made this decision? Do any of your journalist friends know anything?" Shizuku asked.

"Hmm. Well, I did get some concrete intel, but..." Kagami trailed off and looked awkwardly over at Stella, who was still drooping against the railing. "I feel like telling you would mentally destroy Stella-chan."

"I-Is it my fault after all?!" Stella shouted, pale-faced. She jumped to her feet and turned to Kagami, but Kagami hurriedly shook her head upon seeing her exaggerated reaction.

"No, no, no, no, no! It's not your fault, Stella-chan, don't worry. This is all because some dirty adults let themselves get bribed by money. It's just...you're not completely unrelated to the negotiations that happened."

"Kagami-san, I understand your misgivings, but I think we're better off knowing. Otherwise, our curiosity might distract us," Ikki said.

"Okay, but keep it a secret from everyone else, all right?"

Kagami took a deep breath.

"The Seven Stars Battle Festival is supposed to be a tournament for student knights and completely free of financial influence, but we

all know that when it comes to battles between Blazers, money is always involved. After all, it costs money to rent the venue, repair the arena after every battle, bring in iPS capsules to heal the fighters, hire people to keep the audience safe during matches, organize lodging and transportation for all the associated staff, and so on. Basically, the tournament costs a fortune to run. Sales from tickets aren't nearly enough to cover the costs either. That's why the Japan branch of the Mage-Knight Federation, which administers the tournament, sells broadcasting rights to the highest bidder to pay for the whole thing. It's pretty scummy since this is supposed to be a tournament to showcase the skills of Japan's young Blazers to the world, but because the Japanese government doesn't like the Federation, they've passed a law forbidding any public money from going toward the tournament. Because of that, the Committee needs to sell broadcasting rights to keep the tournament running. But that means they're beholden to their sponsors."

"Because without them, the tournament can't be held?"

"Exactly. The reason they moved the schedule up was because their sponsors demanded it. They were pissed that the second and third matches of the B block got canceled because of Stella's overwhelming victory."

"That's ridiculous. Every tournament has people drop out for one reason or another. Even in sports, it's rare for every match on the bracket to actually be played," Alisuin replied with a shake of her head.

"You're not wrong," Kagami said. "That's why the Committee and the Federation tend to ignore those complaints. Well, the sponsors usually don't make such ridiculous complaints in the first place, but it seems the situation is slightly different this year."

"How so?"

"So, remember how I said they auction off broadcasting rights to the highest bidder? Well, there's actually a secret agreement among the major TV stations to take turns buying those rights each year. The Federation also wants to give everyone a chance to air the most important tournament in the country, so rather than doing a proper auction, they just set a fixed price that hardly ever changes.

Incidentally, that price has been set at five billion yen for the past ten years or so, since that's about how much it costs to run the tournament each year. But this year, the Committee held a true auction, and they sold the broadcasting rights for a whopping hundred billion yen."

"A hundred *billion*?!"

"Th-That's twenty times more, isn't it?!"

Alisuin and Shizuku stared at Kagami in shock. Ikki, however, almost immediately realized why the price had soared.

"Oh, I see. It's because Stella's participating," he said.

"Perceptive as always, Senpai."

"H-Huh? How come I made the price go up so much?" Stella asked, confused.

"Because you're world-famous," Kagami turned to her and explained. "You're a princess and a Blazer, which would already be enough to get everyone talking about you, but you're also a Rank A knight with the greatest known mana pool in the world. Plus, you're so beautiful that you make supermodels look plain. That's the biggest winning combination you could possibly ask for! Your entry into the tournament makes a huge difference. The Seven Stars Battle Festival has always been a popular event, but only in Japan. This year, though, the whole *world* is watching to see what Crimson Princess Stella Vermillion is capable of. Even the countries that aren't part of the Mage-Knight Federation. Tons of foreign TV companies entered the bidding war this year, which jacked the price way up."

However, it was precisely because the TV stations had spent so much money securing broadcasting rights that they wanted to recoup their investment at all costs. Unlike previous years, they'd spent most of their companies' capital in the bidding war.

"You're the big star, but now you're going to fight in two fewer matches, Stella-chan," Kagami continued. "On top of that, there were going to be two days where you didn't fight any matches at all. The sponsors really, really, *really* didn't want that, which was why they sent in so many complaints. And considering how much money they've given the Management Committee, it was a lot harder to ignore them this time around."

Heads might literally have rolled had the Committee ignored the TV stations' demands.

"After a night of heated deliberation, the Committee decided to return a fifth of what every nation's TV station paid to secure broadcasting rights and also accelerate the schedule so there'd be only one day where you're not fighting any matches. Beyond that, they're going to use the extra day to hold an exhibition with a former member of the KOK A league. I suspect that at some point today, they'll come up with some reason to try and force you to participate in that exhibition match, Stella-chan."

"I didn't realize my selfish request had such far-reaching repercussions..." Stella muttered, tears welling up in her eyes. "How can I ever make up for this..."

"This isn't your fault!" Kagami said in a firm voice, shaking her head.

"K-Kagami?"

"It's not your fault the Jester got disqualified, and ultimately, the two other Akatsuki members who dropped out have to take responsibility for their own decisions. Your match was officially sanctioned and followed the rules the Management Committee had set out. Besides...everyone at school was really happy you beat them up for us."

"Really?"

"You offered to fight that lopsided match because you wanted to get revenge for us, right? Even though this tournament is super important to you, you lowered your chances of winning just to help us weaklings who couldn't do anything when our school was attacked. Everyone was overjoyed when you gave them the thrashing they deserved!" As she said that, Kagami hugged Stella. "Thank you so much, Stella-chan! I love you!"

"Kagami... Yeah, I love you guys too!"

Stella hugged Kagami back, a beaming smile on her face. It seemed her doubts had been cleared.

I'm glad, Ikki thought as he watched the two of them. In the first place, there was no reason for mere students to care about what the tournament sponsors wanted. He appreciated how smoothly Kagami

had been able to convey that to Stella. She truly was a good friend. *Stella should be fine now. But I wonder if the explanation Kagami-san gave really is the whole story.*

Ikki thought back to what Amane had said to him yesterday. *"And you know what? That's exactly why I need you to keep getting hurt. Spill more blood. Get beat up even more. The worse things get for you, the harder I'll cheer you on!"* A shiver ran down his spine. He knew Amane's Blazer ability was powerful enough to make even something like this happen.

"Nii-san, do you think this might be the work of..."

Shizuku turned to Ikki, a stiff expression on her face, and Ikki nodded.

"Yeah. Considering how our conversation went yesterday, he might have wished to make things harder for me."

"Hmm? What are you referring to, Senpai? That sounds pretty ominous."

"Well, yesterday..."

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"A power that makes whatever he wishes for come true? That's insane!" Stella exclaimed after Ikki finished his story.

"But I suppose that does explain his irregular track record," Kagami mused, her expression clouding over.

"Hey, Kagami, would we be able to get Amane disqualified if we told the Management Committee about this? It's taboo to use your powers outside of a match to influence the outcome of the tournament."

"Hmm. I think we'd have a pretty hard time managing that."

"How come?"

"We don't have any proof. The whole series of events that led to the schedule being changed is unprecedented, but it does follow a logical chain of cause and effect. There's nothing clearly magical we can point to that proves Shinomiya-kun's involvement. Even if he did use his power, we can't be sure, and neither can the Committee."

"Not to mention that if Amane-kun's powers really are that great,

then any attempt to get him disqualified would fail by default," Ikki noted.

"That pisses me off!" Stella whined, stamping her feet in frustration. "I can't believe he's getting in your way even though he called himself your fan! I don't have any matches today, so maybe I should take this opportunity to find him and—"

"If you did that, you'd get disqualified," Shizuku pointed out calmly.

"Rgh."

Indeed, it would be impossible for Stella to eliminate Amane without leaving behind evidence that she was the one who'd done it.

"Besides, there's no need for you or Onii-sama to worry about him," Shizuku added, brimming with confidence. "I'll be taking him down in my evening match today."

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"Are you sure you'll be okay, Shizuku? A power that grants any wish you make is so crazy that I don't even know how he'd use it in a fight, so I have no idea what I'd do to deal with it. What if he does something that makes it impossible for you to fight in your match, like he did with the Doctor Knight?"

"Oh, are you worried about me, Stella-san? What a surprise. Have you finally been captivated by my cuteness?"

Shizuku's teasing immediately got a rise out of Stella.

"D-Don't be stupid! Like I'd ever be worried about a mean sister-in-law like you! You just sounded so sure that I was wondering where that confidence was coming from!"

"Don't worry, I have a plan. I wouldn't be so sure if I didn't."

"Wait, really?!"

"Of course. I've figured out a way to overcome Nameless Glory."

Ikki had already heard from Alisuin that Shizuku had come up with some sort of countermeasure, so he wasn't surprised, but Stella certainly was.

"Wh-What exactly—"

"I'm not telling," Shizuku said in a playful voice, sticking her tongue out at Stella.

"Ikki, your sister's personality is utterly twisted!" Stella shouted as her hair started to glow. "How could you raise her like this?!"

"Ha ha ha. She was much nicer in the past."

"That's not true, Onii-sama. The only person I was a good girl in front of was you."

Ikki's shoulders slumped. He really hadn't wanted to know that.

"This is an announcement for all the fighters in the C block," the announcer suddenly called out. "After a ten-minute break to clean up the ring, we will be beginning today's C-block matches. All fighters, please make your way to the waiting rooms. I repeat..."

The C block was the one Ikki was in.

"Oh yeah, since there's no B-block matches left, I guess it's the C block after the A block. I better get going," Ikki said, then got to his feet. His comrades all shouted words of encouragement at him.

"Good luck, Onii-sama."

"You have to fight two matches today, so take care not to wear

yourself out too much in the first one."

"You can do it, Senpai! Show me a cool fight so I can get some good pictures!"

Ikki smiled back at everyone, then turned toward Stella. It seemed her guilt at being the reason Ikki was fighting two matches had returned, and she looked away awkwardly.

"Ikki, um..." she began. She wasn't sure if she had any right to cheer him on when she had inadvertently made things harder for him.

"It seems we've both been given unexpected blessings," he said, sensing her uncertainty.

"Huh? What?"

Stella looked blankly at him. She had no idea what he was referring to. But in truth, he did consider this surprising turn of events to be a blessing.

"We'll be able to have our long-awaited rematch in the finals one day earlier now. I'd call that a blessing, wouldn't you? I've been looking forward to it for so long, having to wait one day less is the greatest gift I could ask for. You feel the same way, don't you?"

"Ah..."

Stella was drawn in by the fighting spirit in Ikki's eyes. She couldn't help but look straight at him.

"Absolutely!" she said with a fierce grin. An equally bright fighting spirit was burning in her eyes now too, her guilt completely gone. She punched Ikki lightly on the shoulder and declared, "You better not lose before you get to me!"

"Don't worry, I won't!"

With that, Ikki walked off.

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The Bay Dome, where the Seven Stars Battle Festival was being held, had a red gate and a blue gate situated on opposite sides of the arena. Every day, the fighters would receive an email from the Management Committee assigning them a color, and they would wait in the corresponding waiting room. Yesterday, Ikki had been blue,

and today, he was red. Most of the fighters found it mildly annoying to potentially have to change their waiting room each day, but since this was a single-elimination tournament, it was inevitable that a person's color would change at least once if they won enough matches. As a result, fighters would occasionally end up running into people they didn't expect in the waiting room.

Like me right now...

While sitting on the simple metal chair in the waiting room, Ikki snuck occasional glances at the other C-block fighter who'd been assigned red. In the center of the small room sat Donrou Academy third-year Kurashiki Kuraudo, his legs folded over each other. As always, his shirt was open, revealing the skull tattoo on his chest.

Ikki had expected to meet the Sword Eater in the ring, not here. He didn't know how to approach him considering he'd won their duel during the Ayatsuji Ayase incident. And since there were only four fighters left in each block, Kuraudo was Ikki's only companion in the waiting room. Unsurprisingly, neither of them started a conversation, and an oppressive silence hung over the room.

Is it just me, or has he been glaring at me this whole time?

Indeed, Kuraudo had been glaring at Ikki since the moment he'd entered the room. He looked quite angry too.

H-He's not going to attack me, is he?

Ikki knew how violent Kuraudo's disposition was, and he'd done plenty to make Kuraudo hate him.

"To the fighters in the waiting rooms, it's time to begin the C-block matches. Sara Bloodlily, Kurashiki Kuraudo, please enter the ring," the announcer said after they'd been waiting for what seemed like ages.

Finally. I feel like I was put in a cage with a starving lion.

Ikki breathed a sigh of relief. At the same time, Kuraudo let out a long sigh.

"Haaah... Finally, I'm free from this room."

He, too, sounded relieved.

Wait, was he just nervous like I was?

Sadly, Ikki's hopes were dashed by his next words.

"It was really hard to hold myself back from killing you the

moment I saw your shitty mug."

Yeesh. Ikki's face went slightly pale. "Thank you for having patience."

"'Course I'd wait. Like hell I'm gonna get disqualified here. I just gotta win one more match, then I can fight you for real. Just you wait. I'm gonna beat the shit outta you."

"You sure sound confident. But you should focus on your current opponent first. Sara Bloodlily's part of Rebellion. She's a battle-hardened terrorist. It won't be easy to—"

"Doesn't matter," Kuraudo said flatly. "I don't care who she is or how strong she is. The only thing that matters to me, Kurogane, is getting my rematch with you!"

Ikki gasped in surprise. Kuraudo's fighting spirit flared up, and he glared down at Ikki.

"I came here solely to fight you. I spent the last two months training my ass off to beat you! All I care about is settling our score!"

As he said that, mana began coalescing around his right hand, slowly forging his fighting spirit into the shape of a sword. A bone-white, snakelike sword made up of countless links—Kuraudo's Device, Orochimaru.

"What the..." Ikki's surprise grew as he saw that. Not Orochimaru specifically, since he'd seen Kuraudo's Device before, but what had also formed in his left hand. In it, Kuraudo was holding a second, identical sword. "T-Two swords?!"

That should have been impossible. While there were Blazers out there who used multiple weapons as a single Device, their Devices were like that from the start. But Sword Eater Kurashiki Kuraudo's Orochimaru had always been just one sword. He couldn't summon multiple copies of it like Alisuin could do with Darkness Hermit. If he could have, he would have used both in their duel two months ago. After all, his Marginal Counter would have been that much more powerful with two weapons than one.

On top of that, upon closer inspection, Ikki realized that Kuraudo's Device looked different. Before, Orochimaru had had jagged edges on one side and been flat on the other. Now, though, its blades were both double-edged like western swords.

His Device had transformed. That was insane. A Blazer's Device was a manifestation of their very soul. A crystallization of their values, their personality, and their very way of life. Those things didn't change easily. They weren't things that *should* change easily. In order to reach this point, Kuraudo must have gone through unbelievably intense training where he'd completely discarded his old self and forged himself anew—all to surpass Ikki.

"Kurogane. You better make your way up to me. I'll be waiting for you. Then, we'll get to have another blood-pumping death match! All I want is to experience the joy of a duel like that again!"

Ikki grinned, his own fighting spirit ignited. He was truly happy that Kuraudo had worked so hard solely to overcome him.

"Yeah, sounds good. We'll duel again, I promise," he said. Naturally, he had no reason to refuse.

"Ha ha..."

Kuraudo smiled, satisfied, and turned on his heel. He then walked out of the door and into the hallway that led to the arena. He'd come a long way from the second-rate thug he'd been when he'd taken over Ayase's dojo. Now, he was a true first-rate swordsman. Ikki started trembling in anticipation.

"The Seven Stars Battle Festival really is the greatest!"

There wasn't a single foe here who would go down easily. Every enemy was one worth giving his all against. There were no battles where he could afford to take it easy. But that was just how Ikki wanted it. As he looked at Kuraudo's back, he once again resolved to use his full strength against every opponent.

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"Sorry for the wait, folks! At long last, it's time to introduce the fighters in today's first C-block match!"

The crowd erupted into cheers as the announcer said that. The first person to emerge into the arena was Kuraudo.

"Coming from the red gate, we have Donrou Academy third-year Kurashiki Kuraudo! Thanks to his Marginal Counter, which makes use of his supernatural reaction time, his defense is impenetrable!

Furthermore, he can freely change the length of his Device, Orochimaru, allowing him to fight at any range! His powerful offensive and defensive abilities have won him countless matches and earned him the nickname 'Sword Eater'! Will his blood-starved fangs rip out the throat of yet another victim today?!"

Kuraudo walked resolutely across the grassy lawn and stepped into the ring. Stella cocked her head as she watched him.

"Hmm?"

"What is it, Stella-san?" Shizuku asked.

"I don't remember him using two swords..."

"Oh? You're right, that is strange. His Device looks different from what I remember as well," Kagami added.

Indeed, when Stella had watched Ikki's duel with Kuraudo, he'd only used a single sword.

"Maybe you're misremembering? I've never heard of anyone's Device changing shape," Alisuin said.

"I *have* heard of knights who've lost their memories manifesting different Devices, but that's far from normal. Maybe he used to use two swords but tried to change styles at some point or something," Shizuku said.

Neither Alisuin nor Shizuku had been present for the duel, so they didn't know how Kuraudo's Device used to look. And normally, it was impossible for someone to change their Device's shape, as that meant changing the very nature of their soul and reevaluating their core beliefs. Yet Kuraudo had done just that, all in order to defeat Ikki. But Stella and the others had no way of knowing that he had.

"Hmm? Maybe. He didn't strike me as the kind of guy who ever held back, though," Stella said. However, she didn't dwell on the topic any longer. The information wasn't relevant to her right now.

A few seconds later, Kuraudo's opponent stepped into the arena as well. Sara Bloodlily had dark circles under her eyes, and her blonde hair was unkempt.

"From the blue gate, we have Akatsuki Academy first-year Sara Bloodlily! A-As always, she's wearing a rather revealing outfit! It feels like if she starts moving around, we'll be able to see a lot more than we should! Is this going to get by the broadcast censors?! Either

way, I'm sure a certain subset of our audience is going to be watching this match very closely!"

"What kind of ridiculous commentary is that?" Stella asked with a frown.

"Nah, he's just playing to the crowd," Kagami replied, shaking her head. "Sara-chan's super popular with some niche communities on the internet. Some of them are just horny for her because of the revealing clothes she wears, but there's another group that wants to adopt her and take care of her since she seems to put so little effort into her appearance."

"I really didn't need to know about the preferences of these fetish communities."

While the two chatted, the fighters took their positions.

"All right then, we will now begin the first match of the second round of the sixty-second Seven Stars Battle Festival's C block! Kurashiki Kuraudo versus Sara Bloodily! Let's go ahead!"

And thus, the match began.

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"Ha ha! Double Skull Serpent's Blade!"

The moment the match began, Kuraudo sprang into action. He swung his twin Orochimarus down from his starting spot, and they instantly grew to be over twenty meters long. With his powers, he could easily cover the entire length of the hundred-meter ring from anywhere.

The two Orochimarus bore down on Sara's neck from either side. He was trying to decapitate her in one fell swoop, but she certainly wasn't going to stand idly by and let him.

"Demiurge's Brush," she said, summoning her Device. It was a palette filled with paint of all colors, as well as a heavily stained, shabby paintbrush. Dipping her brush into the blue paint, she said, "Color of Magic—Aqua Blue."

When Sara flung the paint at her feet, the ring beneath her began to glow aquamarine. A second later, there was a splash, and she fell into the blue puddle she'd created.

"What?!"

Kuraudo's blades passed harmlessly through the air. He cast his gaze around the arena, searching for his foe, but only when he heard a splash directly behind him, in his blind spot, did he realize what was going on. It was, of course, Sara Bloodlily who'd popped out from another aquamarine puddle in the ground. She'd used her Color of Magic to swim under the arena and reappear behind Kuraudo.

"Color of Magic—Fire Red."

She dipped her brush into the red paint this time, then swung it at him, sending paint flying toward him. Though there should only have been a few flecks of paint coming off the brush, it spewed a massive deluge, as if she were holding a paint bucket and not a brush.

"Hah!"

Unfortunately for Sara, surprise attacks were meaningless against Kuraudo, who could react immediately with his Marginal Counter. Even though he had been taken by surprise, he was still able to react in time to jump out of the way of the paint barrage. As the paint splattered across the ring, it ignited, creating flames the color of magma. The fire was so hot that it melted the stone floor of the arena.

"A-Amazing!" the announcer cried. "Both sides are launching deadly attacks at each other right from the start!"

"Kurashiki went for Bloodlily's neck the moment the match started, and in response, she tried to roast him with her Color of Magic. With how bloodthirsty these two are, it might be difficult for the referee to step in if things get dangerous!" Muroto added.

"Hey, Kagami," Stella said, turning toward Kagami. "I only got to watch Ikki's match in the first round, so I was wondering, what exactly is Sara's power? She did a couple of very different things in just these first few seconds."

"Back when she was in Rokuzon Academy, she was registered as a Rank C Blazer, and her Blazer power allowed her to manipulate concepts via the medium of color. That Aqua Blue just now must have been meant to represent water, which was why she was able to

create a lake that she could swim through beneath the ring. And Fire Red was fire. It made the paint ignite as soon as it touched something."

That was all information Kagami had obtained from her journalist friends at Rokuzon. They hadn't felt any need to be stingy with information regarding a traitor, so they'd told her everything they knew.

"I guess she's got a lot of tricks up her sleeve, then."

"She has as many powers as colors she has access to, so definitely. Back at Rokuzon, her nickname was 'Kaleidoscope.'"

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"Ugh, what a pain. I was hoping to end things quickly..." Sara muttered as she looked at the flames licking the ring floor. She sounded tired and annoyed. The only thing on her mind right now was getting a chance to draw her ideal model.

She wanted to observe Ikki to her heart's content. She wanted to get to know his body in intimate detail. Nothing else mattered to her right now. As an artist, her obsessions always trumped reason. She could barely control herself. This match was only wasting her time.

"Stop running away..."

Sara flung another splash of Fire Red paint at Kuraudo.

"Wh-What a sloppy attack! Kurashiki managed to dodge Sara's surprise attack, but all she's doing now is carelessly flinging paint at him from the front! There's no way that'll hit, right?!" the announcer exclaimed.

Indeed, even someone who didn't possess superhuman reflexes could easily dodge an attack like that. For Kuraudo, it was as simple as leisurely stepping to the side.

"Ha ha! Sorry, but I can't do— Ah?!"

Just as he was about to take another step, he pitched forward, almost as if he'd tripped.

"Whoa, what's this?! Kurashiki was in the middle of dodging, but now he's suddenly stopped?!"

It wasn't that he'd chosen to stop, but that he'd *been* stopped.

Muroto was the first to realize what had happened.

"Iida-san, look at the Sword Eater's feet!"

Iida looked down and saw a bright white line going from Kuraudo's feet to Sara's.

"Color of Magic—Silk White."

White was the color of guidance, the color that marked arrows and other signs that told people where to go. Anyone who stepped on one of Sara's white lines would only be able to go where it directed them. And this white line led directly to the red paint that Sara had thrown at Kuraudo earlier. As a result, Kuraudo wouldn't be able to dodge it.

"I just gotta follow the line, right?!" he shouted. Thanks to his superb reflexes and toned body, he immediately regained his balance and started running down the white line at full speed. As the red paint bore down on him, he swung both of his swords. "Twin Fangs!"

That was the same technique that had given Ikki quite a bit of trouble during their duel. Back then, he'd swung his single sword to the left and right with so much speed that it had seemed like two slashes were bearing down on him at once. Now, however, he was doing the same thing with both swords. It was, in effect, four slashes at once.

Kuraudo sliced through the blobs of paint, turning them into a fine mist. He kept a close eye on every single tiny droplet, twisting his body to ensure none of them landed on him, and ran all the way over to Sara.

"Ngh!"

Sara hadn't expected him to cut his way through her paint, and her reaction was slightly delayed. Kuraudo took full advantage of that opening, mercilessly slashing with both swords in an upward arc toward her. The force of his swings was powerful enough to pull her out of the puddle she was still half inside and send her flying a good ten meters across the ring.

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“Kurashiki’s landed a clean hit! The Sword Eater draws first blood! That looked like quite a nasty hit too! It’s entirely possible Sara’s down for the count!”

“No. Take a look, she’s getting back up.”

Just as Muroto had said, Sara got to her feet as if nothing had happened. There wasn’t even a scratch on her. Upon closer inspection, the announcer noticed that her left arm, the one she’d blocked Kuraudo’s swords with, was covered in silver paint. She’d used Color of Magic—Gunmetal to make her arm as hard as steel and block his slashes.

“Tch.” Kuraudo clicked his tongue, realizing that was why it had felt like he’d slashed a wall rather than flesh. “You sure have a lot of tricks up your sleeve.”

With how varied Sara’s abilities were, it was difficult to press the offensive. At the same time, though, Kuraudo could tell that he was slowly pushing her back. Eventually, her bag of tricks would run dry, and he’d find an opportunity to land a solid blow.

“I’m not done yet!” he shouted, running forward.

“The Sword Eater’s going on the offensive again!”

“That’s a smart choice. While it’s unfortunate that his last attack was blocked, he knows not to let that get to him. If one attack isn’t enough, he just needs to keep attacking until he’s worn Bloodlily down.”

As Kuraudo charged Sara, she looked down at the ground.

“...sucks,” she muttered. Her voice was filled with rage—enough to give Kuraudo pause.

“Huh?!”

“This sucks! There’s so much I want to draw! So much that I probably won’t be able to draw it all in the seventy or so remaining years of my life! And you keep getting in my way! All I want is to draw him as soon as possible...to observe every inch of him... I don’t care about you!” Sara suddenly looked up at Kuraudo. “Stop wasting my tiiime!”

She glared at him in hatred and started drawing something in the air with Demiurge’s Brush. Her strokes were rough, like a child drawing with a crayon, but everyone watching could tell what it was

she was drawing. Then, a second later, her drawing turned into a 3D object that she grabbed with her left hand. She hefted the heavy submachine gun she'd created and aimed it at Kuraudo.

"Purple Caricature—Thompson."

"Wh-What on earth?! I-Is that a gun?!" the announcer screamed. "Sara drew the shape of a gun in the empty air and turned it real! J-Just how multifaceted are her Noble Arts?! I knew she could call upon the concepts we associate with specific colors, but none of the records on Kaleidoscope Sara Bloodlily mentioned that she could do this! Has she been hiding this skill for the Seven Stars Battle Festival?!"

"Holy shit! She can make whatever she wants out of thin air?!"

"So her powers aren't just limited to colors?!"

The audience was just as shocked by Sara's Purple Caricature. When she'd been called Kaleidoscope instead of Bloody da Vinci, no one had seen her use anything like this. Of course, Kuraudo was just as shocked as everyone else.

Sara pulled the trigger, and a hail of bullets sprayed out toward Kuraudo. It seemed the submachine gun she'd drawn was just as effective as the real thing.

"Geh!"

The Thompson was a fully automatic submachine gun that boasted a firing rate of eight hundred bullets per minute. Even the famed Sword Eater had to stop his charge and focus on defense to survive the barrage. Unfortunately, he was already much closer than he would have liked to be.

"You can hear those gunshots from the spectator stands! Sara's mercilessly showering him with bullets! Kurashiki's going to have trouble dealing with— W-Wait, hang on!"

The announcer cut himself off midway.

"Raaaaaaah!"

"M-My god! Kurashiki's blocking them all! He's moving those twin swords of his with incredible skill! Just look at that shower of sparks!"

Kuraudo had shortened both Orochimarus to dagger length and was deftly spinning them around, deflecting all of the submachine

gun's bullets. Even Muroto was impressed.

"Wow. Only someone with his superhuman reflexes could manage something like that."

After a few seconds, there was a loud click, signaling that the magazine was finally empty. Kuraudo finally had a chance to counterattack.

She's out of ammo! He rushed forward. "Extend, Skull Serpent's Blade!"

Kuraudo thrust one of his swords forward and extended it, aiming to pierce Sara's heart. Her physical abilities and reflexes were far inferior to Kuraudo's, and Orochimaru was extending as quickly as a speeding bullet, so she didn't have enough time to get out of the way. But just before it reached her heart, it suddenly bent away and slammed into the floor next to her.

"The hell?!"

Kuraudo had definitely tried to extend Orochimaru straight forward, so it shouldn't have suddenly changed trajectory like that. But a second later, he realized what had happened, and his confusion cleared up. There was a target drawn on the section of the floor that Orochimaru had slammed into.

I get it. My attack was guided to the target she drew!

That meant Sara's powers did more than just allow her to utilize the associations people had with colors. They also allowed her to utilize the associations people had with drawings as a whole. That explained how she'd been able to draw a gun and shoot it.

She's way more dangerous than I realized! She can make use of anything she can draw!

The power to turn her imagination into reality was truly godlike. It made sense, then, that her Device was called *Demiurge's* Brush. Hers was truly the brush of an omnipotent creator. But the real surprise was yet to come.

"Purple Caricature." Sara quickly drew out her next creation, and a long, white, cylindrical object with fins at the back appeared. "Tomahawk."

It was an honest-to-goodness missile. An explosion from a weapon like that wasn't something two swords could block. A second

later, there was a flash of light, and a blast of heat rocked the stadium, kicking up a dust cloud that rose high into the skies of Osaka.

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The audience started screaming the moment the missile exploded.

"W-Wow! That was a cruise missile! What an explosion!" the announcer exclaimed. "It looks like the knights hired to protect the audience managed to keep everyone safe, but the ring's covered in flames and smoke! Is Kuraudo okay down there?!"

"He's definitely dead!" someone in the crowd shouted.

"There's probably nothing left of him!"

The Tomahawk was a cruise missile that had been developed to destroy buildings and sink battleships. Using one against a single person was overkill to the extreme. And Kuraudo had eaten its explosion head-on.

Everyone gasped in surprise as the smoke began to dissipate and the ring became visible once more. Kuraudo was nowhere to be seen, which was to be expected, but there was a stark-white cocoon in the ring standing exactly where Kuraudo had been. After a few seconds, the cocoon started to break apart, and everyone realized what it must have been. As its layers peeled away one after another, it became obvious that it had been spun together by a pair of bone-white blades, which were now shrinking in size. And out of the cocoon emerged Kurashiki Kuraudo, completely unharmed.

"U-Unbelievable! Kurashiki managed to survive a direct hit from a cruise missile! How is that possible?!"

"It seemed he wrapped his Device around himself to deflect the brunt of the blast. It takes either an exceptional amount of power or the ability to interact directly with mana to harm a Blazer's Device. They make the perfect shields."

It was just as Muroto had said. Kuraudo had instantly realized that he wouldn't be able to cut through a missile's explosion, so he'd instead stretched both Orochimarus as far as he could and created a

defensive cocoon for himself. Normal people would have reacted too slowly to manage that, but he had his prized Marginal Counter. Even then, though, it had been close.

"You're one crazy bitch," Kuraudo spat, glaring over at where he believed Sara was through what was left of the smoke. Not only was she aiming to take his life, but she was also bringing out far more firepower than was necessary. You didn't need a weapon that big to defeat a single human.

His anger quickly turned to shock as the last of the smoke cleared. Standing in front of Sara were a hundred skeletal soldiers, all holding military-grade machine guns.

"Purple Caricature—Necro Battalion."

"Holy fuck. You're insane..."

The soldiers opened fire in unison, drowning Kuraudo in a deluge of bullets.

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"What?!"

Ikki jumped to his feet. He'd been watching the battle from the monitor in the waiting room, and this new development was such a shock that he didn't even notice the chair clatter to the floor behind him. It wasn't what Sara had done that surprised him, though. It was how Kuraudo had responded.

"I-Impossible..." he muttered, staring at the screen.

The vast majority of the bullets were finding their mark. A normal person would have been turned into mincemeat after being shot by that many bullets. And yet, Kuraudo stood resolutely at the center of the storm of lead peppering him.

"Wh-What on earth is this?! What are we witnessing?! Not only is Kurashiki managing to stay standing amid this relentless barrage, he's even...moving forward! It's like the tempest of bullets means nothing to him! He's just walking through them toward Sara Bloodlily!"

"Ah?!"

Even Sara was surprised. She couldn't understand what was

going on. The barrage of bullets was so heavy that even Kuraudo couldn't react fast enough to block them all. And right now, he wasn't even swinging his swords, so he wasn't blocking anything. Both Orochimarus were at his side, their blades pointed downward. In other words, he was walking defenselessly into the machine gun fire. Despite that, he didn't seem to be taking any damage at all.

"Oh!"

After a few seconds, Ikki figured out what was going on. While it looked like Kuraudo wasn't taking any defensive action, he was. It was true that he wasn't dodging the bullets, but upon closer inspection, Ikki realized that they were being turned aside millimeters from his flesh. The moment a bullet touched his clothes, it was redirected and flew harmlessly past him. Of course, he was the one doing the redirecting.

I had a feeling Kurashiki-kun spent the past few months studying swordsmanship. Dual-wielding swords suits his unique abilities way better than using just one weapon, and I'm sure someone must have pointed that out to him. Besides, his gait when he walked out of the room was completely different. He had the gait of a trained martial artist. But to think the person he chose to train under was...

Ikki recognized the technique Kuraudo was using. It relied on reading the flow of everything around you, taking note of even the most subtle details, and using that knowledge to parry everything that came at you. It was a truly godlike technique that a master swordsman had dedicated most of his life to perfecting. It was also the ultimate skill of the Ayatsuji Sword Style—Celestial Counter.

Come to think of it, Ayatsuji-san did mention that she was planning on going home over summer break to help her dad with his rehabilitation, but he'd told her to stay in the dorms. I guess this was why.

If Ayase had learned that her father had taken Kuraudo in as a disciple, she probably would have thrown a fit. She wouldn't have understood why the Last Samurai had decided to train someone who'd beaten him half to death. Honestly, even Ikki didn't know what Ayase's dad had been thinking.

"A-Amazing..."

Regardless, the fact of the matter was that Kuraudo had splendidly mastered the Ayatsuji Sword Style. Not even Ikki could do something like this. His Celestial Counter wasn't this perfect. When he'd been assaulted by the Jester's stone golems back during the training camp, he'd tried to use it to parry their attacks and failed. However, Kuraudo was successfully parrying the thousands of bullets coming his way. That was something only he could do thanks to his Marginal Counter. Celestial Counter was the perfect technique for someone with superhuman reflexes like him. A regular attack couldn't even scratch him as long as he was focusing on defense.

"Tch. First a missile, now an army. You just keep pulling out more shit. What are you, Doraemon? I was trying to keep this secret until I fought him, but you forced me to use it," Kuraudo muttered angrily.

Ayase's father had put him through hellish training that had nearly killed him dozens of times. He had lost count of how many times he'd thought the man was trying to kill him as revenge for beating him half to death. He'd been forced to keep at it until he puked blood, but as a result of that crazy training regimen, he'd finally mastered Celestial Counter. And he'd wanted to keep it secret so he could pull it out as a trump card in his battle with Ikki.

Sara's skeletal army kept firing, but no matter how many bullets they showered Kuraudo with, it made no difference.

"Don't waste your time! It doesn't matter how many of those lumps of lead you shoot at me! They won't do jack shit! This isn't enough to stop me!"

"Tch!"

The only way to hit a swordsman using Celestial Counter was to strike at them with such a precise slash that there was no room for them to adjust its trajectory and parry it. However, Sara was a regular artist, not a martial artist. She didn't know the first thing about swordsmanship.

"You know, you said you weren't the least bit interested in me earlier and that I was getting in your way. What a coincidence, I feel the same way. I only care about the guy I'm gonna fight after you. I don't give a damn about fighting you. So get the hell out of my waaay!" Kuraudo ducked low and started sprinting toward Sara, who

was hiding behind the massive army. Naturally, her Necro Battalion kept firing at Kuraudo, but it accomplished nothing. “You ain’t stopping meee!”

Kuraudo extended one Orochimaru dozens of meters and sliced through the entire army in one big slash. The bisected skeletons dissolved into thin air, leaving Sara alone and exposed.

“You’re done for!”

He extended Orochimaru even farther and tried to decapitate Sara on the backswing. But of course, she didn’t just stand there and let him kill her. She started drawing something else at breakneck speed. Kuraudo didn’t care, though. She could pull out a tank, a warplane, or even a giant robot; he was confident he could cut right through it. But as he swung Orochimaru, there was a metallic clang, and his blade was repelled.

“What the...”

Kuraudo’s jaw dropped open. However, it wasn’t because his attack had been repelled. That had happened before, and he had expected someone as multitalented as Sara Bloodlily to have a few tricks left up her sleeve. Having his attack blocked wouldn’t have shaken him this much. It was *what* had blocked Orochimaru that had him so stunned that he even forgot to breathe: a black-haired boy wielding a jet-black blade.

“Purple Caricature—Another One,” Sara said in a clear voice. “If you want to fight him that badly, then go ahead. Fight him all you want.”

The copy of Kurogane Ikki crouched down and started radiating pale blue mana.

Oh shit!

“Ittou Shura.”

The Ikki copy shot forward and slashed at Kuraudo’s chest before he could react.

“Gaaaaah!”

Kuraudo screamed in pain and staggered backward as Ikki’s sword cut through the skull tattoo on his chest. The cut itself wasn’t very deep, and frankly, Kuraudo was more surprised than hurt. He stared dumbfounded at the clone of Ikki. And he wasn’t the only one

surprised by this sudden turn of events.

"O-Oh my god! Did Kurogane suddenly appear in the ring to attack Kurashiki? Shouldn't he be in the waiting room?!"

"Th-That's not the real him! I can't believe it, but it seems Purple Caricature can even recreate other Blazers!"

Everyone from the announcers to the spectators had been blindsided by this reveal. And the Ikki Sara had created was more than capable of taking advantage of the opening Kuraudo had shown due to being caught so off guard. It pressed the offensive, moving so decisively that it felt like Kuraudo was facing the real Ikki.

"Kurashiki's forced on the defensive again! There's nothing he can do to fight his way past Kurogane! Is this the end for him?!"

"Kurashiki's certainly going to have a difficult time overcoming this hurdle," Muroto said. "His strength lies in his superhuman reflexes and his quick thinking. As a result, even when he's taken by surprise, he can act quickly enough that he never truly loses the initiative. If it were the old Another One he was up against, he might have been able to fight defensively and stall out Ittou Shura's one-minute time limit. But this Kurogane Ikki is capable of using Twin Wings's swordsmanship. That gives him the edge in speed, and thanks to the instantaneous zero-to-one-hundred nature of her techniques, Kurashiki's Marginal Counter is ineffective. The way things are going, his defeat is all but assured."

There was another black flash as the Ikki clone broke through Kuraudo's defenses and sliced him again.

"Nnngh!"

Blood spilled all over the ring. A mere twenty seconds had passed since this Ikki had used Ittou Shura. There was no way Kuraudo would be able to last the whole minute.

"Dammit!" Kuraudo gritted his teeth and glared at the fake Ikki. *Am I really going to lose to you* again*?! Even after all that hellish training, even after reforging my goddamn soul, I still can't beat you?!*

The thought was unbearable. With each of Another One's slashes, Kuraudo felt as though his heart was being sliced apart along with his body. But just then, he thought back to what Ayase's father,

Kaito, had asked him.

"Why do you want to fight Kurogane-kun again so badly?"

That had been right after Kuraudo had gone to the dojo and dropped to his knees to beg Kaito to train him. Kaito had known that Kuraudo wasn't the kind of guy to beg. And he'd been curious what was driving him to go this far.

"Because I'm just like you," Kuraudo had responded. He'd then turned to look at the sword belted at Kaito's waist and added, *"Even though you just got out of the hospital and only have a little bit of time left to live, you're still carrying around a real sword, even in the middle of the night. In other words, you're still pissed that you lost to me, aren't you? You want a rematch, don't you?"*

"I do."

"Well, I'm no different. I can't stand knowing I lost to that bastard. It won't stop eating away at me until I've gotten my revenge! I can't rest until I beat him!"

That was why he couldn't let himself lose again. He refused to stay a loser. He'd gotten this far solely to defeat Ikki.

"Don't fuck with me!"

Kuraudo wasn't going to allow some fake to beat him. Given how straightforward and determined the real Ikki was, he'd just keep getting stronger and stronger. He wouldn't sit around and wait for Kuraudo to catch up to him. He'd continue pulling further and further ahead. But even so, Kuraudo didn't want to lose to him. He wanted to become a man like Ikki. For the first time in his life, he'd found someone he respected.

"Like hell I'm losing to this sham!"

Even as he coughed up blood, Kuraudo launched a Twin Fangs with both of his swords. Unfortunately, he'd already lost too much blood, which slowed his attacks down enough that the Ikki clone was able to block them all. Then, it slashed at his torso again, and he slumped to his knees. As the entire ring fell silent, one voice rang out clearly.

"Don't give up, Kuraudooo!"

"Huh?!"

It was a voice Kuraudo knew well. One he couldn't forget even if

he wanted to. He turned around, and as he'd expected, he saw the real Ikki looking at him from the entrance to the red gate. Kurogane Ikki had run out to cheer on his rival. He was actually trying to become a source of strength for Kuraudo.

Rage flared up in Kuraudo's heart upon hearing Ikki's shout. It had done its job, however, because suddenly, Kuraudo found the strength to get back up.

Why did you come out here? Why are you cheering me on? Why do you look like you want me to win so bad? Why...am I so damn hopeless that you think I need your help?!

"Don't underestimate me, Kuroganeee!"

Kuraudo was so furious that it made his blood pump faster, giving him the oxygen he needed to get a second wind. His body was already past its limits, but his anger kept him going. It was honestly a miracle that he didn't pass out. He was in a very precarious state right now, where even the slightest push would send him tumbling to his defeat. But still, he could fight for a few seconds longer. And in those few seconds, he would grasp victory.

"Raaaaah!"

With godlike footwork, he unleashed his most powerful attack yet, bearing down on the Ikki clone with eight consecutive slashes coming from all directions. This was his signature move, Yamata no Orochi, and now, he was using it with two swords at once. Simply put, he was attacking sixteen times in a single second. Moreover, thanks to his training under Kaito, his swings were far more precise than before.

Only by combining his natural talents with the swordsmanship he'd honed was this technique possible. It was the very peak of his abilities. Ikki's Celestial Counter wasn't nearly good enough to parry sixteen slashes at once, and not even Twin Wings's swordplay could defend against them all. And so, Kuraudo's twin swords sliced right through the Ikki clone.


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The copy dissolved into mist, but then two black katanas pierced Kuraudo's body. He stared in shock as two new Ikkis stood before him.

"Fight him all you want."

It was only then that he realized the true meaning behind Sara's words. That hadn't been a figure of speech; she had literally meant that she'd make as many copies as he wanted. Sara Bloodlily was capable of that. She could draw dozens of Another Ones and let him fight until he finally gave in to exhaustion and collapsed.

"Agh..."

Blood spilled from Kuraudo's open mouth, and his body went limp. His twin swords dropped to the ground with a clatter, signaling his defeat.

Battle was a cruel mistress. No matter how strong the hopes one carried in their heart were, at the end of the day, there could only be one winner. The vanquished had their wishes go unanswered.

"Shit..."

In that moment, one man's fervent dream of overcoming the only person he'd grown to respect died a merciless death.

◆◇◆◇◆

"The moment Kurashiki collapsed, the referee called the match! It's over! Sara Bloodlily is the winner!"

The announcer shouted, but no cheers came from the stands. The audience was completely overwhelmed by the power Sara had displayed.

"Even though the match is over, the stands are silent. Everyone's been completely blown away by the victor! It's understandable, since her powers are far beyond what her Rank C rating would imply!"

"She must have been hiding her true strength," Muroto said.

"You think so too, Muroto?"

"Yes. It happens sometimes. Normally, if you know your opponent is ridiculously strong, you'll try to come up with countermeasures against them. Those who dislike being marked by their foes in such a manner will occasionally keep their full strength a secret until the

Seven Stars Battle Festival begins."

The stronger a Blazer was, the less they wanted to show their hand. For that same reason, Moroboshi Yuudai had hidden the fact that his Tiger Bite could chew through Devices until he'd been pressed to by Ikki.

"But even so, Bloodlily's strength is something else," Muroto continued, his voice trembling. As a former KOK fighter, he knew just how insane Sara's powers were. "The ability to use powers based on color associations and make the objects she draws real is impressive on its own, but Bloodlily can even recreate other Blazers *and* their Noble Arts. To put it another way, she can use the powers of every Blazer she's seen fight."

She had no blind spots. Muroto couldn't even think of a way to fight against a power that overwhelming.

"What's more, for all the things she created and the multiple copies of Kurogane Ikki she made, she didn't look like she was even close to running out of mana. We need to update her Blazer rank! It's clear that she has as much mana as other Rank A Blazers like the Crimson Princess and the Gale Emperor!"

Silence filled the arena once more. Ikki watched as a group of medics carried Kuraudo past him on a stretcher.

The Sword Eater had grown truly strong in the months since their duel. He'd learned how to dual wield, mastered Celestial Counter, and further honed his battle senses. But despite that, his full strength hadn't been enough to win. It hadn't even been close. At no point during their battle had he landed a clean hit on Sara.

"Bloody da Vinci Sara Bloodlily..." Ikki muttered, staring at Sara as she walked away. He finally understood why the Beast Tamer had warned him about her at the party. She was, without a doubt, one of the strongest Blazers in the tournament.

And I'm going to have to fight that monster soon...

That knowledge weighed heavily on Ikki's mind.

Hagun Academy Bulletin

Character Intros Journalist: Kusakabe Kagami

Hiraga Reisen

■PROFILE

Affiliation: Akatsuki Academy

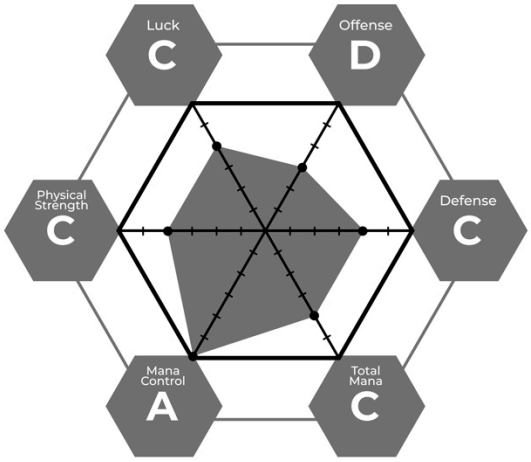
Third-Year

Blazer Rank: B

Noble Art: Ex Machina

Nickname: Jester

Summary: A puppeteer who fights from afar.







Kagamin's Thoughts!

A weird pervert who's always wearing clown clothes. But it turns out the Hiraga Reisen we saw wasn't even the real him; it was just a doll he was controlling with his Device, Black Widow. In fact, that's probably why he looked fine even though President Toudou burned his arms with electricity during the training camp. But if his dolls are this strong, the guy himself is probably a real handful to deal with.

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Interlude: Blackout

"Sheesh. I thought Akatsuki'd give up after Stella-chan creamed half of 'em at once, but I guess they've got some real monsters left."

Moroboshi Yuudai shook his head as he watched the conclusion of the match. He was in the waiting room attached to the blue gate with his friend Byakuya. Since he'd fought Ikki, he knew that the clones Sara had created were just as strong as the real one and possessed the same sharp perception. It was mind-boggling that she could just create as many copies as she wanted of a fighter that strong.

"Even if you beat Kurogane, you'll have to go up against that next. I feel for ya, man," Moroboshi said with a laugh and clapped Byakuya on the shoulder.

"Yuu, did you come here to cheer me on or to make me feel worse?" Byakuya asked, frowning.

"Mostly just to make fun of you."

"Get out."

"Oh, come on. It's not like you need me to encourage you. You know you've got what it takes," Moroboshi said nonchalantly.

Of course, the two of them had known each other for a long time. Byakuya understood that this was just Moroboshi's way of trying to get him to relax. He didn't genuinely want Moroboshi to leave. "I gotta say, though, you really are a weird guy, Shiro. You didn't even watch your next opponent's match or warm up at all. You've just spent all your time staring at that shogi board."

Moroboshi looked down at the shogi board Byakuya had set up on the table in front of him.

"This *is* my way of warming up."

"Aren't martial arts battles completely different from intellectual ones?"

Byakuya gave Moroboshi a small smile. Moroboshi had an

outstanding sense for the flow of battle and came up with his plans on the spot, so him thinking that way wasn't a surprise.

"To me, duels aren't about physical prowess or martial skill, they're all about intellect. Battle is all about learning what pieces—aka techniques—an opponent possesses and what their outlook on life is. Once you know those two things, you're able to ensure you're always one or two steps ahead."

Byakuya's explanation didn't end there.

"But that's just the start. Any analytical fighter can do that. I also study my opponents' bodies, as well as their personalities, quirks, any tendencies they might have in how they prefer to use their skills, what they like to combo together, and even what slight changes in their stance or where they choose to look signifies about what they'll do next. My stance is to analyze everything, right down to the way a person breathes. Then, I compile all of that information and thoroughly examine it from all angles to ensure I can control the flow of the match from beginning to end."

"So you're telling me you already know how to checkmate Kurogane?"

Byakuya's smile turned into a confident grin.

"Indeed. In twenty-three moves, when Another One uses Flicker Mirage to dodge to the right, I'll be able to land a decisive blow. I'm certain of it."

"I'd be careful if I were you. He might not move like you expect him to. Sure, his Blazer powers are weak, but he's got a lot of martial arts techniques at his disposal. For all we know, he might have a few hidden moves he hasn't shown us yet."

Byakuya nodded in understanding, realizing that this was what Moroboshi had come to warn him about. Despite his flippant attitude, Moroboshi was sincerely rooting for his friend. Byakuya was grateful for that, but at the same time, he didn't need any advice.

"You're right, Yuu, he's a far trickier opponent than he appears at first glance. Honestly, even for me, it'd be difficult to predict every single move he'll make. Under normal circumstances, that is. But this upcoming match is different," he said with the utmost confidence.

"How so?"

"For this next match, it'll be easier than usual to predict his moves. After all, he has one glaring weakness."

Moroboshi could easily guess what Byakuya was referring to.

"The restrictions that come with using his Noble Art?"

"Yes, exactly. His Noble Art is all about using up all of his strength in a short window. But that requires superhuman focus to accomplish, and as a result, he can't cancel it halfway through. Furthermore, it takes him a day to get enough mana back to use it again. Since he'll have to fight two matches in a row today, he won't be able to use it in this match."

"You can't be sure of that, can you? He can use it in one of his two matches, so what's to say he won't in the first one?"

Byakuya shook his head.

"I'm positive he won't. Sara Bloodlily can create numerous copies of him that are all capable of using Ittou Shura, so there's no way he'd challenge her without keeping it around to deal with that. In addition, there's a very important reason he needs to win this tournament. He won't do anything that will lower his overall chances of accomplishing that."

"There is?"

"Unless he becomes the Seven Stars Sovereign, he won't be able to graduate and become a formal Mage-Knight."

"What?!" Moroboshi exclaimed. "Why the hell does he have to win the tournament to graduate?!"

"His family is holding him back. Apparently, they think it would be shameful if they produced a Rank F Mage-Knight. That's why he needs to produce results so outstanding that no one can complain about him being granted the title."

"Seriously?"

Since Moroboshi attended a different school, he didn't know about the abuse Ikki had faced in Hagun last year or the conditions surrounding his graduation. However, Byakuya had thoroughly researched Ikki. He knew everything about his background, including his complicated family situation and the unfairness he had to deal with. It was for that reason that he was confident Ikki wouldn't use Ittou Shura in their upcoming fight.

"If all he wanted was to showcase his strength against the very best in the country, then it would be entirely possible that he'd use his Noble Art against me. But he's always been aiming for the top. He has no other choice. Therefore, he can't afford to use up any of his trump cards before fighting Sara Bloodlily, who can make copies of him. After all, he needs to be able to beat her as well."

Just as Byakuya finished speaking, the announcer called for him and Ikki to enter the ring. He got to his feet and waved casually to Moroboshi. "See you soon," he said, then started walking toward the gate.

As he stepped out into the arena, he was greeted by a wave of cheers. But he paid no attention to the voices of the crowd. He was focused on one thing and one thing alone—his opponent. There was no room for unnecessary information in his brain right now. Not only did he not hear the crowd, but his vision didn't even register the stands. He blotted out all visual noise, focusing his sight solely on Kurogane Ikki.

Narrowing his eyes, Byakuya examined his opponent. As he'd expected, Ikki, too, was completely focused. He was staring directly at Byakuya. There wasn't a hint of fear or nervousness in his eyes, and his heartbeat was steady. Though he was focused, he was taking care not to be too tense. He was in top form.

Byakuya smiled slightly. This was exactly what he wanted for their duel. Only if Ikki was in peak physical and mental condition, only if he was able to squeeze out every last drop of intellect to try to outwit Byakuya...

Only then will my perfect twenty-three-move game of shogi be complete!

For Byakuya, achieving victory in the manner he'd predicted was just as important as winning. It went against his aesthetics to merely win. He wasn't interested in slugfests or battles where people tried to one-up each other with their various techniques. He wanted a purer battle of intellect versus intellect, logic versus logic. And he was confident that Kurogane Ikki could give him the kind of cerebral battle he wished for. A thrilling duel where they tried to read each other's moves, plan one step ahead, and back their opponent into a

corner without ever once drawing blood. Byakuya had no doubt that these twenty-three moves would lead to a legendary match whose beauty was spoken of for years to come.

"All right, it's time for the second C-block match of the day! Let's go ahead!"

Come! Let us play out the perfect match on this game board!

That was the last thing God's Eye Jougasaki Byakuya remembered thinking. A second later, he blacked out. It was so sudden that he didn't even realize he'd been knocked unconscious. The last thing he remembered seeing was the afterimage Ikki had left behind upon using Ittou Rakshasa.

Afterword

I wanna play Monster Hunteeer!

Sorry about that. Just had to get it off my chest. Hello everyone, Riku Misora here. I've been so busy with work that I haven't had any time to play Monster Hunter, even though I really, really wanna. Huh? What about the cat I said I'd be talking about last afterword? Uh, sorry, everyone, but I have yet to get one. What I *can* talk about is the cockroach that keeps showing up in my [REDACTED].

Anyway, let's get back to talking about the story. We're finally in the second round of the Seven Stars Battle Festival. A good chunk of this volume was taken up by people I wasn't expecting to give much screen time to. It even caught me by surprise, and I'm the author (ha ha).

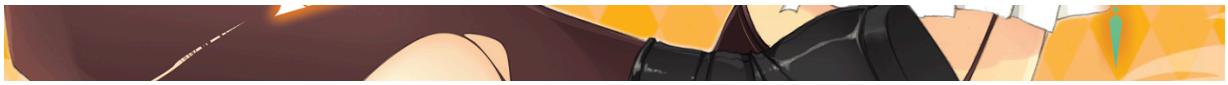
Also, Stella-san's become quite the hardcore main heroine. I mean, think about it. How many girls do you see melting their bones back together to win a battle? I bet you haven't seen any other heroines who do that. I know I haven't. But after all, she's not just the main heroine. She's also the final boss Ikki will have to overcome at the end of the tournament. You could think of her as a deuteragonist. In order to fulfill the promise she made with the one she loves, she can't just be cute.

Well, there's no guarantee either of them is going to make it to the finals. They're going to have to work harder than ever if they want to reach that stage. I hope you'll root for them in the next volume as well.

By the way, it seems like the manga adaptation's going to be getting released as full-fledged books soon. Stella looks super cute in the manga, so I hope you all check it out.

Thank you for reading this volume, and may we meet again in the next one.


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Chivalry of a Failed Knight
6




© Won
“Bloom bright, Thousand Petals!”
“Karsalitio Salamandra!”
As sword and shield clashed, a shock wave of heat and light and wind engulfed the entire stadium.


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Smiling, Stella gently stroked his cheek.
“You can bite me all you want, Ikki.”


"Double Skull Serpent's Blade!"
The two Orochimarus bore down on Sara's neck from either side.
"Demiurge's Brush."
She dipped her paintbrush into the blue paint on her palette and splattered it at her feet.
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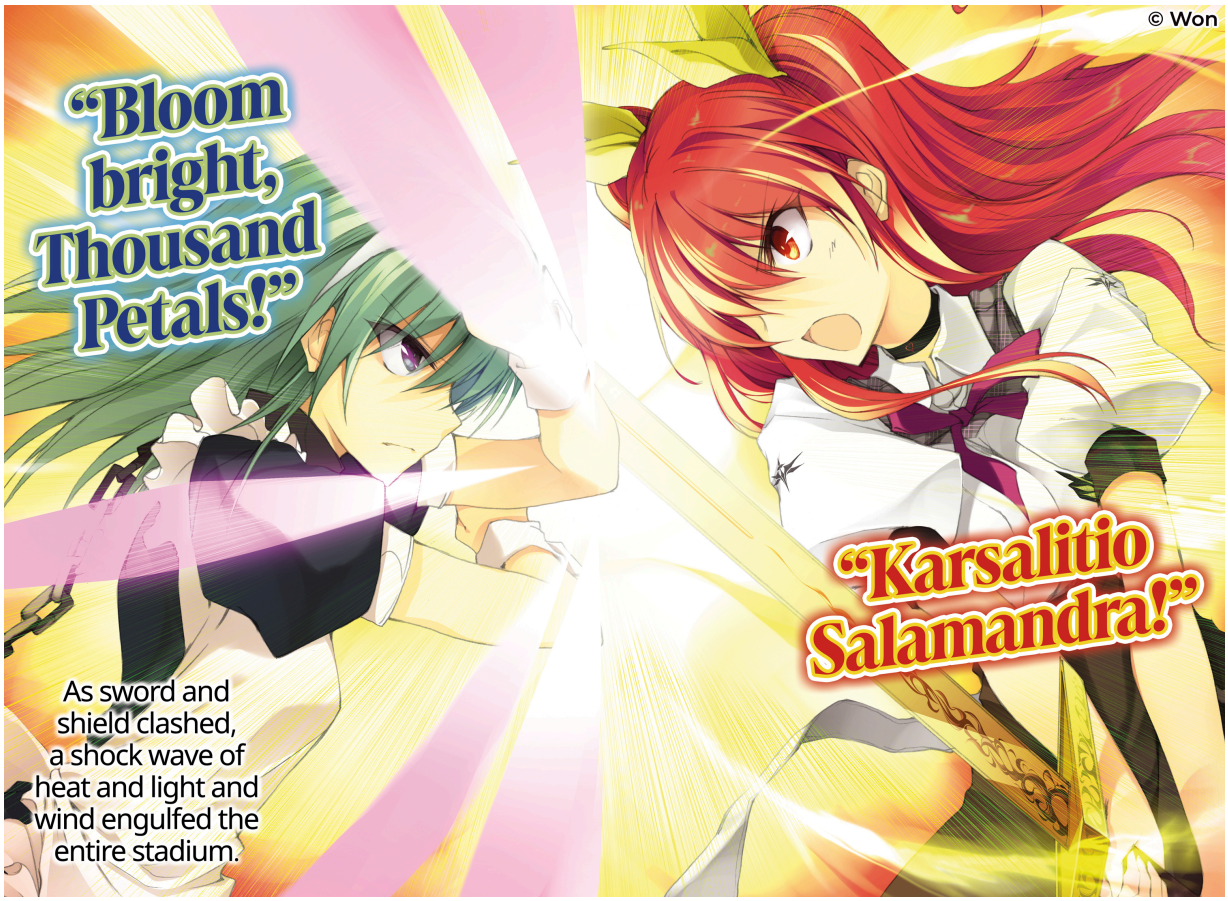


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Chivalry of a Failed Knight

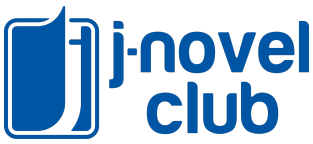

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