Riku Misora

Illust. Won



7

Chivalry of a Failed Knight

Riku Misora

Illust. Won



7

Chivalry of a Failed Knight



Table of Contents

Cover

Interlude: An Anticlimactic Victory
Chapter 8: A Very Noisy Medical Ward
Chapter 9: The Warriors' Brief Break
Chapter 10: The Third Round Begins
Interlude: A Bloody Conclusion

Afterword
Color Illustrations
Bonus High Resolution Illustrations
About J-Novel Club
Copyright

Interlude: An Anticlimactic Victory

The second battle in the C block, Kurogane Ikki versus Jougasaki Byakuya, ended in a way no one could have foreseen. In the previous round, Ikki had defeated the reigning Seven Stars Sovereign, but Byakuya had still come second in the previous year's tournament. The crowd had been expecting a climactic battle. However, the moment the match had begun, Ikki had used Ittou Rakshasa and defeated Byakuya in less than a second. It was all so sudden that even the referee took a few seconds to process it.

"Referee."

Ikki calling out to him brought the ref back to his senses, and he ran over to Byakuya to check on his condition. After confirming that Byakuya was out cold, he declared Ikki's victory.

"Wh-Wh-What on earth was that?!" the announcer screamed. "Kurogane Ikki shot forth the moment the match began and cut down Jougasaki Byakuya before he even had time to react!"

"Wh-What the hell was that?!" an audience member exclaimed.

"Did anyone see what he just did?"

"N-No, I couldn't see a thing. The match started, and then it was over..."

Everyone in the crowd looked at one another in confusion. They still couldn't believe the match was over. Ikki's Ittou Rakshasa made him faster than the naked eye could follow, though, so it was hardly surprising.

"That's the technique he used in his match against the Thunderbolt. It's an upgraded version of his Ittou Shura that hones his concentration even further and compacts all of his strength and mana into a single instant. On top of that, he used Twin Wings's swordsmanship in conjunction with it to boost his speed even more. Those two techniques mesh extremely well together," the new pro commentator who'd come in to take over for Muroto, Yaotome, said

thoughtfully. She was a young woman in a sharp suit and stylish glasses.

"Is Ittou Rakshasa really that compatible with Twin Wings's swordsmanship?" the announcer, Iida, turned to her and asked.

"Absolutely. Another One's Noble Arts and Twin Wings's techniques stem from the same core concept: gathering up all of one's strength and using it in one explosive burst. They both excel at that, so it's only natural they'd synergize. If you look at the official record for how long this match lasted, you'll understand just how impressive the combination is."

Iida looked over at the scoreboard to check.

"U-Unbelievable! You're telling me that match lasted just 0.8 seconds?! Kurogane Ikki's taken out last year's second-place fighter in record time!"

"I-It didn't even take him a second?!" someone in the audience cried.

"Hey, does anyone know what the old record was?!"

"I'm pretty sure it was twenty seconds."

"So he was more than twenty times faster than the old record!"

"H-He's so cool..."

"Holy shit, kid, you're amazing! I'm looking forward to you sweeping the whole tournament!"

"You can do it, Ikki-kuuun!"

"Kurogane's making his way back to the waiting room amid raucous cheering! This Rank F Blazer just set a new record for the fastest match in any Seven Stars Battle Festival ever, and against last year's second-best Blazer no less! The Worst One truly is a force to be reckoned with! What wonders will he show us in his third match?! Will he make it all the way to the top, or will he finally meet his match?! Either way, it'll be a match worth seeing!"

While everyone else seemed to think he was making his way up with ease, Yaotome had a very different thought as she watched him languidly walk back to the waiting room.

He certainly made it look effortless, but was this match as

overwhelming a victory for him as everyone thinks?

◆◇◆◇◆

"Ngh!"

Once he passed through the gate, Ikki leaned against the hallway wall, his breath coming in heavy gasps. Sweat beaded on his forehead, and blood dripped from his arms.

Ittou Rakshasa granted Ikki ten times as much power as Ittou Shura. Even his honed body couldn't bear the burden of using that much explosive power at once. It did a lot of damage to him, and honestly, it wasn't a technique he wanted to use if he could help it. But he was certain it had been necessary to beat Byakuya.

If we'd fought normally, I would've lost to God's Eye after twenty-three moves.

After running various simulations in his head, Ikki had come to the same conclusion Byakuya had—that after twenty-three moves, he would be checkmated by Byakuya's discerning powers of observation. At the same time, though, he'd also predicted that Byakuya wouldn't expect him to use Ittou Rakshasa, meaning his only hope of victory was doing the unexpected. He'd chosen to take the path that would guarantee him this victory even if it made the next one harder to achieve, and as a result, he'd won in what seemed like an overwhelming manner.

But it wasn't as easy as it looked...

Ikki knew that better than anyone. There was only one reason a man perceptive enough to be given the nickname "God's Eye" had failed to take into consideration the possibility that Ikki might try to end the match immediately with Ittou Rakshasa. Considering the change to the tournament schedule, which resulted in him having to fight another match in the afternoon, it was far too reckless a decision. Even more so given that his next opponent was Bloody da Vinci. She'd managed to defeat the Sword Eater without taking a single hit, and she had the ability to make anything she drew real, including other Blazers capable of using their Noble Arts. She was without a doubt one of Akatsuki's trump cards that they'd been

keeping hidden for the tournament. And Ikki had used his only trump card before fighting her. Overall, that greatly reduced his odds of reaching the finals.

Even if Byakuya would have been difficult to defeat without Ittou Shura or Ittou Rakshasa, it would have been more rational for Ikki to have tried to find a way to outwit him. However, he had instead chosen to use Ittou Rakshasa. He'd had no other choice. Byakuya was too strong for him to worry about holding back for an upcoming match. In other words, Ikki was the one who'd been pushed into a corner.

I put on a brave face for Stella, but consecutive battles are going to be really rough...

Ikki didn't feel the least bit happy about his victory. He was too worried about his next battle. The Seven Stars Battle Festival was a gathering of Japan's strongest student knights, and now he had to fight two of them in a row. To make matters worse, his upcoming opponent's Noble Art, Purple Caricature, could create a perfect copy of him that could use both Ittou Shura and all of his sword techniques. Ikki suspected that if Sara wanted to, she could even create a clone of him that was able to use Ittou Rakshasa.

Will I be able to beat her without Ittou Shura?

Another source of worry was how obsessed Sara was with him. She was determined to get him to model nude for her, and as a result, he'd been forced to flee to his brother's room the night before. Knowing her, she might strip him right then and there in the ring if he lost. He'd never be able to show his face in public again if she did that. After all, this year's Seven Stars Battle Festival was being broadcast worldwide.

"Ugh, my stomach hurts... It hurts more than my muscles do..."

Ikki's next match was one he was not looking forward to in the slightest, for a lot of different reasons.

Chapter 8: A Very Noisy Medical Ward

After the match, Ikki went into an iPS capsule to heal his injuries. The advanced technology of the capsules was able to heal all of the damage he'd done to his muscles with Ittou Rakshasa in just a few minutes. If nothing else, he'd be physically fine for his upcoming match.

Once his wounds were healed, the doctor on duty transferred him to a bed in the medical ward, where he remained asleep for a while. iPS capsules injected a light anesthesia into the patient before healing them, and Ikki needed to sleep off its effects. As he slept, the TV in the medical ward showed the next match. It was between Ikki's sister, Lorelei Kurogane Shizuku, and the Blazer who'd placed third in the previous tournament, Asagi Momiji.

"Look at how fast Asagi Momiji's going! She's managed to slip her way between Kurogane Shizuku's Water Prison Bubbles and is closing in on her fast! Will Shizuku be able to land a clean hit on her at this rate?!" Iida exclaimed.


© Won

"Momiji has more than just speed going for her," Yaotome said.

"What do you mean?"

"She's using the same Stealth Step that her master, War God Nangou Torajirou, favors to make her movements harder to follow. Unless you've spent some time studying martial arts and are capable of fully controlling how your brain processes the information your eyes are feeding it, you'll have trouble breaking through the illusion. As a pure mage, Shizuku isn't capable of seeing through it. Finding a counter isn't going to be easy."

Just as Yaotome had said, Shizuku couldn't follow Momiji's movements. Before long, Momiji managed to close in on Shizuku and circle behind her.

"Uh-oh, Shizuku might be in trouble now!"

Scarlet flames ran down the length of Momiji's Device, a Japanese katana, and she swung it down on Shizuku's defenseless back. Though Shizuku was familiar with the Stealth Step technique since she'd seen Thunderbolt use it as well, she wasn't able to control her brain and her reflexes well enough to make her immune to its effects. It would require years of training to acquire the level of fine-tuned control needed for that. There was no way she could have managed it in the short time between losing to Touka and the Seven Stars Battle Festival.

However, Shizuku didn't need a means to see through Stealth Step in the first place. As Momiji's sword came down, a wall of ice sprang up behind Shizuku, blocking the slash. Momiji was so surprised by Shizuku's response that her reactions dulled for a second, which gave Shizuku the opportunity she needed. In that instant, she created another Water Prison Bubble and trapped Momiji in it.

"Wh-What the?! It looked like Momiji had taken Shizuku by surprise, but it seems Shizuku had read everything! And now, Momiji's trapped in a Water Prison Bubble! How will she fight back when she can't breathe?! No matter how hard she tries to rip the bubble off, you can't claw water away with your hands! B-But how did Shizuku know Momiji would strike from behind?!"

"I see... It seems Shizuku's quite the sly fox."

"Do you know what she did, Yaotome?"

"Yes. It seems her earlier Water Prison Bubbles were just a smoke screen. Her true goal was to spread a thin film of water over the entire arena without anyone noticing. Once she had, she didn't need her eyes to track Momiji. The ripples Momiji created every time she took a step accurately told Shizuku where she was at all times."

Indeed, even if she'd closed her eyes, Shizuku would have been able to keep perfect track of Momiji's location.

"Oh my! Momiji's on her knees! And it looks like the referee's calling the match! The winner of the second match in the D block is Lorelei Kurogane Shizuku! The crowd looks despondent, but who can blame them?! Bukyoku Academy is a local school, and everyone thought their golden age had come, but now their three best fighters have all been defeated! Meanwhile, three of Hagun's students have made it to the third round! Akatsuki also has three students left in the tournament! These two schools really are a cut above the rest this year! I'm looking forward to seeing which one has more fighters left after this evening's matches!"

"Heh. She's too stubborn to let herself get beaten by the same technique twice," Stella said with a smile before turning off the TV. She was sitting on a metal chair next to Ikki's bed.

With Shizuku's match over, the top eight had been determined—though technically, it was the top seven since Stella had jumped all the way up to the semifinals. Each and every one of them was a veteran fighter. First off, there was Stella herself, Ikki, and Shizuku, all from Hagun. Then, there was Rokuzon's Panzer Grizzly, Kaga Renji, who was still hanging in there while the two rising powers, Hagun and Akatsuki, duked it out. Lastly, there were the three remaining Akatsuki members: the only other Rank A Blazer in the tournament aside from Stella, Gale Emperor Kurogane Ouma; Bad Luck Shinomiya Amane, who'd managed to win both of his matches so far by default as his opponents had forfeited; and...

"Last and least, we have this pervert."

Stella looked down at her feet. Lying on the ground was Sara Bloodlily, wrapped up so tightly in bandages that she couldn't move, her hair askew. Her varied Noble Arts had won her two matches

without taking a single hit so far. She was determined to get Ikki to model nude for her, and she'd figured he would use an iPS capsule after defeating Byakuya with Ittou Rakshasa, so she'd thought she might be able to strip him while he was asleep. But though she'd managed to sneak into his room, just as she'd started undressing him, Stella had walked in, having expected her to try something like this.

"I'm not a pervert. I'm an artist," Sara said, glaring up at Stella.

"Yeah, an erotic artist maybe! I can't take my eyes off you for a second!"

"Why the sudden change of heart? I thought you were on my side last night."

"Urk." Stella looked away awkwardly. "Y-You did lure me in with the promise of painting a mural of the two of us together in the royal palace, but I've had a day to cool my head and think about things. I'd love to have you paint us, but if Ikki doesn't want to be your nude model, I can't force him."

"It's because he doesn't want to that I decided to paint him while he's sleeping."

"That's even worse!"

Stella angrily stepped on Sara's back.

"Ow, owww! I give, I give! You're going to break my spine!"

Stella wasn't stepping particularly hard, but Sara really did look like she was dying. Though she'd been recruited into Akatsuki because of her exceptional Blazer powers, she wasn't a fighter. In fact, she lived an unhealthy lifestyle, never exercised, and had a weak constitution, so her body was frailer than most.

"I can't believe you're complaining after that light tap," Stella scoffed. "You really are weak."

"I'm a painter, not a fighter. Unlike a certain gorilla, I can't just melt my broken bones back together."

"Watch your mouth. I've got a score to settle with all of you, don't forget. If you piss me off, who knows what I'll do."

"Eeeep!"

Stella pulled on one of the bandages hanging off of Sara, and they dug tightly into her skin, causing her bones to creak. Bloody da

Vinci once again cried out in pain, but Stella wasn't so underhanded that she'd truly harm any of Akatsuki's students outside of the ring, so she eased up just enough not to break Sara's bones and let out a long sigh.


© Won

"Haaah. Why are you so obsessed with Ikki anyway? The Mario Rosso paintings I'm familiar with cover a wide variety of subjects."

Indeed, she had painted portraits, landscapes, and even religious iconography. She had also employed all sorts of styles, from abstract to realistic. That was the Mario Rosso Stella knew—which was why she couldn't understand why Sara was so obsessed with painting one specific guy in the nude.

"There's a work I must complete at all costs," Sara muttered after a few seconds of silence.

"A painting?" Stella asked, and Sara nodded.

"Another artist dedicated their entire life to completing a perfect work depicting a messiah, but they were unable to finish it to their satisfaction. I need Ikki to model for me so I can finish that painting. My instincts are telling me it has to be him."

"So you think the messiah figure in this painting needs to be modeled after Ikki?"

"Yep."

"Why not ask Ouma, then? They're brothers, so they look pretty similar. If anything, Ouma has a more toned build. He'd look better nude for sure, from an artistic standpoint."

"Ouma won't work. It's true that they look similar, but he doesn't have the kindness Ikki does. He has the same unreasonable strength, but that's it. He's not fit to fill the void in the painting. He can't be a messiah. You're aiming to win this tournament, so surely you understand, right? I'm not willing to settle for second place."

"Fair enough."

"Finishing that painting is as important to me as winning this tournament is to you. I have no intention of compromising. Just like how you guys put your lives on the line during your battles, this is my battle that I'm putting my life on the line for. Painting *is* my life."

Sara's voice was soft, but there was an unyielding determination in her words. It was shocking to see such a strong will in such a weak body, and honestly, that moved Stella. She had a soft spot for people who were willing to do whatever it took to achieve their goals.

"I understand now that you have a deep passion for what you're

doing. I'm sorry for calling you an erotic artist earlier. I take it back. But ultimately, if Ikki says no, I want to respect his wishes. If you still want to draw him nude, then you'll have to convince..." Stella trailed off as she realized that Sara was shaking. *I'm not pulling on the bandages anymore, so she shouldn't be hurting...*

"What's wrong?" Stella asked. "Why are you trembling?"

"Untie me."

"Sorry, but I can't. I know the moment I do, you'll try and strip Ikki again."

"Fine. You don't have to untie me, but..."

"But what?"

"Bring me a bottle to pee in."

"If you have to go to the bathroom, just say so!"

"Also, take my underwear off for me."

"Please don't assume you're going to leak here! As a woman, aren't you embarrassed to pee yourself like that?!"

"Not really. I do it all the time in my atelier when I'm pulling all-nighters."

"Okay, just shut up or I'll sew your mouth shut! Give me a sec! I'll untie you, so go to the bathroom like a normal person!"

Stella panicked and hurriedly started trying to untie Sara's bandages. Sara, on the other hand, seemed unperturbed by her predicament.

Wait, how did I tie these again?

Unfortunately, Stella had tied Sara so tightly that she'd completely forgotten which knots she'd done in which order. In other words, she didn't remember how to undo them.

"M-Maybe I should start here?"

Trusting her instincts, Stella pulled on one of the bandages.

"Eep?!"

That just tightened the section around Sara's chest more, however, squeezing her breasts.

"It hurts... Ow..."

Sara gasped for air, and tears welled up in her eyes.

"S-Sorry, I messed up! Um, how about from here?!"

Stella kept pulling on different bandages, but each one turned out

to be incorrect. Every tug only tied Sara up tighter, and before long, her apron slipped off. At this point, the only thing hiding Sara's nipples was the bandages.

"Th-This has turned into some kind of bondage scene..." Stella murmured.

"I-If you keep squeezing me tighter...I'm going to leak..."

"No, we can't have that! That's *not* happening!"

Stella was getting more and more flustered, to the point that she'd started shouting. Her voice was loud enough to finally wake Ikki.

Mm...

He lazily rubbed his eyes and rose into a sitting position.

"Mm... Huh? What are you doing, Stella?" He looked over at Stella, who had a half naked Sara tied up at her feet, and blinked in surprise. "Wait, what? What the heck are you doing?!"

"I-Ikki?!" Stella grew even more flustered. She had no idea how she could explain this situation while maintaining her and Sara's dignity. At the same time, though, there wasn't a moment to lose, so instead, she decided to forgo an explanation and stick to only the most important details. "W-We're in trouble! Sara's about to leak, but I don't know how to untie these bandages!"

"I'm really curious how you got here, but the point is that you want me to untie her, right? If we can't get the knots undone, can't we just cut the bandages?"

"Y-Yeah!"

Embarrassed that she hadn't thought of that herself, Stella summoned Lævateinn, slid it between Sara's skin and the bandages, and sliced them off in one go. She then kicked Sara out of the room.

"Th-There! You're free now, so hurry up and pee!"

"Okay..." As Sara hobbled off to the bathroom, she glanced back at Ikki and said, "Thank you, Ikki. Your quick thinking saved me from wetting myself."

"Cool. Glad to hear it."

"So, now that the crisis has been averted, I assume you want to know how things ended up like this," Stella guessed.

"No, I think I figured it out."

"Wait, really?"

"When I first woke up, my thoughts were muddy, so I was surprised. But looking at it now, it's obvious. Besides, I know you, Stella. I may not be able to literally read your thoughts, but I think I can figure out how we got here."

Ikki smiled at Stella, who breathed a sigh of relief. She'd been worried Ikki might misunderstand because of how insane the situation had been.

"I-I see. That's good."

Stella smiled back, grateful that her boyfriend was so understanding. It also made her happy that they were able to comprehend each other so thoroughly. Ikki reached over and grabbed Stella's hand, looking into her eyes.

"But you know, Stella, you should save that kind of thing for your boyfriend. I promise I won't hate you no matter what fetishes you have."

"Never mind! You didn't figure it out at all!" Stella's smile vanished, and she shook off Ikki's hand. She had to clear up the misunderstanding. "You've got it all wrong, Ikki! I'm not a sadist who likes tying up women! Things just ended up that way! I didn't want to use phantom form because if I exhausted her too much, it might impact her next match, so I decided to tie her up instead, that's all!"

Stella hurriedly professed her innocence, speaking so quickly that she nearly bit her tongue.

"I'm kidding, don't worry," Ikki replied with a laugh. "You were protecting me from Sara-san, right?"

"Wha— Y-You were just teasing me?! How could you?!"

Stella puffed her cheeks out angrily. Smiling playfully, Ikki poked her cheek.

"This is revenge for chasing me out of my room last night," he said.

"Urk." Stella couldn't argue back against that. On the contrary, her anger faded immediately and was replaced by worry. *Did I hurt Ikki's feelings more than I realized?*

"Are you actually mad about that?" she looked up at him and asked.

“Nope. I got to poke your puffy cheek, so I forgive you.”

“Sheesh, you almost gave me a heart attack...”

Stella breathed a sigh of relief. She then tilted her head to poke her cheek against Ikki’s finger. It was her way of saying she was sorry about last night.

After poking her a few more times, Ikki cupped her cheek with his palm and gently caressed it. Her skin was soft and smooth like a baby’s; Ikki never got tired of touching it. Stella also enjoyed being touched by Ikki, and she closed her eyes and submitted herself to his ministrations.

“You’re like a cat, Stella.”

“Meow,” she responded playfully.


© Won

The two enjoyed a tender moment together. Sadly, though, that moment didn't last. The door to Ikki's room slid open, causing the pair to flinch in surprise. The newcomer stared at Ikki, who was still cupping Stella's cheek, then turned to Stella.

"It seems I'm doomed to always have the worst possible timing," they muttered in a flat, deep voice.

Neither Ikki nor Stella said anything. They couldn't. This was the last person they'd expected to see here.

"N-No way!"

"D-Dad?!"

Indeed, it was Ikki's father, Kurogane Itsuki, the man known as the Iron Tyrant.

◆◇◆◇◆

"I-I didn't know you were here, Dad," Ikki said.

"It's the biggest tournament in the country. As the head of the Japan branch of the Federation, it's only natural that I'd be attending. Especially since three of my children are participating in the tournament."

"I-I guess that's true, aha ha."

Ikki was still flustered at the sudden appearance of his dad. His smile was stiff, but one could hardly blame him. Itsuki had walked in on him and Stella flirting, after all. There was no situation more awkward.

Unsurprisingly, Stella was similarly embarrassed, blushing to the tips of her ears. She was looking down at her knees, her hands balled into fists, and shaking violently. The shame she felt seemed to have her on the verge of passing out. She hadn't been this red even at her and Ikki's first meeting, when he'd walked in on her changing.

Oh my god... Oh my god!

It would've been one thing if a stranger had walked in on them, but it was Ikki's father, of all people, when she hadn't even introduced herself to him yet. She wanted to die for having acted like a cat a few seconds ago. There was no doubt in her mind that Itsuki thought she was a silly little girl. She'd made the worst first

impression possible.

Waaah!

In truth, Stella had a pretty negative opinion of Ikki's dad. How could she not when she knew all about the horrible things he'd put Ikki through? She couldn't simply overlook any of that. Even so, he was her boyfriend's father. Not only that, but he was also the head of Japan's Mage-Knight Federation branch. Both as Ikki's girlfriend and as a princess of the Vermillion Kingdom, she couldn't have Itsuki thinking she was a moron. One way or another, she needed to improve his opinion of her. Problem was, she didn't know how. She was so embarrassed she couldn't think straight. Because of that, it was Itsuki who broke the ice.

"Princess Stella."

"Y-Yes?!"

She jumped in her seat and looked up at Itsuki, who bowed his head to her.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Kurogane Ikki's father, Kurogane Itsuki. Thank you for looking after my son these past few months."

Oh nooooo! He introduced himself fiiirst! Letting him introduce himself first was a huge social faux pas. There was no saving her horrible first impression now. It was well and truly over. Steam started rising out of her head as her brain completely short-circuited. *Wh-What's the proper way to react in this situation?! I don't know enough about Japanese culture and etiquette!*

Stella desperately tried to remember the lessons she'd taken on formal speech. Unfortunately, her embarrassment, combined with the pressure of introducing herself to Ikki's dad, kept her brain from working.

"I'm Stella Vermillion! It's your honor to meet me!" she shouted, bowing as low as her head could go.

"S-Stella, you're supposed to say 'it's an honor to meet you,'" Ikki explained. "Also, you don't need to bow that low."

"Oh..."

Stella swayed in her chair, and it took all of her remaining willpower to keep herself from fainting.

"Heh."

Itsuki's lips curled up into a faint smile. As Stella heard him laugh, her shoulders started trembling, and tears spilled from her eyes.

I wish I could just disappear.

"Stella, you don't need to be so nervous," Ikki said, gently placing a hand on her shoulder. Then, he pulled her closer to him and turned to glare at Itsuki. "Dad, Stella's nervous because you showed up out of the blue. Please don't laugh at her."

Itsuki put on a neutral expression once more and apologized.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to laugh at you. It's just, her reaction reminded me of how you were practicing your introductions to her parents while you were being confined in the Federation building. It made me think you two really are similar."

"Uh, Dad?!"

"You were practicing your introductions too, Ikki?"

This time, it was Ikki's turn to blush and look down in embarrassment. His reaction told Stella everything she needed to know.

So he's nervous about meeting my parents too...

"Aha ha..."

Stella smiled, glad to know that her boyfriend had been doing the same thing as her. Her nervousness vanished, and Itsuki took the opportunity to start things off on the right foot.

"Thank you for that wonderful introduction. I hope you continue to support Ikki from here on out as well."

He then held his hand out for a handshake. She took it immediately.

"O-Of course! Ah..."

As she gripped Itsuki's rough hand, Stella realized how similar it was to Ikki's. It even had the same faint warmth to it.

He's...different from what I was expecting...

She'd assumed he was a cold, stern man with as much emotion as a boulder. After all, he'd been willing to put his son through hell. She was shocked that he was being so cordial.

"So why did you come here, Dad? Are you sick or something?" Ikki asked, still trying to recover from his embarrassment.

There was a hint of worry in his voice. It made sense, seeing as they were in the medical ward. People usually only came here when they weren't feeling well. But as Itsuki let go of Stella's hand, he turned to Ikki and shook his head.

"No, I came to talk to you."

"You did?"

"Yes, I have something to discuss with you as the head of the Kurogane family."

Ikki's and Stella's expressions stiffened. There wasn't a single good thing Itsuki had done to Ikki in the name of the Kurogane family. Stella wrapped her arm around Ikki's and gave it a supportive squeeze. If Itsuki had come here as the head of the Kurogane family, it meant this involved family matters. For a moment, Stella wondered if she should leave since this was a private affair, but then she shook her head.

This involves me! I can't leave!

Stell was Ikki's boyfriend. No, she was part of his family now. After Ikki's duel with Touka, they'd vowed to become each other's family. Therefore, no matter what the Kurogane family tried to do, she'd protect him. She wouldn't let them hurt him any more. To that end, she planted herself firmly into her chair and glared at Itsuki.

Sensing her determination, Itsuki didn't bother asking her to leave. He merely spoke in a voice as heavy as lead.

"Ikki, I'm thinking of disowning you."

It seemed he was here to put an end to the feud between Ikki and his family in the most definitive way possible.

◆◇◆◇◆

"What?!" Stella stared at Itsuki, dumbfounded. "Wait, why would you—"

"Now that I've won my first two matches and made it into the Seven Stars Battle Festival's top eight, the Worst One's—or rather Another One's reputation has grown immensely," Ikki explained. "I'm too famous for even the Kurogane family to keep my existence hidden. Because of that, it's better to cut me off from the family

entirely. Is that what you're thinking, Dad?"

Ikki's voice was calm. He was taking the news better than Stella. In response to his question, Itsuki nodded solemnly.

"That's more or less correct. The Kurogane family has maintained the order of the Blazer world since way back when they were still called samurai. We cannot have someone who would disturb that order come from within our own family. At this rate, plenty of other people will try to overcome their limits just as you have. You'll become a role model to all the low-ranking Blazers who dream of accomplishing things beyond their abilities. Your dauntless spirit will inspire numerous copycats, whether you like it or not. But the reckless actions of those dreamers won't always be to their benefit, and more often than not, they'll end up disturbing the order of the Blazer world that we've carefully built up. You're no longer just worthless to the Kurogane family, Ikki. The existence of Another One Kurogane Ikki is a threat to the order we aim to protect."

"Don't give me that bullshit!" Stella leaped to her feet, the metal chair clattering to the floor behind her. Hair ablaze, she glared at Itsuki. "I was a fool for thinking you were an even remotely reasonable man! You dare call yourself a father after saying all that?!"

There was a feral gleam in her eyes, and it looked like she might even attack Itsuki depending on what he said next. A weaker man would have been too intimidated to speak, but naturally, the head of the Mage-Knight Federation's Japan branch was made of sterner stuff.

"My duty as the warden of this nation's Blazers takes precedence over my feelings as a father, Princess," Itsuki said in an even voice, meeting Stella's angry gaze. "I cannot allow my organization to waver, nor can I overlook anyone who threatens the foundations of that organization. I swear on my name, Itsuki, which was given to me by my father, and on my title as the Iron Tyrant, that I will continue to protect order and stability over all else."

Itsuki's eyes were a dull gray, a stark contrast to Stella's flaming red irises. But the steadfast determination in those eyes was as hard as steel. Stella could tell that it was pointless to try to argue with

him.

"You—"

"Stella..." Ikki got to his feet and gently placed a hand on Stella's arm. "That's enough, Stella."

"But—"

"Thank you for getting angry on my behalf. But please, stay calm for now."

"Mrrrgh!"

Since it was Ikki asking, Stella had no choice but to hold her anger in. She balled her hands into fists and punched the wall. After that, she turned her back to Itsuki, knowing that she wouldn't be able to keep herself in check if she looked at his face for even a second longer.

"Thank you," Ikki said once more. Then, he turned back to his father. "I take it you're not joking about this."

"Naturally. But think, this is an opportunity for you to escape from our influence. If you're disowned from the Kurogane family, I'll have no reason to keep getting in your way. Cutting ties with the Kurogane family should be in both of our best interests."

Indeed, Ikki would benefit from this proposal. It was clear he couldn't go down his chosen path and win his father's approval at the same time. That being the case, it was for the best if he simply cut ties with his family.

"Dad, I don't think I can give you an answer right away," Ikki said hesitantly. Even if he knew it would be good for both of them, abandoning his family wasn't something he could readily agree to. Itsuki seemed to understand as well.

"Of course. I have no intention of rushing you. I'll return once you've made up your mind."

Itsuki got to his feet and left the medical ward, leaving an oppressive silence behind.

◆◇◆◇◆

"God, he pisses me off so much!" Stella shouted, throwing a pillow at the door Itsuki had walked out of. She then turned back to

Ikki, her eyes still blazing with rage. “Ikki, is that guy really your father?! Are you sure you’re not secretly the son of some secret lover your mother had?!”

“I look too much like him for that. We’re related by blood. At least, I’m pretty sure we are...” When he thought back to how his family had treated him all this time, Ikki started losing confidence in that claim. “Anyway, I kinda get what Dad’s trying to say. It’s his job to keep Japan’s Blazers in line, and it would be a lot harder if they were all weirdos like me.”

Despite everything, Ikki was still trying to cover for his dad. Stella gave him an annoyed look.

“How can you be so calm about this? He’s talking about disowning you!”

Ikki was moved by how concerned Stella was for him, and he gave her a gentle smile.

“I know. Before, I probably would’ve gotten depressed, but I found someone who promised to become part of my family, so I don’t feel all that lonely anymore.”

This wasn’t like the time Ikki had been kidnapped by the Ethics Committee. Now, even if his father abandoned him, he knew there was someone who’d stay by his side no matter what. Someone who’d promised to become part of his family. That was why, while Itsuki’s proposal had come as a surprise, Ikki wasn’t too beat up over it. His new place was by Stella’s side, and he was more comfortable there than he had ever been at home.

“Oh...”

Stella’s anger immediately faded, and she blushed to the tips of her ears. She hurriedly looked away, knowing that she must have a very dopey smile on her face.

“Besides, I expected this day to come eventually,” Ikki added, his smile now wider. “Honestly, I should’ve been the one to bring it up to Dad after I ran away from home. This was a bridge I’d have to cross eventually. It’s a problem I can’t just avoid.”

He was the one who’d rebelled against the Kurogane family precepts, so he needed to settle things.

“Do you really plan on permanently cutting ties with that man?”

"That's what I thought I wanted."

"Why past tense?" Stella asked, giving Ikki a confused look.

"I was fully prepared to leave the Kurogane name behind. But when Dad actually suggested it...I wasn't able to say yes."

Even though that's the only answer I could possibly give at this point.

Ikki smiled bitterly at himself.

"I wonder why it is that even now, I can't bring myself to hate him," he wondered aloud. "I guess this is why they say blood is thicker than water."

"Ikki..."

"Don't worry, though. I'll find my answer soon enough. Or rather, I already know what the answer has to be. I just need to work up the resolve to tell him. Me and Dad are like parallel lines—our paths will never cross. It'll be best to put an end to our relationship once and for all."

"I'm not so sure about that," someone said from the half-open door to Ikki's room.

"Huh?"

Ikki and Stella turned to see Sara Bloodlily standing at the entrance. It seemed she'd returned from the bathroom.

"I didn't realize you'd come back," Stella said.

"It sounded like you were having a serious discussion, so I waited outside," Sara replied.

"If you have enough common sense to not interrupt people's conversations, I wish you'd use it to dress properly too," Stella muttered with a sigh as she looked at the apron that was the only thing covering Sara's boobs.

"Sara-san, do you have some advice for me?" Ikki asked.

"Not really..." Sara muttered, shaking her head.

He'd definitely heard her say "I'm not sure about that" when she'd walked in, meaning she clearly had an opinion about what he should do. But if she didn't want to say it, he wasn't going to press the issue. They certainly weren't close enough that he felt comfortable asking her for life advice.

"More importantly—"

“I refuse.”

Ikki immediately cut Sara off.

“B-But I didn’t even get a chance to ask yet.”

“There’s only one thing you’d ask!”

Though Sara’s face was as expressionless as a doll’s, her eyes were brimming with curiosity. It was the same curiosity she’d shown when she’d met Ikki at the welcoming party and when she’d invaded his hotel room, hence why Ikki had immediately declined. However, her reasons for wanting to draw him were too important for her to back down. She needed him to model for her at all costs.

“Actually, I was going to say I don’t need you to model for me anymore, but since you refused, I guess—”

“You can use all the fifth-grade reasoning you want, no means no!” Ikki wasn’t backing down either. He couldn’t. No matter how famous a painter Sara was, he was too embarrassed to strip in front of people. Thus, he couldn’t be her nude model. “No matter what you say, I won’t be your nude model!”

“Aw...”

“Puppy dog eyes won’t help!”

“Awww...”

“Neither will even cuter puppy dog eyes!”

Sara’s shoulders slumped.

“Fine...”

“Are you finally willing to give up?”

“I’ll come back when you’re asleep.”

“I guess not! Not that I expected you to!”

Ikki cradled his head in his hands. They were getting nowhere. To make matters worse, he couldn’t lock Sara out. Even if he hid in a solid concrete block, she’d just paint a door on it and let herself in.

Proper rest was important so that he’d be in top shape for his matches, but the way things were going, he wasn’t sure he’d be able to get any sleep. In the same way that he needed to settle things with his dad, he needed to do something about his twisted relationship with Sara as well. One way or another, he needed to get her to give up on drawing him nude. As she turned to leave the room, he grabbed her by the shoulder.

"Hold on a second, Sara-san! No matter how many times you—"

He trailed off as the strap holding up Sara's apron broke, leaving her breasts fully exposed.


© Won

"Oh..." Sara muttered, seemingly unconcerned.

"Ah," Ikki gasped, blinking in surprise.

"Eeeeeek!"

Screaming, Stella leaped forward and covered Ikki's eyes with her hands.

"Wh-What are you doing, Ikki?!" she cried.

"H-Hold on, that wasn't on purpose! The string just snapped when I grabbed her shoulder!"

"Oh, the threads are completely frayed..."

Mumbling calmly to herself, Sara picked up the apron. Given how damaged it looked, it was hardly surprising that it had snapped of its own accord.

"It probably got damaged when you were tying me up," she said, turning to Stella. "This is your fault."

"Gah. N-Now that you mention it, I might have accidentally pulled on the strap of your apron when I was trying to untie you..."

I guess it really is *my fault. But it's partially your fault too for wearing such revealing clothing!*

Regardless, Stella knew now wasn't the time to argue about that.

"Anyway, hurry up and wrap these sheets around yourself!" she ordered. "And give me the key to your room! Since this is my fault, I'll go get you a change of clothes!"

"Don't have any."

"You lost your hotel keys? Fine, tell me your room number. I'll go talk to the people in the lobby."

"No, I mean I don't have any other clothes."

"Why the hell not?! What's wrong with you?! You're a girl, aren't you?!"

"They're a pain to wash, so I didn't bring any extra."

"Just how slovenly is your lifestyle?! You're way more of a gorilla than I am! Fine, whatever! I'll give you some of my clothes since it's my fault your apron snapped!"

"Getting a proper outfit in return for a shoddy apron feels wrong. I'm not trying to be a greedy scam artist here. It's embarrassing to get something valuable in exchange."

"You should be more embarrassed about walking around half

naked! Do you seriously intend to show up to your next match looking like that?! They'll have to censor the broadcasts!"

"It's fine, it's just the strap that snapped. I can retie it, and the apron'll be usable again." As she said that, Sara crudely retied the strap and put her apron back on. Then, she puffed her chest out proudly at Stella. "See?"

O-Oh god! This girl's beyond saving.

Stella suddenly felt a migraine coming on. The problem wasn't whether Sara's apron was still usable, it was the fact that she was wearing something that could come undone at any minute. But she didn't seem to understand that at all. If something didn't change, she really would fight her match with Ikki dressed like that. If she made any sudden moves, chances were that the sloppily tied strap would come undone.

Frankly, if Sara was fine with being an exhibitionist, Stella didn't care if she showed her boobs to the whole world. But she was worried that Sara exposing herself like that might unbalance Ikki even the tiniest bit during their match, which could potentially lead to a loss.

There's no way I'm letting Ikki lose for such a stupid reason!

It was already partially her fault that Ikki had to fight two matches in one day. There was no way she was going to cause any more trouble for him, even indirectly.

"Fine. Ikki and I are going to go get one of my tracksuits. You can wear that for now. Then, we're all going to the department store together to get new clothes for you."

"Really? Together?"

"Also, I'm bringing a friend who's well-versed in fashion along to help pick out your outfit."

"But why? I've already fixed my apron, so—"

Right as she said that, there was a loud whoosh as something flew past Sara's ear. She turned around to see a giant sword stuck in the hallway wall—Lævateinn. Sensing the naked hostility in Stella's gaze, Sara shrank back.

"If you jump around in that tattered old rag, it'll snap again. I guarantee it," Stella said with an utterly terrifying smile. "But if you

absolutely *insist* on fighting Ikki in that stupid apron, then I guess I can burn it into your skin to make sure you don't distract him with those boobs of yours. Would you prefer that over getting new clothes?"

Sara hurriedly shook her head, too intimidated to speak.

"Good. Now wait here. I've been told I have a cute smile, so you might not have realized it, but I'm pretty pissed off right now. If you try and run, who knows what I'll do to you. Are we clear?"

Sara nodded emphatically, her face deathly pale. Stella then stalked out of the room, and Ikki meekly followed behind her.

Hagun Academy Bulletin

Character Intros Journalist: Kusakabe Kagami

Saijou Ikazuchi



■PROFILE

Affiliation: Hagun Academy

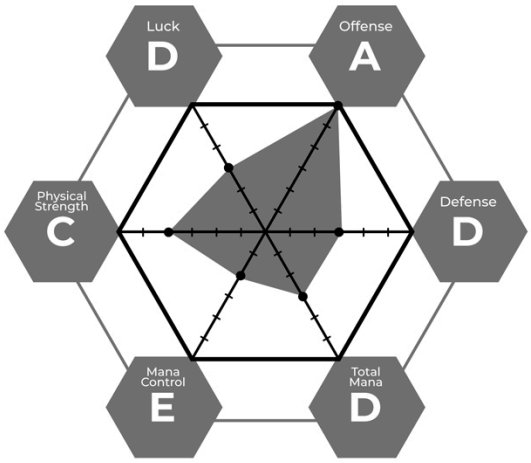
Second-Year

Blazer Rank: C

Noble Art: Crescendo Axe

Nickname: Destroyer

Summary: The student council secretary.



Kagamin's Thoughts!



Saijou-senpai was considered the fourth-strongest student in Hagun until the new first-years arrived. His power allows him to continually stack energy with each swing of his massive zanbatou. In other words, the more he swings it, the more powerful the next swing will be. It's a rather straightforward ability, though its main weak point is how inflexible it is. He can't do much unless he's prestacked a lot of swings.

© Won

Chapter 9: The Warriors' Brief Break

Stella and Ikki went up to her room to grab her tracksuit. Stella then went back to the medical ward where Sara was waiting, while Ikki called Alisuin and arranged to meet up with her outside stadium exit number three. As Ikki walked out the door, Alisuin got up from a bench near the fountain and waved him over.

"Over here, Ikki."

Ikki jogged over and saw that Shizuku was sitting next to Alisuin.

"Sorry about dropping this on you out of the blue, Alice. And thanks for coming as well, Shizuku."

"I'll follow you anywhere, Onii-sama, whether it's to hell itself or to the bath."

"Please don't."

"Heh heh heh, I'm kidding. I suppose you'd be worried if I followed you to hell."

"I'm more worried about you following me into the bath. Are you okay with using your precious free time on this, though? You have another match waiting for you later. Shouldn't you be resting?"

Especially since her next match was going to be against Shinomiya Amane, the infamous Bad Luck who'd won his past two matches by default. His Noble Art, Nameless Glory, made everything turn out exactly as he wished, and there was no telling just how powerful his ability to twist fate was. It was only natural that Ikki was worried. But Shizuku just chuckled.

"Don't worry, Onii-sama. I've already figured out a perfect countermeasure," she said.

"So I've heard, though I don't know the details."

"Since we're both fighting in the same tournament, it wouldn't be fair for me to tell you. All I can say is that you don't need to worry

about me. Besides, you have a match coming up too, don't you? So why on earth are you asking us to go to the department store with you to help pick out clothes for that exhibitionist devil? She's your next opponent, you know."

"Well, you see..."

Ikki explained the situation to Shizuku. Namely, that Stella had ripped Sara's apron, but that Sara was planning on showing up to the match in it anyway, and that as a result, Stella had threatened her into going to the department store to buy new clothes.

"That's...surprisingly thoughtful of Stella-san," Shizuku said, sounding impressed.

You don't need to add the "surprisingly" bit, you know. But rather than bringing that up, Ikki just nodded and said, "Honestly, I'm grateful to Stella. It would have been pretty hard to fight Sara-san while she's dressed like that."

Though he wanted to say he was confident his concentration wouldn't waver no matter what happened, unfortunately, that wasn't entirely true. He was a pubescent boy, after all. Even his unshakable self-control might prove ineffective against hormonal impulses.

"I see, so that's why you called for my help," Alisuin said.

"Yep. You're the most fashionable person I know. We were hoping you could teach Sara-san the importance of dressing properly. Or at the very least, make her more interested in wearing normal clothes."

Ikki had heard from Shizuku how skilled Alisuin was at doing people's makeup and coordinating outfits. He was hoping that Sara would find that she liked dressing up once she saw how cute Alisuin could make her. If nothing else, he wanted her to stop going out in public wearing just an apron and jeans. Stella wanted the same thing, which was why she'd suggested the shopping trip in the first place.

It was clear that Sara had no sense of shame, so appealing to that was a futile endeavor. She only wore an apron to keep paint from splattering onto her, which meant that if she wasn't constantly painting things, Ikki suspected she'd just walk around naked. He had no idea why she didn't care about covering herself up, but he

figured she had a few screws loose like most genius creative types did. Regardless, the point was that she didn't feel embarrassed about being seen naked. Therefore, the only way to make her wear clothes of her own volition was to nurture an interest in fashion for fashion's sake.

"I realize it might be a bit awkward since you used to be part of Akatsuki, but would you mind helping us out, Alice?" Ikki asked in an apologetic tone.

"Not at all," Alisuin replied, a casual smile on her face. "It's true that I technically betrayed her, but it's not as if I'd really talked to her before this."

The only Akatsuki members Alisuin had had any direct contact with were the Jester, Hiraga Reisen, and the One-Armed Sword Master, Wallenstein. Had Shizuku not defeated him, Wallenstein would have come here as one of Akatsuki's instructors. Regardless, since Alisuin hadn't met Sara beforehand, she didn't feel awkward about seeing her now.

"Besides, while she looks like a hopeless shut-in right now, she's a real diamond in the rough. I'm looking forward to polishing her into a true gem."

"Thanks a lot."

"I can't believe that exhibitionist is still trying to get you to strip for her, though. If she tries anything funny, I'll drop-kick her again," Shizuku said with a frown.

"Sh-She's got another match today, so I'd prefer it if you didn't harm her..." Ikki requested, cold sweat beading on his forehead.

The three of them chatted for a while longer, waiting for Sara and Stella to appear. But as time continued to pass and they didn't appear, Ikki began to get worried. He checked his student handbook, and it was only five minutes past the appointed meeting time.

Still, it's not like Stella to be late...

Ikki knew it took time for girls to get ready, but Sara wasn't a normal girl. Stella had brought four different tracksuits just in case she did have a preference, but Ikki still hadn't expected her to take this long.

Unless she's already started caring about fashion? That'd be

great, but...

Just as he was thinking that, Alisuin got to her feet.

"Ah, there's Stella-chan," she said.

Ikki and Shizuku got to their feet as well, turning toward the stadium exit. As Sara and Stella drew closer, Ikki noticed that Stella looked oddly deflated.

"S-Sorry we're late..." Stella said in a despondent voice, her shoulders slumped.

"Wh-Why do you look so exhausted, Stella? What happened?" Ikki asked.

"W-Well..."

Stella glanced back at Sara. She was wearing a light tracksuit, which sounded normal enough on its own. However, she'd only zipped it up halfway, so her boobs were mostly exposed. It made what was otherwise a very unsexy outfit look very, very sexy. So much so that everyone who passed by them stared openly at Sara's exposed cleavage.


© Won

"Come now, a girl shouldn't be dressed like that. You have to properly zip up your tracksuit," Alisuin said with a slight smile, pulling Sara's zipper all the way up. But as soon as she took her hand off of the zipper, it slid back down until it was only half closed again. "O-Oh my..."

"It's not big enough to accommodate my bust size. The other shirts I tried couldn't be buttoned up either," Sara said plainly.

"Gah!"

Stella doubled over as if she'd just been punched in the gut. Ikki immediately realized what had her so down.

"I-I think I understand now..." he muttered, giving Stella a pitiful look.

"I-I've never experienced humiliation like this before..."

Stella had a rather ample bust herself; there weren't many girls with bigger boobs than her. Within Hagun, probably only Toutokubara Kanata had larger breasts.

"My condolences."

"It's going to take a while for me to recover from this..." Stella murmured, trembling like a wizened old lady. But then she looked over at Shizuku, and her expression changed completely. With a newfound cheeriness, she added, "Well, we're all here now, so let's go to the department store!"

"Stella-san, what exactly cheered you up so suddenly?" Shizuku asked with a pointed glare.

"You three have matches waiting for you in the evening, so let's not waste any time!" Stella said, deliberately ignoring Shizuku.

"Answer me right now, Stella-san, or I'll kill you."

◆◇◆◇◆

Following a twenty-minute bus ride, Ikki and the others had reached one of Osaka's many shopping districts. It was one of the biggest ones in the city, with three major department stores all situated right next to one another. They stared at the three towering buildings as they exited the bus station.

Even though they hadn't walked here, Ikki, Stella, and Shizuku

looked utterly exhausted. Considering how the trip had gone, it was hardly surprising.

"Kurogane-san, I'll be enrolling in Hagun next year! I hope you'll remember me!"

"Thank you for your autograph, Stella-oneesama! I'll treasure it forever!"

"Shizuku-chaaan! Look at me like I'm trash again one more time, please!"

"Good luck, guys! I'm rooting for you!"

A bunch of middle school students were sticking their heads out the windows, waving at the party as they exited the bus.

"Please refrain from sticking your head out of the windows!" the driver shouted, but the kids ignored him.

It seemed this class of middle schoolers was on their way to some kind of club tournament or activity or something, but regardless, they'd all ended up on the bus together and had mobbed Ikki and the others. They'd been begging for autographs and handshakes and so on. At some point, Ikki and the others had gotten tired of smiling at their adoring fans.

"I...underestimated our popularity," Ikki said with a long sigh.

"I-I don't normally get this much attention..." Stella replied with a nod as she ran her hands through her tousled hair. "Today was excessive."

"That's more people than I ever want to deal with... I think I'm going to be sick..." Shizuku muttered.

"Want to rest for a bit?" Sara asked, gently rubbing Shizuku's back. Under normal circumstances, Shizuku wouldn't let anyone other than Ikki or Alisuin touch her, but right now, she was too exhausted to bat Sara's hand away.

"Thank you. I'll be fine, though... Blegh."

Shizuku wasn't a fan of people on the best of days, and right now, she was thoroughly sick of being fawned over.

"People would usually be more reserved since they don't want to come off too strongly, but considering how much hype the tournament is generating, it makes sense that they're too excited to hold back. After all, there's four of the tournament's best eight in

one place. You guys are bound to attract attention," Alisuin said, and everyone nodded in agreement.

Unfortunately, they'd realized their mistake too late. The sound of hundreds of footsteps drew closer, and they looked up to see a horde of people running toward them.

"Huh?"

"Over here, everyone! They're at the bus stop!"

"Squeeeee! It's Ikki-kun in the flesh! That guy on Twitter wasn't lying!"

"I gotta let everyone know!"

"Stella-sama! Please shake my hand!"

It seemed someone—or more likely everyone—on the bus they'd been riding had posted online that Ikki and the others were here.

"So this is the power of the internet. How terrifying," Alisuin said.

"Don't just stand there spacing out, Alice! We gotta do something fast, or someone's going to get hurt!" Ikki shouted.

"W-With a crowd this big, if anyone trips, they're bound to get trampled," Stella said.

"B-But how are we meant to pacify this crowd, Onii-sama?" Shizuku asked.

"I gotta touch the princess's boobs! With this many people, I might actually be able to cop a feel!"

"Yeah, we just gotta take advantage of the crowd!"

"I need to keep my eyes on the prize! Eyes on the prize!"

"Shizuku-sama! Please step on me!"

"Never mind, let's just kill them," Stella and Shizuku said in unison.

"C-Calm down, you two! I understand how you feel, but if you hurt them, you'll get expelled!" Ikki placed a hand on either of their shoulders in an attempt to calm them down. "Let's just run for now! If that crowd catches us, forget about shopping, we won't even make it back to the stadium in time!"

"It might be too late for that," Sara said, looking behind her. There was another crowd approaching from the opposite direction, smartphones in hand. They were completely surrounded.

"I guess they would've just chased us even if we ran," Ikki

sighed.

"Oh well, I guess we have to kill them," Stella replied.

"Indeed. It's a shame since I really don't want to hurt anyone, but there's no other choice," Shizuku said with a nod.

"Why are you two so eager to kill them?!"

What now? At this rate, someone really might get hurt...

Much to his chagrin, Ikki couldn't think of any way out. The crowd was clearly too excited for him to calm them down. As he was racking his brain, Sara suddenly spoke.

"We just have to get out of sight, right?" she asked, summoning her Device, Demiurge's Brush.

"What are you—"

Before Ikki could finish his question, Sara mixed some of the colors on her palette together to create a murky gray and painted an image onto the back of her hand.

"Color of Magic—Stone Gray."

A second later, Ikki and the others found it difficult to focus their attention on Sara. Her Noble Art, Color of Magic, allowed her to manifest phenomena associated with the color she painted. This particular color, Stone Gray, represented the mundane. Someone with that color painted on them seemed as unimportant as a roadside pebble. And if even the trained knights with Sara struggled to remain actively conscious of her, normal people were sure to miss her completely.

Though Sara hadn't explained this color to Ikki and his friends, they all immediately figured out what she was doing. They also realized that it was the perfect solution to their woes.

"I see. I guess we could just use magic to make ourselves imperceptible. I've never used my powers for stealth, so it didn't occur to me," Stella said, sounding disappointed.

"I suppose if there's a way to solve this without murder, we can't kill them..." Shizuku noted, sounding equally disappointed.

"Flame Veil."

"Azure Phantasm."

Stella used heat to bend the light around her while Shizuku used water to do the same, and they both turned invisible to the crowd.

They could only accomplish such complex feats because of how fine-tuned their mana control was.

"Those three sure are skilled. Should I use my powers to make you into a shady silhouette?" Alisuin suggested to Ikki while materializing Darkness Hermit. She had the power to manipulate shadows, and one of the applications of that power was the ability to make people look like hazy, shadowlike figures.

Generally, student knights were forbidden from using their powers when they weren't on school grounds or participating in a sanctioned event. If they didn't do something, though, the situation was going to get out of hand, and Ikki figured it was better to break the rules than to risk injuring regular people.

"Nah, no need," Ikki said, shaking his head.

"Oh? But your Blazer powers won't help you with stealth, will they?"

"No, but if I'm just dealing with regular people, martial arts will be enough to make me undetectable."

As he said that, Ikki focused his attention on the encroaching crowd. He found the few blind spots in their collective consciousness and started walking through them using Stealth Step. It was typically impossible to do something like that when dealing with such a large number of people, but with Ikki's powers of observation, he could see the narrow path that allowed him to escape notice. Indeed, not a single person spotted him as he slipped through the crowd and appeared on the other side.

"Oh my, you're even better at stealth than an assassin. You never cease to amaze me, Ikki," Alisuin said, sounding impressed. She had used Darkness Hermit to meld into the shadows and follow after everyone else.

Having watched the five knights vanish, the crowd turned to one another in confusion.

"H-Huh?! What happened?! Where'd they go?!"

"Hey, what's going on?! Where's Ikki-kun?!"

"How strange. I know I saw them here a second ago..."

The crowd's excitement started to wane, and after a few minutes, they began to disperse. There was no need to worry about anyone

getting injured now. After making sure everyone was gone, Ikki and the others walked into one of the department stores.

◆◇◆◇◆

The five of them rode the escalator up to the sixth floor, which was where all the women's clothes were. It seemed there was some kind of special summer campaign going on, so the partitions that normally divided the individual stores were gone.

"Huh, there's a lot of different fashions here," Stella said, looking around.

"It seems they're doing a limited run of some foreign brands as well since there are so many people coming here for the Seven Stars Battle Festival," Shizuku noted.

Indeed, the department store was busier than usual. An event like the Seven Stars Battle Festival was the perfect time for stores to run special campaigns since there were more people in town than usual.

"With this many different brands, we're bound to find something you like! Let's start looking!" Stella exclaimed, but Sara didn't look at all enthused.

"All right, I'll take this," she said, grabbing the first thing she saw.

"You've already picked something? Wait, that's a negligee! You can't wear that outside!"

"Why not? It fits."

"That's not the problem here! It's completely see-through! Considering your proportions, they definitely won't be able to broadcast the match if you go out wearing that! Don't just pick the first thing you see! Choose a real outfit!"

"Mrr. Fine, then I'll take this."

"Let's see what you've got... Wait, this isn't even clothes! It's just a freaking belt!"

"If I wrap it around my chest, it'll hide my nipples."

"Is this your fetish or something?! Pick actual clothes!"

"Fine, fine. I'll pick seriously... Here, I'll wear this."

"And now we're back to an apron?! What, are you cursed to hate

the feeling of anything but an apron on your skin?!”

“You can put it on and take it off quickly, and it’s breezy. Logically speaking, it’s the best choice.”

“I wonder if this is what it feels like to take pride in your cooking but be married to someone who doesn’t care about what food tastes like...” Stella groaned with a shake of her head. Meanwhile, Alisuin put a hand on her chin and looked Sara up and down.

“She’s really far gone, isn’t she?”

It was clear that Sara only wore clothes because she had to. Getting her to enjoy fashion for fashion’s sake would be quite the ordeal.

“Do you have something in mind?” Shizuku asked.

“Just leave it to me.” The way Alisuin saw it, if Sara had no reason to dress up, they just needed to give her one. “Hey, Lily. Why do you care so little about fashion?”

“There’s no need for me to dress up. I’m not trying to impress anyone or make anyone like me.”

“But you want Ikki to be your nude model, don’t you?”

“What of it?”

“I’d say that’s a pretty good reason to dress up.”

“Huh?”

Sara gave Alisuin a confused look, and Alisuin grinned.

“If you dress up and make yourself look pretty...you might get Ikki to fall for you.”

“H-Hey, Alice?!” Ikki shouted.

“Wh-Wh-Wh-What are you saying?!” Stella shouted at the same time.

Their faces paled, and they turned to each other. They couldn’t believe that their friend would try to tear them apart. Even Sara felt that way.

“Not possible. Another One is already in love with the Crimson Princess. He won’t fall for me,” she said with a frown.

“Eheh heh, I wouldn’t be so sure. Men are the kind of creatures who’ll tell a girl they’ll love only her for the rest of their life, then turn and cheat on her the next day. As a famous painter, I’m sure you’re aware of the old Greek myths, aren’t you? Even Zeus, in all of

his divinity, cheated on his wife all the time. What makes you think a mere human like Ikki will never cheat? Besides, affairs are so normalized in Japan that they have this saying: 'One gets married so they can cheat.'"

"Really?" Sara asked, still somewhat suspicious.

"Absolutely. If you really put effort into your appearance, Ikki might end up smitten with you. Then you'll be able to draw him all you want," Alisuin whispered in Sara's ear, looking exactly like the snake that had tempted Eve.

Unable to stand by and listen any longer, Stella jumped between the two of them.

"A-Alice, stop giving her weird ideas! And Sara, stop nodding like they're good! Ikki's *mine*! I-I won't let you steal him away from me!"

"Oh? This isn't like you at all, Stella-chan," Alisuin said, smiling provocatively at Stella.

"Wh-What do you mean?"

"Do you think the war's over just because you became his girlfriend? The Stella-chan I know would proudly declare that she'll keep Ikki at all costs and take on any challengers."

"Mrgh..."

Stella staggered backward, unable to counter Alisuin's argument.

Shizuku, who'd been content just watching until now, walked over to Ikki and slid her arm around his. Then, she turned to Stella with a smile on her face.

"Good grief, it's pathetic to see you being so passive," she said. "Men are always looking for a better woman, and women are always looking for a better man. Evolution designed us to be this way. It's survival of the fittest. You're weaker than I thought if you're going to cling to systems humanity made up like monogamy and fidelity."

Shizuku looked up at Ikki before continuing.

"Look at how complacent your girlfriend has gotten, Onii-sama. You may as well abandon her now. She's the kind of woman who's going to end up lazing around at home watching TV dramas while you're out hard at work for the family. Even worse, she'll probably start dabbling in foreign exchange investing and end up squandering the family finances. Of course, if you choose me, I promise to be a

hardworking housewife for the rest of my life."

"Mrrrgh..."

"C-Come on, you two. Stop teasing Stella," Ikki said, unable to watch Alisuin and Shizuku bully his girlfriend any longer.

In the first place, Ikki would never cheat. He would never even want to cheat, as that would require him to have found someone he wanted to be with more than Stella, and he could say definitively that no such woman existed. There was no better girlfriend he could ask for. He turned to Stella so he could tell her exactly that. "Don't take them seriously, Stella. My feelings for you won't—"

"Wait, Ikki," Stella said, covering his mouth with her hand.

"Mmmpf?!"

Stella then turned back to Shizuku and Alisuin.

"They're right. I've been getting too complacent."

"S-Stella?" Ikki asked, pushing her hand aside.

"I know what you're trying to say, Ikki, but there's a difference between you saying it of your own volition and me being so irresistible that I force you to say it."

I can't believe I got so conceited. Alice is right, I really was thinking like I'd won just because Ikki and I are dating. I've been hiding behind my status as Ikki's girlfriend without doing anything to keep that position. Besides, I don't even have the right to pull Ikki away from the women that are bound to crowd around him.

In retrospect, Stella should have seen this coming. Kurogane Ikki was a man of such high caliber that she, Stella Vermillion, had fallen in love with him. In other words, it was only natural that anyone who came to know how kind and wonderful a person he was would also fall for him. It was petty of her to push other women away just by making a fuss about the fact that she was Ikki's girlfriend. Not only that, it was wrong.

Any woman who grows complacent won't be able to win true happiness for herself!

A promise alone wouldn't be enough to tie Ikki down to her. She needed to keep winning his heart, both so that he would keep loving her and so that she could stay forever in love with him. It was only after putting in the effort that she'd be able to happily accept Ikki's

declaration that he'd love no one more than he loved her.

"Fine, bring it on, Sara Bloodlily! If you want to steal Ikki away from me, go ahead! I won't stop you from trying! But you won't succeed! Ikki's heart belongs to me, and I won't ever let that change!"

After making that declaration of war, Stella hurried off to look at clothes. She was going to find a killer outfit that could outdo anything Alisuin might choose for Sara.

"I suppose I may as well take this opportunity to find something new as well. See you later, Onii-sama."

Shizuku wandered off as well. Alisuin grinned as she watched the two of them leave.

"Aha ha, it seems there's a lot of competition for you, Ikki."

Ikki frowned back at her.

"Aliiiiice."

"Now, now. No need to give me that look. You're ruining your pretty face."

"And whose fault do you think that is? Stella's the most competitive girl I know, so I'd appreciate it if you didn't egg her on so much."

"Sorry, but that's the only way I could think of to make Lily care about wearing actual clothes. Besides, I don't think what I said was wrong. You don't want to tie Stella down to you just because the two of you have promised yourselves to each other, right? You want to shower her with enough love and appreciation that she *wants* to stay with you."

"Well...yeah."

Ikki couldn't argue with that. Just as Alisuin had said, he wanted to make Stella choose to stay with him because she felt loved.

"All right, well, I'll go take a look around with Lily. Wanna come with us?"

"Nah. There's some stuff I wanted to buy, so I'll be splitting off from the group too."

"I see. Well, let's all meet back here in two hours, then. I'll text

the others to let them know."

◆◇◆◇◆

Since all of the shops were competing for customers during this busy period, they'd all put out their best stock. Everything from casual clothes to formal dresses was on display. There were even exotic costumes from far-flung foreign cultures.

An entire three floors of this department store had been dedicated to women's clothing of all shapes, sizes, and styles. Mannequins were dressed up either in clothes that were trending for the summer or new outfits that specific brands were trying to push. Stella passed by a mannequin dressed in a milky-white dress, and another wearing a bright, striped, flared skirt. Both outfits looked quite good, but she frowned and shook her head.

"They're cute, but..."

Not cute enough.

Sara had Alisuin helping her out, and Stella knew just how good she was at dressing people up. The outfits she chose for Shizuku made her look way cuter than usual. Considering Sara would be going from wearing rags to one of Alisuin's outfits, her sexiness and charm would increase exponentially. Stella making a cute but safe choice here wouldn't be nearly enough to outdo that. At the same time, though, taking too much of a risk could backfire on her.

"Hmm?"

Just then, Stella spotted something in the corner of the room. It was a sign that read, "Cool off this summer with a new yukata! (Changing rooms available)." It seemed that section specialized in Japanese clothing.

"This might be just what I need!"

Yukata were tried and tested outfits, so in that sense, they were a safe choice, but Stella was confident that Ikki would be surprised to see her in one. It was the perfect season for them too. Furthermore, Sara probably wouldn't end up getting anything similar. She needed an outfit that was easy to move around in since she'd have to fight her match in it, and yukata weren't really practical

combat outfits. Best of all, Stella didn't own any Japanese clothes yet, so she could use this opportunity to expand her wardrobe.

She hurried over to the yukata corner and started browsing the racks. Eventually, she settled on a white and red yukata that paired well with her fiery red hair. She took it off the rack and walked over to the register, dispelling her Flame Veil as she did so.

"Excuse me, I'd like to try this on."

"Welcome. The changing rooms are right this...way?!" The middle-aged woman working the register stared at Stella in shock as she realized who it was that had walked up to her. "Y-Y-Y-You're Princess Stella Vermillion, aren't you?! Wh-What are you doing here?!"

"I want to try this yukata on."

"O-Oh, yes, of course! My apologies, I almost forgot what store this is! O-One moment! I'll bring some tea and snacks right away! Saitou-san! Go down to the first floor and buy some snacks and tea, pronto! The most expensive ones you can find!"

"It's fine, I don't need any tea or snacks, I just want to try this on!" Stella hurriedly held out her hand to stop the woman, who'd pulled out her wallet, from running over to the man behind the register at the next shop over. "I'm here with a friend today and can't stay long. I appreciate the hospitality, but I really don't have the time."

"I-I'm terribly sorry. I've just never served royalty before, so I got ahead of myself... Aha ha."

"I'm just a student right now, so you can treat me like everyone else."

"As you wish. The changing rooms are right here. If you need any help putting it on, just ask."

The woman guided Stella to a space that was partitioned off from the rest of the open floor plan. It seemed decently large, and as Stella opened the partition and walked inside, she spotted a familiar face.

"If it isn't Shizuku. What are you doing here?"

Shizuku turned to face Stella.

"These are the changing rooms, what else would I be doing other

than trying on new clothes? You said we're welcome to try and steal Onii-sama away from you, so I thought I'd dress up in a yukata for him."

"Mrrrgh..."

Stella frowned. She'd picked a yukata to avoid getting the same thing as Sara, but she'd ended up getting the same thing as Shizuku instead. She already had her heart set on Japanese clothes, though, so she couldn't back down.

"Hmph. I don't recall you ever holding back on my account before. Well, whatever. Do what you want. I'll still be the one to win Ikki's heart in the end," she said with a confident smile.

"Heh... You truly are naive."

"Hmm? What do you mean?"

"It's a mistake to try and compete with the same outfit as me. There's no way you'll look as good in a yukata as I do."

"W-We won't know that until we try them on!"

"Heh heh, true enough. Once we're wearing them, you'll see."

Wh-Why's Shizuku so confident? Stella knew that Shizuku was just as competitive as she was, but Shizuku sounded far more confident than usual. *Well, I won't lose!*

Stella called the store clerk in to help her change into the yukata. The woman was quite deft with her fingers, and she finished putting it on in no time.

"There you go. What do you think, Stella-sama?"

"Wow!"

Stella smiled, impressed, as she looked at herself in the full-length mirror. The yukata she'd chosen had red thistles on a white background. She'd also changed out of her shoes into traditional geta, and the store clerk had even lent her a drawstring pouch to carry. The obi was a deeper red than the thistles and had been tied into a large ribbon.

"I kind of look like a goldfish. It's really cute..."

Stella did a little twirl, and the ribbon on her back swayed back and forth like a tiny goldfish tail. She was confident she'd look stunning walking to a festival like this.

"Huh, that looks better on you than I thought, Stella-san,"

Shizuku said, walking out of her own changing room.

Like Stella, she was wearing a yukata. Hers had an indigo background punctuated with pale white irises. There were ripples around the irises to give the impression that it was all one big pond. The muted tones and dark colors were a stark contrast to Stella's bright yukata. However, they paired well with Shizuku's hair and skin color, giving her the air of a cool, elegant lady.

"...Huh?"

I-Is it just me, or...

After seeing Shizuku, Stella was suddenly gripped by unease. She turned back to the mirror to look at herself. She couldn't tell exactly why, but she was absolutely certain that her yukata didn't suit her as well as Shizuku's did.

"Heh heh heh heh. It seems you've noticed, Stella-san."

"Wh-What are you talking about?"

Stella tried to act as if nothing was wrong, but Shizuku saw right through her.

"You're a terrible actor. You can tell that for some reason, your yukata doesn't match you as well as mine does me. Isn't that right?"

"N-Not at all! I'm definitely cuter!"

"If you say so. Why don't we both go see Onii-sama, then?"

"Ngh..."

Stella really didn't want to show Ikki this outfit when she wasn't even confident in it anymore.

But why is it that this yukata doesn't feel like it suits me as well?

Stella turned back to the mirror and struck a number of different poses, but she still couldn't figure it out. She turned back to the store clerk who'd helped us change.

"H-Hey, miss? Who looks better, me or Shizuku?"

"Oh, um..." As a professional, this wasn't the kind of question she could answer. So she just smiled awkwardly and said, "Both of your outfits highlight your individual charms splendidly!"

She wasn't lying. Stella was utterly gorgeous, so most clothes looked good on her. There was just one thing that made the difference.

"However, if you'll forgive me for being rude, that girl over there

seems far more used to wearing Japanese clothes," she added.

"I see..."

"That's right," Shizuku said with a nod. "I'm from a prestigious family, after all. I personally prefer dresses, which is why I usually wear them, but I have a lot of experience wearing kimono and other formal Japanese clothes during family events. Naturally, I've also been trained on how to conduct myself while in such outfits. Unlike you, my gait isn't so sloppy that it messes up my sleeves, and like a proper demure Japanese lady, I don't stare directly at people like you do."

"Ah..."

Stella looked down at her sleeves and noticed that they had indeed gotten a little rumpled.

"When you speak to others, you must keep your back straight but your gaze slightly lowered, as if you're waiting upon them. Keep your hands in front of you, and make sure they never go past your shoulder line. These are all small things, but they change the overall impression you give. Japanese clothes aren't like Western dresses. You aren't trying to be showy, you're trying to be demure. But you're far too brash in your actions. And there isn't a single demure thing about your body!"

"Ack!"

Indeed, Japanese clothes had been developed with traditional Japanese culture and the builds of Japanese people in mind. This was Shizuku's home turf, while Stella was playing an away game. It was only natural she'd never match up to Shizuku in a yukata.

The more Stella moved around in her yukata, the more she came to realize that. She hadn't trained to perform the minute movements and mannerisms that were second nature to Shizuku. She certainly wouldn't be able to imitate Shizuku's demeanor in just a few minutes of practice either. As someone who'd been trained in Western etiquette, she knew just how long it took to develop those skills.

"You're right... This won't work."

"That's not true! You look wonderful, Stella-sama!" the store clerk said.

"Thank you, but..."

Just looking wonderful isn't good enough. I have to look better than everyone else. This is a battle with my pride as a woman and as Ikki's girlfriend on the line.

Moreover, Shizuku wasn't Stella's only opponent. She needed to outdo Sara, who was getting help from Alisuin the fashion master, as well. If she couldn't even beat Shizuku with a yukata, there was no point in trying to compete with Japanese clothes.

But what else can I use?

Stella closed her eyes and mentally ran through her options.

"Would you like me to help you pick out an outfit?" Shizuku whispered to Stella in a honeyed voice.

"You?"

"Your competition has Alice helping her. It's only fair that you get some advice too, right?"

Stella gave Shizuku a suspicious look.

"Liar. There's no way you'd ever help me. You're plotting something, I can tell. I won't be fooled that easily."

Considering how often they bickered, it was natural for Stella to distrust Shizuku. But Shizuku gave Stella a hurt look in response.

"You really don't trust me, do you?" she asked. "Well, I can see why you wouldn't think highly of a sister-in-law like me, but that still hurts. Despite what you may believe, Stella-san, I do approve of you dating my brother."

"Really?"

"Really. If I didn't, I'd pull you two apart by force. If you weren't worthy of Onii-sama, I'd chase you to the ends of the earth and use any means at my disposal to bury you forever. You should already know that's the kind of woman I am. You're the first person I've ever thought might be able to support Onii-sama other than me. That's why I don't want that floozy who just wants Onii-sama for his body to beat someone I approve of."

"Shizuku... I never knew..."

"Will you let me help you, Oneesama?"

Shizuku took Stella's hand and gave it a gentle squeeze as she said that. She'd never once called Stella "Oneesama" before, and Stella's eyes lit up with joy. She'd never realized that Shizuku felt

that way about her. Squeezing Shizuku's hand back, she smiled down at her.

"I'm sorry I ever doubted you! Let's beat that exhibitionist together!"

"Of course!"

"So, what outfit do *you* think would make me look the cutest?"

"That's obvious. Considering your flaming red hair and womanly curves that shine through no matter what you wear, there's no need for you to go out of your way to dress up too much. After all, you have plenty of natural charm."

"I-I see... Eheh heh. I'm happy to hear you say that, Shizuku."

"In your case, making use of your natural assets will work better than anything else. And the outfit that highlights them best is this!"

"Wh-What kind of outfit is this?!"

"Since they're going all out on variety during this special campaign, I picked out what I thought would suit you best. Someone with a figure as full as yours can definitely make this outfit work. If we just add a spicy little twist to it, I guarantee you'll be able to win Onii-sama's heart!"

"You picked this out for me? Thank you, Shizuku! You're right, I think this will work! Let's try it on!"

◆◇◆◇◆

While Stella and Shizuku were joining forces, Sara and Alisuin were taking the escalator down a floor. As they walked through the aisles, Alisuin turned to Sara.

"We don't have much time, so first off, I'd like to ask: Are there any particular designs or brands you're partial to? Or are you happy just leaving everything to me?" she asked, and Sara shook her head.

"I don't know much about clothes, so you can decide everything."

"Got it."

She has a match coming up, which means they have to be clothes that are easy to move around in.

Because Akatsuki didn't have a school uniform, she didn't have a default outfit she could use for matches. And heavy clothes were a

no-go since they would restrict her mobility. Alisuin didn't feel any lingering attachment to Akatsuki, so really, she didn't care if Sara had an easy time in her matches or not, but she knew that Ikki wouldn't accept anything less than a perfectly fair match. However, before picking out clothes, there was something else Alisuin needed to take care of.

"Whatever we pick, we need to fix your face first."

"Am I getting plastic surgery?"

"No, we're not going that far. Besides, your features look good already. It's just a waste that you don't wear any makeup. So let's...start with this." Alisuin stopped in front of a cosmetics store. It was a very fancy store, with white marble floors and black lacquer pillars leafed with gold. The sweet smell of women's perfume wafted out of the entrance. "I'm guessing no, but have you ever put on makeup?"

Sara again shook her head.

"If you don't care about fashion, I suppose there's no reason to..." Alisuin muttered.

Sara's hair was unbrushed and flecked with paint, and her lips were dry and cracked. If she didn't even take care of her skin, there was no way she would have ever put on makeup.

It's a wonder the rest of her skin is as perfect as it is. Maybe she's just blessed with good genetics.

Sara's glossy skin wasn't as much of a mystery as Stella's weight, considering how much she ate.

"Got it, so you know nothing about makeup or skincare."

"I've never put it on, but I know it's this skin-colored powder you, like, pat onto your face, right?"

"That's what we call foundation. There's a lot more to makeup than just that."

"Really?"

"Yep. Since we're here, I suppose I may as well teach you everything. Listen closely."

"Okay."

"Before you even worry about makeup, you first need to pay attention to what we broadly refer to as skincare. We use face wash

like this product here to keep our skin clean and remove excess oil before putting on makeup. If there's dirt or other impurities on your skin, the makeup probably won't stay on."

"I see."

"After that, you need to put on face lotion. That helps keep your skin glossy and smooth."

"I see, I see..."

"Next, you use this milky lotion. It keeps your skin elastic and young-looking. You kind of just rub it on the same way you do the face lotion. Then, in order to ensure the active ingredients in these lotions stay in your skin for as long as possible, you seal it all up with this day cream."

"..."

"Once all of that's done, you can finally start putting on primer. That protects your skin from UV rays and is extremely important. After that, we need to use a control color to figure out the specific hue and condition of your skin on that day. If you're worried about your skin's redness, you'll use purple color corrector, and if you want to highlight a blush, you'll use silver. Then, you can finally get to the foundation step that you mentioned earlier. You spoke of the powder variant, but there are other kinds as well, like liquid and cream. It's important to pick the right one for your skin type. If there are things the foundation can't get rid of, that's when you'll start using concealer, and once that's done, you use highlights and blush to make everything look less cakey. However, depending on the type of foundation you're using, when you actually do each of these steps changes, so keep that in mind. With that, you've finally gotten the base down and can start working on your eyes. Are you following so far?"

White smoke was rising out of Sara's head, and she looked dead inside as she stared at Alisuin.

"Life as a woman is harsh, isn't it?" she asked.

"My, I see you understand perfectly," Alisuin replied. "That's right. Women have to put in an inordinate amount of effort each day to look pretty. Men all call makeup fake, but they simply don't understand."

"You're a man too, aren't you?"

"I'm a woman at heart."

"What a weirdo..."

"I'm not sure you're in any position to be calling others weird," Alisuin retorted with a shake of her head.

"I don't think I can look pretty anymore..."

"I made it sound more complicated on purpose, but frankly, you can get pretty far just by using lotion, day cream, and primer. Might as well try it and see how well it goes."

Alisuin snapped her fingers and dispelled the magic concealing her shadow, thus revealing her presence. A second later, a store clerk called out to her.

"Excuse me, pretty boy over there. Are you looking for a present for your girlfriend?"

A young woman walked over to Alisuin. The people working at this store made commission, so the moment they spotted someone they might be able to get a sale from, they swooped in like piranhas. An inexperienced shopper could easily find themself overwhelmed by the pushy salespeople and end up being squeezed for all they were worth. But of course, Alisuin was no stranger to stores like this.

"Oh, no, I'm just picking out makeup for this girl here," she said, smiling at the clerk. "She's never even put on face lotion before."

"Not even once?! But her skin's so pretty!" the clerk exclaimed, noticing Sara for the first time only after Alisuin had pointed her out. "Since she's this pretty, it's a waste for her not to put on makeup."

"Exactly. But since she's never put any on before, I'm not sure what will look good on her and what won't."

"I understand completely. Why don't you follow me to the counter? We have some samples you can try."

"Thank you very much."

It seemed this particular store clerk had no interest in the Seven Stars Battle Festival, as she failed to recognize that Sara was one of the fighters in the tournament. That made things easier, though. Alisuin took the bag of samples the clerk handed her and guided Sara out of the store. The samples were a full set of makeup from an organic cosmetic brand.

"They really just give all that away for free?" Sara asked, surprised.

"Yep. Makeup works differently on different people, so any self-respecting brand will hand out plenty of samples. A lot of them allow you to return opened products too."

"How generous of them."

"In return, though, even small bottles like this might sell for ten thousand yen or more. On the flip side, if they don't accept returns, that means customers might not be willing to take a risk and try a new product."

The bottles all looked pretty, and you could tell that they were primarily marketed toward women. Some people were so obsessed with the designs of the bottles that they ran around collecting as many samples as possible. Those people weren't ever going to become customers, however, so they weren't who the company was targeting. Of course, people like that could be found in every niche hobby, meaning the practice wasn't something they could or wanted to eliminate.

"Hmm, okay. We should be in the cameras' blind spot here."

As a former assassin, Alisuin had extensive knowledge of all CCTV models and their effective ranges. She had easily found a blind spot, led Sara to it, and then walked into the shadow of a nearby wall.

"Shadow Spot," she said, plunging Darkness Hermit into the wall and cutting down toward the floor. The wall opened up as if it had been unzipped. "Step inside."

Doing as she was told, Sara walked into the dark cavern. Upon passing through the veil of darkness, she found herself in a bland, tiny room.

"What's this?"

"It's a safehouse I created. It exists on the other side of the world, but I can access it using my shadow powers. We can hardly do your makeup in public, after all."

Alisuin's safehouse wasn't hooked up to the power grid, but it did have water and gas, and she'd also stored some emergency rations there. If necessary, she could hole up here for a few days, making it a very convenient place for her to have. When she'd attacked

Kagami, she'd temporarily stored her here.

"The bathroom's over here," Alisuin said, waving Sara over. They needed to wash her face first. And since she'd never washed her face properly before, they'd need to do a peeling session to get the old keratin off. However, Sara stopped at the entrance and gave Alisuin a confused look.

"Why are you helping me?"

"Well, I've found a diamond in the rough, so it would be a shame not to polish it, right?"

"But you betrayed us."

"I betrayed Rebellion. And I certainly have no desire to work for them ever again, but that's no reason not to help you in a personal capacity. Ikki and Stella-chan did ask me to help too, of course. Besides, I don't get a bad stench from you."

"That's probably because I showered yesterday."

"I meant that metaphorically... Wait, does that mean you don't normally shower every day?!" Alisuin sighed and shook her head in exasperation. "Anyway, I was referring to the vibes I get from you. I've spent most of my life dealing with unsavory types, so I can tell. People like me, the ones who gladly chose the path of evil, have a stench that's worse than rotten sewage."

Though the public at large considered them all terrorists, the members of Rebellion had wildly different backgrounds. There were those like the Jester who did what they did for fun, and others like Tatara who simply didn't know any other way to live. They'd been born and raised in that environment and couldn't so much as envision taking a different path in life.

Regardless of what others said, Alisuin didn't consider them equally evil. People like Hiraga were beyond saving, but others like Tatara were...simply unfortunate. There was no greater inequality than the circumstances one was born into. As someone who'd scraped by on the streets of a bitterly cold city as a child, Alisuin understood that all too well. She didn't judge people based on what organization they belonged to. Her instincts were honed to pick out far more important differences than that.

"My nose tells me you don't have that stench, so I have no

reason to hate you, Lily."

"I see..."

"If you don't mind, though, I'd like to ask you something. Why's a painter as famous as Mario Rosso running errands for Rebellion? Even *I've* heard of your artist name."

Sara shook her head.

"I have no intention of joining Rebellion for real. I just...have a debt I need to repay."

"A debt?"

This time, Sara nodded.

"There's a painting I absolutely *must* finish, no matter what it takes. In order to complete it, I needed to travel the world, expand my horizons, and find the perfect model. To make that happen, I asked the Grand Professor to cure my chronic illness. I offered to pay for the surgery by selling my paintings. I'm also using Rebellion's transportation routes to get into conflict-ridden regions that aren't easy to reach, but that's about it."

In other words, the only reason Sara was helping with this whole Akatsuki business was to find her perfect model. She didn't care one bit about Rebellion's ideals. They had a very businesslike contract, with her using Rebellion for her ends, and Rebellion using her for theirs.

"I see... But you know, you're getting completely ripped off. I don't know what kind of surgery you underwent, but your entire catalog of paintings would be worth enough to buy a small country."

"Maybe so, but I don't care. As long as I can keep this body that's capable of drawing, I don't need money. In fact, I don't need anything else at all."

Sara spoke matter-of-factly, and there was little emotion on her face, but her tone was resolute. Alisuin could tell she was serious. This painting mattered to her so much that everything else was trivial. After seeing just how much importance she placed on those feelings, Alisuin felt a little bad about using them to try to manipulate her into caring about fashion.

"I hope you manage to finish that painting," Alisuin said after a pause.

"It took a long time, but I've finally found the ideal model. I'll finish it no matter what it takes."

"You're referring to Ikki, right?"

"Yes. In the painting, there are hordes of demons crawling out of every nook and cranny. The messiah that bravely faces them down needs to be manly enough not to flinch in the face of such horrors, but at the same time have the gentle kindness of a young girl. He fits that ideal perfectly." Sara had spent years traveling the world looking for someone like Ikki. "When I first saw him, I instinctively knew he was the one. Only he can serve as the model for my messiah."

Sara blushed slightly as she said that.

"Hee hee. In other words, you fell in love with him at first sight," Alisuin replied.

"I did?"

"I mean, it sounds to me like you're saying Ikki's the ideal man. Doesn't that mean you've fallen for him?"

Sara looked down, confused.

"I'm not sure. I've never really thought much about romance..."

Have I fallen for him? she asked herself, but her heart offered no answer. As someone who'd never experienced a first crush or love of any kind, her feelings were as incomprehensible to her as a foreign language.

◆◇◆◇◆

Ikki was the first to arrive at their rendezvous point two hours later. Since everyone other than him was a girl, it made sense that they were taking more time. He sat down on a nearby bench and started reading the book he'd bought while he waited for everyone else. About five minutes after the appointed time, Alisuin showed up.

"Sorry, were you waiting long?" she asked.

Ikki closed his book and looked up.

"Not that long—"

He abruptly stopped talking, his expression stiffening when he saw Sara. She was standing next to Alisuin, but she looked totally

different. Thanks to Alisuin's hard work, she was wearing an actual outfit rather than an apron and jeans. She was even wearing a bra—or rather, a bra was all she was wearing to cover her breasts. She'd also swapped her jeans out for denim hot pants, so in a sense, she was exposing even more skin than before.


© Won

"Um, A-Alice..."

Ikki turned back to Alisuin and gestured toward Sara. Seeing his confused expression, Alisuin just sighed.

"Look, I know what you're going to say. I did my best here, but in the end..."

Alisuin explained that once Sara's makeup was done, the two of them had started looking for clothes that would match her jeans, but after a few minutes, she'd suddenly collapsed. When Alisuin had asked her what was wrong, she'd replied, *"T-Too heavy..."* with a pale face.

"In other words, regular clothes are too heavy for her. Apparently, she only wore Stella-chan's tracksuit because she was scared of her, but even that was a struggle to move around in, hence she ran out of energy and collapsed."

"Just how weak is her body?!"

"It was a shock to me too..."

"I can't carry anything heavier than a paintbrush," Sara said flatly.

"I'm impressed you've survived this long, Sara-san..." Ikki replied.

"I did everything I could to make her not look like an exhibitionist, at least. Since she's wearing a bra, her boobs won't be bouncing around everywhere."

Alisuin circled around behind Sara, grabbed her shoulders, and pushed her closer to Ikki as if showing off a prized model. Initially, Ikki had been so surprised by how much more skin Sara was showing off that he hadn't noticed, but upon closer inspection, he realized that Alisuin really had done a good job turning this into an actual outfit.

Sara was wearing a long-sleeved summer cardigan that matched her show-off bra, and she had fashionable boots to go with her hot pants. Since the cardigan was unbuttoned, it emphasized her midriff, and the sleeves were long enough that they hid most of Sara's hands. Alisuin had opted not to fix Sara's hair, but thanks to the outfit, she now looked like she was going for the "sexy depressed girl" look on purpose rather than just looking like an unhealthy shut-in.

Furthermore, her makeup was perfect. Thanks to the lotion, her

skin was silky smooth, and her eyelashes had been properly curled. She also had eyeshadow on to make her features more distinct, and her previously dry and cracked lips were now a luscious red. Alisuin had found the perfect balance of makeup to use, not going overboard but not skimping out either. Ikki had to admit, Sara looked pretty right now.

"Do I look weird?" she asked hesitantly.

"Nope. Way better than before. You're really pretty, Sara-san," Ikki said honestly.

"I see..."

Sara looked away, blushing slightly. She hadn't been expecting such frank praise, and now she was embarrassed. It was the first time Ikki had seen her make an expression like that.

"Impressive as always, Alice. She looks like a completely different person," Shizuku said, walking over to Alisuin and the others. Her geta clacked loudly on the mall's tile floor, but her gait was reserved and refined to ensure that her sleeves didn't get messed up. She went over to Ikki as if his side was where she belonged and grabbed hold of his sleeve.

"Did you buy a new yukata, Shizuku?" Ikki asked, and she nodded with a smile.

"Yes. I still hadn't spent any of the reward money we received for capturing those terrorists at the department store, so I decided to splurge. What do you think, Onii-sama?"

"An iris pattern, huh? The color and design really suit you."

Ikki gently patted Shizuku's head, taking care not to mess up her meticulously brushed hair.

"Thank you very much." Shizuku closed her eyes and leaned into Ikki. After a few seconds, she grinned playfully up at him and said, "But what you truly want to see is the outfit Stella-san chose, isn't that right?"

"Um, w-well... I—"

"No need to deny it. It's only natural to be the most interested in the woman you love." Shizuku turned back down the hallway she'd come from and shouted, "All right, Stella-san, it's time for your grand entrance! Show that upstart newcomer what *real* charm looks like!"

"You got it!"

Stella's response had seemingly come from thin air. In truth, she was just using Flame Veil to make herself look invisible. But she dispelled the light-bending Noble Art and strode confidently in front of Ikki.

"I've become a cute bunny to hop right into your heart, Ikki!"

She was wearing a stereotypical bunny girl outfit, complete with a bunny-ear hairband and fishnet stockings. Everyone, including other passersby, stared at her, dumbfounded as she leaped into Ikki's arms.

"Hee hee hee," she giggled. "Look, Shizuku! Ikki's so stunned by my cuteness that he can't even say anything!"

The only person who didn't realize why everyone was speechless was Stella herself. Ikki grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her off of him.

"Please put your old clothes back on, Stella-san," he said with dead eyes.

"Wait, why are you suddenly using honorifics with me?! I thought I hopped straight into your heart!"

Shizuku started snickering loudly.

"Ah!" Stella rounded on her, and upon seeing the sadistic delight in Shizuku's eyes, her face went pale. "Shizuku, you...you tricked me?!"

"Now, now. I didn't, heh heh, trick you. I mean, aha ha, think about it. Why would I ever take your side in the first place?"

"Th-Then when you told me that Ikki loves bunnies, so if I dressed like one, it would make him fall for me all over again, that was—"

"Sorry, but logic like that only works in *Draco Quest*."

"Mmmrrrgh!" Stella's face turned red from a mixture of embarrassment and rage. "Y-You little! Ikki, it's not what you think! Shizuku tricked me! That's the only reason I—"

"I understand, don't worry. But please put some normal clothes on, Vermillion-san."

"Nooooo! I'm losing him! It feels like we're even further apart than when I first met him now! You'll pay for this, Shizuku, mark my

words!”

Stella covered her exposed skin with her hands and ran off to the changing rooms. Shizuku snickered again as she watched her go.

“Aha ha ha, she’s such an entertaining woman.”

“Come on, Shizuku, stop messing with Stella so much,” Ikki said, feeling sorry for Stella.

“I refuse,” Shizuku replied flatly. Normally, she listened to anything Ikki said, so it was a surprise to see her reject him so strongly.

“D-Do you really want to torment her that badly?”

“I do. This is my god-given right as her sister-in-law. Not even you can stop me, Onii-sama.” As she said that, Shizuku turned to once again look in the direction Stella had run off in. “Heh heh heh... Really, what a cute girl.”

Upon seeing her expression, Ikki felt a sudden pang in his heart.

Huh? What’s going on? Ikki wasn’t sure why he’d suddenly felt that, nor honestly what Shizuku’s expression was even trying to convey. *Was that a pang of love or of pity? But if it’s pity, what about her is pitiful?*

Ikki had no way of knowing.

“Now then, I’ll be taking my leave before the cute bunny rabbit comes back as a vengeful ogre. There’s a few things I need to prepare for my upcoming match as well.”

Shizuku waved to everyone and turned on her heel. Ikki had no reason to stop her, especially if she needed time to prepare. The tournament took priority over everything else right now, so Ikki decided not to dwell on the weird pang he’d felt earlier and nodded.

“Sounds good. I’ll cheer Stella up, don’t worry.”

“I’ll leave it to you. Alice, I’ll need your help, so can you come with me?”

“Of course. My job here is done anyway.”

“Thank you. All right, I’ll see you later, Onii-sama.”

“Bye-bye. Make sure you make it back in time for your match, Ikki.”

“I’m looking forward to fighting you in the semifinals!” Ikki shouted as the two of them walked off.

Shizuku looked over her shoulder and replied in an uncharacteristically loud voice, “Me too!” She then went into the elevator with Alisuin and vanished behind the closing doors. A few minutes later, Stella returned, once again wearing her uniform.

“Hmm? Where’d Shizuku and Alice go?”

She looked around, seeking her target for revenge. But Ikki just shook his head.

“She went back to warm up for her upcoming...match?”

Ikki’s expression once again stiffened as he looked at what was in Stella’s arms. It shocked him even more than when she’d come out in a bunny costume. For whatever reason, she was holding a sleeping baby.

“I can’t believe she just ran away... That bitch!”

“S-Stella, why do you have a baby?” Ikki asked hesitantly.

“Did you give birth to it?” Sara asked.

“Like hell anyone can give birth that fast!”

◆◇◆◇◆

After Stella had changed back into her uniform, she’d been fuming to herself as she checked herself in the mirror to make sure her clothes weren’t disheveled.

“That bitch, that bitch, that bitch*! That does it! When I get back, I’m hot gluing cat ears on her!”* she’d screamed, tears welling up in her eyes.

But just then, she’d spotted something strange in the mirror. A baby had silently appeared in the air behind her and slightly to the right, seemingly out of nowhere.

“What?!”

Stella had been absolutely flabbergasted, but there had been no time to stop and stare. Once the baby had appeared, it had started following the laws of gravity and hurtled toward the floor.

“Watch ooout!”

And so, Stella had dove backward to catch it before it hit the ground.

“And that’s what happened.”

"Good job catching the baby in time," Ikki said.

The three of them had gone to the mall's lost children center and were sitting on the sofa in the office while they waited for the baby's guardian to show up. The baby, a tiny boy who probably wasn't even a year old yet, was sleeping soundly in Stella's arms right now.

"This baby's a Blazer, isn't he?" she asked, looking down at the baby, and Ikki nodded.

"Yep. He probably has some kind of teleportation power, similar to Jougasaki-san."

That was the only explanation for why he'd suddenly popped up in the women's bathroom. Normally, a Blazer's powers only manifested once they were old enough to talk and think, but occasionally, one with exceptionally strong abilities would become able to use a small fraction of them while still an infant, before they could even summon their Device. And since they weren't even old enough to stand on their own, there was no way they could actually control those abilities. It made them a danger to themself and others.

Indeed, there were cases of babies accidentally killing themselves with their powers. Had Stella not caught this baby, he, too, might have died had he landed on the floor. At the very least, he would have been severely injured.

"Thank god you were there, Stella."

"Tell me about it. I hope his parents find him soon."

"I guess that'll depend on just how strong his powers are."

If they were lucky, the baby's parents would be in the same mall. However, depending on the strength of his Blazer powers, it was possible that they were much farther away. His shirt had a name tag that read "Nitta Makoto," so if nothing else, his parents were most likely Japanese and in Japan.

"I know we already told the mall staff, but we should still probably stick with him for as long as we can," Ikki said.

"Yeah... Oh."

Just then, the baby squirmed a bit and opened his eyes.

"Bah?"

He looked up at Stella, blinking in apparent confusion...

“Bwaaaaaaah!”

...before starting to bawl his eyes out. He also started flailing his limbs in an attempt to escape Stella’s arms. He was probably panicking since his mom wasn’t around.

“H-Hey, stop squirming! It’s dangerous!”

“Waaaaah!”

“Wh-Wh-Wh-What do I do, Ikki?!”

Stella hugged the baby tight to make sure she didn’t drop him and turned to Ikki for help. Unfortunately, Ikki didn’t know how to handle babies either. Shizuku was only a year younger than him, so he’d never had to take care of her when she was a baby. He tried playing peekaboo with the kid, but that only made him cry harder.

“Waaaaaaaaaaah!”

“H-His crying got worse?!”

“M-My bad.”

Seeing the two of them completely at a loss, Sara stepped between them.

“Give him to me,” she ordered, then took the baby out of Stella’s arms and began rocking him back and forth.

“Sara?! Wait, aren’t you super weak?! It’ll be bad if you drop him!”

“Shut up. You’re being too loud.”

“Geh.”

Stella had hurriedly reached out to take the baby back, but Sara stopped her with an unexpectedly forceful glare. Then, Sara sat down and started stroking the back of the baby’s head.

“It’s okay, your mom will be here soon,” she said in a gentle voice.

“Au...bau?”

“He stopped crying...”

Indeed, the baby was now resting contentedly in Sara’s arms.

“That was amazing, Sara-san. Are you used to handling babies?” Ikki asked.

“Not particularly. But I’ve seen a lot while traveling around the world, and I’ve had to communicate with gestures and body language pretty often since I rarely spoke the native language of the

country I was in, so I'm good at figuring out what people want even when they can't use their words. He's just worried because his parents are gone. If we get flustered, he's just going to get more worried. We have to stay calm. Children are extremely sensitive to the emotions and expressions of adults," Sara said, staring pointedly at Stella and Ikki.

"W-We're sorry," they said in unison, bowing their heads.

If kids looked to adults for reassurance, those adults couldn't afford to lose their cool. Stella felt like she'd lost in terms of womanliness, and she was still worried that Sara wouldn't be able to hold the baby for long with her frail body, but she nevertheless let her keep the baby for now. Instead, she just kept a close eye on Sara's arms, ready to leap in and grab the baby if she dropped him. After a while, the baby started nuzzling Sara's chest.

"Pah! Pah!"

"Aha ha, even I can guess what he wants now," Stella said with a laugh. The baby was clearly hungry. "But sorry, neither of us has any milk for you."

"I'll see if any of the staff can't get some for us," Ikki said, getting to his feet. As he did so, Sara slid her bra off and exposed her nipples. "Bwuh?!"

"S-Sara?! What are you—"

"Quiet."

Sara once again glared at Stella, silencing her.

"Ah, s-sorry. But still..."

"I may not have any milk, but I'm sure letting him suck on my breasts will still calm him down."

Indeed, the baby sucked happily on Sara's teat, seemingly not minding the fact that no milk was coming out. Perhaps he wasn't actually hungry and was just seeking human warmth. Sara had been able to understand that thanks to her discerning painter's eye. She looked down at the baby and started singing a beautiful lullaby.

"Ninna nanna, ninna oh. Questo bimbo a chi lo dò?"

Stella immediately recognized the language as Italian, as she'd been schooled in all of the major European languages.

"Se lo dò al lupo bianco, me lo tiene tanto tanto."

Sara sang it with such tenderness that even though neither Ikki nor the baby could understand what she was saying, they were still able to understand the meaning of the lullaby. There was a motherly love in her voice that transcended all borders and languages.

"Ninna nanna, nanna fate. Il mio bimbo addormentate."

After a while, the baby finally fell back asleep. To Ikki and Stella, the sight of Sara gently rocking a baby was more beautiful than they could adequately express. She hadn't looked this stunning even when Alisuin had picked out the perfect outfit for her.

◆◇◆◇◆

Once the baby was asleep again, Sara handed him off to Ikki. Her arms weren't capable of holding him for much longer.

"He's sleeping so soundly now," Ikki said, smiling as he looked down at the baby.

"Stella is too..." Sara muttered, looking down at her.

"Zzz, zzz."

It seemed Sara's lullaby had put Stella to sleep as well. In combat, she never showed an opening on either offense or defense, but she apparently had no resistance to status effects like sleep.

Meanwhile, Sara took out a notebook, laid it open on her lap, and started sketching Ikki holding the sleeping baby. Her pencil strokes were slower and more refined than the frenzied brushstrokes she'd made when fighting. It was amazing how rich a world she was able to create with just a pencil, though. If he reached out and touched the rough paper, Ikki felt as though he'd feel the baby's soft cheek. He didn't have an artistic bone in his body, so to him, Sara's technique was like magic.

"Hmm? Do you want something?" Sara asked when she noticed that Ikki was staring.

"Ah, sorry. It's just, you're really good at drawing."

It made sense, as according to Stella, a single one of Sara's paintings had sold for 1.4 billion dollars. Even so, Ikki couldn't help but be moved as he watched Sara's artistic skill in action. Furthermore, while he had no artistic talent, his observation skills

were top-notch. He could tell that the pencil strokes Sara made look so casual were, in fact, finely controlled movements that required precisely coordinating one's arm, hand, and fingertips. It was clear that she had spent years upon years honing her craft.

Her pencilwork is no different from a master's swordsmanship.

It took an immense amount of love, devotion, and resolve to reach the level of skill that Sara had.

"You really do love art, don't you?" Ikki said. He'd initially been wary of her since, in his eyes, she'd just been a weirdo who was trying to get him to model nude for her. But he was genuinely awed by the strength of will he saw in her now.

"I do now..." she replied, turning to him. In response, he cocked his head.

"You didn't before?"

Sara looked into Ikki's eyes for a few seconds. Then, finally, she muttered her answer in a voice full of hate.

"I used to despise art."

◆◇◆◇◆

The girl known as Sara Bloodlily used to live in a small atelier in a suburb in the mountains of Italy. She'd been born with weak bones and had been unable to walk on her own as a child. As a result, what she could see of the atelier from her bed had been her entire world.

Sitting in the center of that world had been a broad back, the person it belonged to permanently facing a canvas and painting. That person had been her father, a painter of no renown whatsoever who had spent his time trying to perfect a religious painting of a messiah figure banishing a horde of demons with holy light. It was meant to be a depiction of salvation from Armageddon.

The only memory Sara had of her father was his back as he faced the canvas, trying to finish the painting for years and years and years. As far as she knew, he'd never once turned to look at her. Even when she'd called out to him, he'd never replied. A housekeeper he'd hired had taken care of her and seen to her

meals. She didn't even know what his face looked like since he'd never once turned toward her. All he'd done was paint, like a man obsessed.

"That's why I used to hate art. I blamed it for taking my father away from me."

She'd wanted him to play with her, to love her. Sara laid her entire past bare to Ikki.

"So then...what prompted you to start pursuing art yourself, Sara-san?" Ikki asked.

It had all started when her father had died, she explained. One day, her father had suddenly slumped over onto his canvas and died, just like that. According to the housekeeper who'd taken him to the hospital, the cause of death had been his chronic illness getting worse.

Sara had been left all alone in the atelier with the giant canvas and the incomplete painting on it. She'd spent three whole days crying, and after her tears had finally dried up, she'd glared at the painting that had killed her father with intense hatred. The canvas was wide enough to fill one whole wall of the room, and the center where the messiah was supposed to stand was conspicuously blank. While still glaring at the painting, Sara had sworn that she would destroy it. After all, she'd despised it from the bottom of her heart. It was because her father had been obsessed with the painting that he'd never turned to even look at her.

Using every ounce of strength in her body, Sara had managed to crawl out of her bed and to the canvas over the course of a day. Then, leaning heavily against a chair, she'd managed to stand up in front of it. She'd then grabbed the painting knife that had been dropped next to the canvas and prepared to rip it to shreds.

"But in the end...I couldn't bring myself to cut up the painting."

As she'd gotten close to the painting, she'd noticed something that she hadn't been able to see from the bed: the sea of empty paint tubes that had littered the floor, and the dozens of frayed paintbrushes lying next to them. At the same time, she'd seen just how many times her father had painted over the canvas, then scraped the paint off and started all over again. More than anything,

Sara had been able to sense the immense amount of passion her father had poured into the painting.

Upon noticing all of that, Sara's hatred had been replaced by a profound sadness. The tears she'd thought had dried up had started spilling out again. Her father had spent an inordinate amount of time on that painting. He'd neglected his daughter and even his health as he'd poured his lifeblood into creating that one work. But in the end, he hadn't even managed to complete it. Despite having staked his entire life on it, her father had not been blessed by the muses, and so hadn't been able to finish his painting. Was there anything more heartbreaking than that?

When she'd thought of how her father must have died burning with regret, Sara had been unable to stop herself from crying again. She knew better than anyone just how much time he'd spent with the painting. It was why she'd come to hate it in the first place. But as the tears spilled down her cheek, Sara had vowed to finish the work that her father had been unable to.

"I realized that finishing the painting was the one thing I could do for my dead father. Crying for him or laying flowers at his grave wouldn't mean anything."

That was the one and only memento Sara had of her father, after all. Afterward, she'd been adopted by her father's friend, Kazamatsuri Kouzou, whom he'd asked to look after his daughter if anything happened to him. Sara had then used Kouzou's Rebellion connections to get Rebellion's best doctor and one of its twelve Numbers, the Blazer known as the Grand Professor, to cure her illness. She'd had to go deep into debt to do it, and even then, the Grand Professor had been unable to fully heal her bones. She'd gained nothing more than the ability to move around, but that had been enough.

In order to free her late father from his biggest regret, Sara had started traveling the world, honing her artistic talents and searching for the perfect model for the messiah figure who would banish the demons in her father's painting. Traveling as a lone woman carried many dangers with it, and she had nearly lost her life multiple times, but even so, she had never given up. After spending ten years

traveling the world, she'd come to realize that having a half-assed technique or basing the messiah on a half-assed model would simply result in her being swallowed up by the burning grudge that still resided in that painting.

"As I kept on polishing my skills...I started to realize that I liked art. It honestly made me happy knowing that I was like my father in that regard."

"I see..."

After hearing Sara's story, Ikki finally understood why she was so obsessed with drawing him. He still had no idea what about him made him the perfect model, but he was willing to accept that he just lacked those particular artistic sensibilities. The point was, if it had taken Sara ten long years to find a model she thought was ideal, there was no way she was going to give up.

"But why?" Ikki asked.

"Why what?"

"Why are you willing to go so far for a father who never showed you any love?"

While Ikki could understand that this meant the world to Sara, he still couldn't understand why. Her father had never even turned to her. How could she care so much about him when she didn't even know what his face looked like? He couldn't help but feel like her situation was similar to his own, which was why he'd felt compelled to ask.

"Because I love him," Sara answered as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"Even though he never loved you? Even though you can't even recall his face?"

"It's true that I can't remember his face. In fact, I have no memories of his face since he never looked at me. He probably wasn't a good father by most standards. But even so, despite everything, I was never once able to hate my dad. So I'm fine with things being like this. As long as I know my feelings are real, I don't mind that my love was never reciprocated."

For all Sara knew, her father might genuinely have hated her. Hell, he might not even have wanted her to pick up the brush and

try to finish his work. But that didn't matter to Sara. At the end of the day, he had still been her father.

"Maybe it's selfish of me to keep loving him, but as his daughter, I have the right to that selfishness, don't you think?"

"Ah..."

In that moment, Ikki finally realized what answer he truly wanted to give his own dad.

I see...

For so long, he'd thought he would eventually need to cut ties with his dad. Neither of them was going to compromise on the path they walked, and their two paths would forever be at odds. Because of that, he'd always believed he would need to settle things once and for all at some point.

But that's not true.

Even if Itsuki didn't care for Ikki, even if he wanted to disown his son, Ikki wasn't obligated to do things just because his dad wanted them. After all, it wasn't as if Itsuki had ever done anything for Ikki that Ikki had wanted either. There was no need for Ikki to go along with his dad's plans. He certainly hadn't thus far.

That's right. What matters is how I *feel!*

Regardless of what Itsuki felt, if Ikki didn't hate his dad, then there was no reason to force himself to try to hate him. Even if it meant they would be at odds forever, that didn't matter. Ikki and Itsuki were still related by blood, even if their paths were destined never to intersect.

I guess I'll be a little selfish too, then. A child's allowed to be selfish when it comes to their parents, after all.

That was the answer Ikki came to regarding his troubles with the Kurogane family. Once he found it, he felt a weight that he'd been carrying with him since childhood vanish from his chest. At long last, he was able to affirm his feelings of wanting to be Itsuki's son, even if that meant the two of them had a very twisted relationship. He beamed, genuinely happy from the bottom of his heart.

"You're finally smiling again," Sara said in a relieved voice. "I can't have my model looking depressed. It wouldn't be fitting for a messiah."

Only then did Ikki realize that Sara had seen herself in him when he'd been talking to Itsuki. That was why she'd said, "I'm not so sure about that." She'd known from experience that parent-child relationships weren't so simple. And now that she'd told him her story, he knew that there was still a way he could try to connect with his dad. She'd done all of this for him.

"Thank you, Sara-san. I've finally found the answer to one of my biggest worries."

"If you want to thank me, how about becoming my model?"

Ikki smiled wanly in response. But now that he knew her past, he could understand why she was so obsessed with having him model for her. Finishing that painting was her raison d'être. That being the case, he couldn't just brush her off like before.

"Fine, I'll do it," he said.

"What?"

Sara gave him a stunned look. She hadn't expected him to acquiesce so easily. Though of course, Ikki wasn't planning on agreeing just like that.

"I have one condition, though. You have to beat me in our upcoming match."

"I see."

"If you win, I'll be your model like you want. But if you lose, you have to promise to give up on getting me to model nude for you. Can you agree to those terms?"

The look in Sara's eyes suddenly transformed, and Ikki felt goose bumps rise on his arms.

"Sure."

Her eyes were glowing with a fierce fighting spirit, and Ikki gasped at the intensity in her gaze. He'd never seen her look so serious before.


© Won

The Seven Stars Battle Festival was a tournament for knights to test their skills against one another. But Sara wasn't a warrior like Ikki and Stella. Though her multifaceted powers made her an unbelievably strong Blazer, she had no interest in winning the tournament. It was clear that she didn't care all that much about Rebellion's goals either. Having heard her story, Ikki knew the only thing she was willing to stake her life on was that painting. Everything else she did was just for the sake of achieving that goal. During her battle against Kuraudo, she hadn't been the least bit fired up.

But that's such a waste.

The passion Sara had for art was just as strong as the passion Ikki and the others had for battle. While they were walking down different paths, the strength of their determination was the same. If anything, it was possible that Sara's was even stronger than Ikki's own. He didn't know for sure, but he wanted to find out. That was why he'd made his modeling conditional on her beating him. He wanted her to channel all of that passion, all of that determination, into fighting him. And he knew this was the best way to do it. She'd come at him for real now, which was exactly what he wanted. The Seven Stars Battle Festival was supposed to be where the very best knights threw everything they had at one another in an earnest attempt to come out on top.

◆◇◆◇◆

Some time later, a panicked mother came running over from the mall across the street, and Ikki, Stella, and Sara safely handed the baby back to her. The three of them had a light lunch at the food court, then returned to the stadium by 4:30 p.m. There were only two hours left until the third round of matches began.

Hagun Academy Bulletin

Character Intros Journalist: Kusakabe Kagami

Jougasaki Byakuya

■PROFILE

Affiliation: Bukyoku Academy

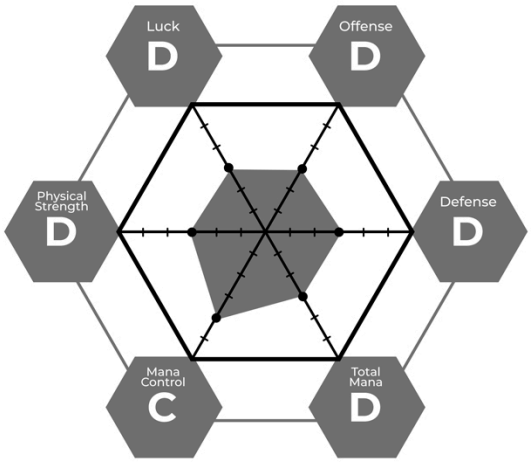
Third-Year

Blazer Rank: C

Noble Art: God Hand

Nickname: God's Eye

Summary: The runner-up in last year's Seven Stars Battle Festival.







Kagamin's Thoughts!

His actual combat abilities aren't particularly impressive, but his noble art, God Hand—which lets him freely teleport anything he's locked onto—is exceptionally well suited to the Seven Stars Battle Festival. He can easily ring out his opponents by teleporting them inside a boulder or something, so I think Ikki-senpai made the right call when he decided to use Ittou Rakshasa at the start of the fight.

© Won

Chapter 10: The Third Round Begins

"It is now 6 p.m."

Following that notice being played over the stadium loudspeakers, a bell chimed three times. The floodlights turned on, bathing the arena in harsh white light and chasing away the summer evening gloom.

"Sorry for the wait, everyone!" the announcer boomed. "We will begin the third round of the sixty-second Seven Stars Battle Festival shortly!"

Cheers erupted from the stands, and the spectators started stamping their feet on the bleachers.

"Once this night's over, the top eight will have been whittled down to the top four. The crowd's excitement has already reached a fever pitch! I, Iida, will continue serving as your announcer, and we have Yaotome here to provide pro commentary! Now then, let's have our first two fighters take the stage! Coming from the blue gate, we have Kaga Renji!"

A massive man built like a boulder lumbered out of the blue gate and into the brightly lit arena.

"It's him! It's Kaga!"

"He's crazy huge!"

Kaga Renji, the star of Hokkaido, was as manly looking as a man could be.

"From Rokuzon Academy in the frozen lands of the north comes the famous Panzer Grizzly! Standing at a towering 236 centimeters tall and weighing a massive 370 kilograms, they call him 'grizzly' for a reason! He is without a doubt Japan's foremost powerhouse when it comes to pure strength! Promising Blazers have been taken out left and right, yet he hangs on as the only member of last year's top

eight to make it this far! Will he be able to push his way through the newcomers and show us the pride of a veteran, or will he fall like the others?!" Iida shouted.

"Kaga's a fighter who excels at both offense and defense. Thanks to his massive size, his punches hit like dump trucks, and his Blazer powers further enhance that strength by letting him turn his entire body into steel. He's strong, he's tough, and thanks to how simple his power is, he doesn't have to worry much about his compatibility with his opponents. He can run his game plan no matter who he's up against. Most of the remaining fighters have a lot of quirks to them, and it's opponents like those that fighters like Kaga handle best," Yaotome explained.

As Kaga stepped into the ring, he ripped his shirt off and tossed it aside. He hadn't done that during his previous matches, so presumably, it was a sign that he was getting serious.

"Will you look at that! Kaga ripped off his specially made extra-extra-large uniform and is wearing only his fundoshi! What did he do that for?!"

Yaotome once again offered an explanation.

"Not all Blazer Devices take the shape of a weapon. For some Blazers, they can be rings, or collars, or glasses. In Kaga's case, his Device, Raiden, is that fundoshi. Since he's normally wearing it underneath his clothes, you rarely get to see it, but this time he's opted to wear nothing but his Device. It's probably his way of pumping himself up since he knows this will be his hardest battle yet."

Indeed, Kaga had stripped down to just his Device as a way to psych himself up for the coming fight. He squatted low like a sumo wrestler and lifted his left leg high into the air before slamming it down onto the ring. The entire arena shook, and the left half of the ring sank a few centimeters into the ground. The spectators watched on in silent awe.

"M-My god! That one stomp was enough to tilt the entire ring and sink half of it into the ground! And now he's doing the same thing with his right leg!"

Kaga swung his right leg down and sank the right side of the ring

a few centimeters as well, making it level.

"The ring's balanced again, but it's clearly sunk a good bit into the ground! What an immense display of power!"

"It certainly was an impressive display, but you should take a good look at the ground under his feet," Yaotome pointed out.

"His feet? W-Wait, what on earth?!" As Iida looked down at Kaga's feet, his jaw dropped open. "He's left footprints in the ring! These rings are made of a special type of stone that not even napalm can scratch so that Blazers can fight freely on them, and he's smooshed it like it was sand!"

"What's even more impressive is that even though he's carved his footprints into the ring, he hasn't put a single crack in the stone around him. It's proof that he concentrated all of his strength perfectly downward without letting it disperse outward. Kaga isn't just strong, he has impeccable control over that strength. Very impressive."

"Whoooooa! He's so cool! He's massive *and* skilled!"

"Squeeee! You're my favorite, Grizzles!"

The audience started cheering Kaga on. His unique style of fighting, which was based off of sumo, as well as his surprisingly gentle and broad-minded personality, had garnered him avid fans all across the country. Unsurprisingly, many of those fans had come to Osaka to watch him fight in the Seven Stars Battle Festival. Normally, Kaga always smiled and waved for his fans before a match, but not today. Today, the Panzer Grizzly was wholly focused on the gate across from him, where his opponent would appear.

"Kaga's little show has gotten the crowd excited! But his calm eyes are focused on one thing and one thing alone: the red gate, from which his nemesis will appear! Now then, let us introduce the other remaining Blazer in the A block!"

The spotlights all turned to shine on the red gate. Ouma strolled out of it, wearing his usual loose kimono.

"The eldest son of the esteemed Kurogane family and the prodigy who took the Blazer world by storm when he was still in elementary school! When he won the Under-12 World Cup, everyone thought for sure that he would be the one to follow in Kurogane Ryouma's

footsteps and become a national hero! But contrary to expectations, our lauded prodigy had no interest in making a name for himself! He was tired of the Federation's stifling rules that required Blazers to fight with their Devices in phantom form until they were of age! He sought true carnage, pitched battles where your life was on the line! All so that he could ascend to even greater heights! And so, he vanished from the public eye!"

Iida continued with Ouma's introduction.

"People all over Japan lamented the loss of such a talented young man, but now he's returned to Japan! In his final year of high school, he has at last deigned to take part in the Seven Stars Battle Festival! And he's so much stronger than when we last saw him that he seems like an entirely different person! Representing the newly formed Akatsuki Academy, we have the Gale Emperor, Kurogane Ouma!"

Ouma's long hair and long sleeves flapped in the wind as he steadily made his way into the ring. Everyone in the crowd held their breath as they watched his entrance.

"H-Holy shit..."

"That pressure is insane!"

He was just walking, but the bladelust Ouma exuded felt sharp enough to cut skin and reached far enough that even the audience felt it. It was as if they were looking down at a drawn sword, poised to strike.

"Yaotome, it's been five years since the Gale Emperor's last public match. What do you make of the Blazer we see before us now?"

Yaotome lapsed into thought for a few seconds.

"He's strong," she said finally.

"Th-That's it?"

"Frankly, I can't say much more at this point."

"Why not?"

"Because so far we haven't seen him get serious even once," Yaotome said simply.

Ouma had won his previous two matches in the exact same way: Both opponents had intuited that they would be at a disadvantage in melee range, so they'd tried to fight a long-ranged magic battle. In

response, Ouma had simply walked up to them and cut them down. He hadn't tried to dodge or block their long-ranged barrages. He'd just walked straight through them, taking the hits directly. But his opponents' attacks hadn't been able to scratch him or even slow his advance.

They had been such one-sided battles that you couldn't really tell much about Ouma's strength from them. He hadn't used any special techniques or Noble Arts. He'd been so far above his opponents that he simply hadn't needed to. As a result, all Yaotome could say was that he was strong. There was no real information to go off of, so there was nothing to comment on.

"However, we might learn something in this match. Back in their elementary school days, the Gale Emperor and Panzer Grizzly often fought pitched battles against each other. Since Panzer Grizzly isn't the type to use cheap tricks or subterfuge, he'll likely charge straight at Ouma. And as we've seen, his strength is impressive enough that even a Rank A Blazer won't be able to shrug off his blows. I get the feeling this match will finally show us what Ouma's learned in the past five years."

"I see. Now *that* sounds exciting! And it looks like both fighters have reached their respective starting points."

Kaga and Ouma stared at each other across the ring. After a few seconds, Kaga spoke.

"Ouma, it's been six years since we last fought in the ring. This sure brings back a lot of memories!"

"I don't recall us ever being close."

"Gah ha ha. I see you're as aloof as always. Well, whatever. Even if you're not happy about our reunion, I am! I've always wanted to fight a serious battle with you, where we both put our lives on the line! Besides, this is finally my chance to pay you back for thrashing me during those elementary school tournaments! I've trained my body this much solely to surpass you!"

Kaga thumped his chest proudly. He hadn't once managed to beat Ouma back when they were both in elementary school. But now, he'd grown, and his body was far larger than average. He wouldn't go down so easily this time. Kaga had no idea what Ouma

had been up to these past five years, but he was confident that his relentless training had let him finally catch up to his old rival, thus he wasn't afraid even though his opponent was a Rank A Blazer.

"I won't be like your first two opponents. I won't run from you, so come at me seriously, Ouma!" he declared.

"Whether or not I have to get serious will depend entirely on you, Renji," Ouma replied in a cool voice.

"Gah ha ha, can't argue with that! All right then, guess I'll *make* you get serious!"

"Looks like their old rivalry is still going strong!" the announcer shouted. "Panzer Grizzly boldly proclaims that he'll take the Rank A Gale Emperor head-on! Coming from any other Blazer, that would sound reckless, but Kaga might just have the strength to pull it off! Like Yaotome mentioned, this might be the match where we finally see what Ouma's truly capable of! Now then, the starting signal should be firing any moment now... And there it is!"

◆◇◆◇◆

It was Kaga who made the first move.

"Raaaaaaaaah!"

Yelling loudly enough to shake the entire stadium, Kaga wreathed his body in mana. His skin started to turn the silvery-gray of polished steel, and in seconds, everyone could see why he'd been given the nickname Panzer Grizzly. This was Kaga Renji's Noble Art, Steelification. It quite literally turned his body into superhard steel.

"Kaga's made the first move! He's transformed into a hulking steel behemoth!"

"He can't fight at full strength without hardening his body like this, so it makes sense that's what he'd do first."

As Yaotome had mentioned, Kaga had to do this in every match. It made his already powerful blows exponentially stronger, and at the same time, it made his body sturdy enough to repel any attack. His overwhelming sumo strikes were the perfect martial arts style to make the best use of his unique strengths as well. He generally overpowered his foes through sheer strength and didn't bother

setting up elaborate strategies or counters to what his enemies might do.

"Gah ha ha! Sorry, mister commentator, but that's not quite right!" Kaga shouted with a hearty laugh.

"Hmm?"

"This isn't Steelification! This is my trump card that I was saving for Ouma!" As his body finished transforming, Kaga once again enveloped himself in mana. "Graaaaah!"

With another yell, his body started transforming yet again. Two new arms grew out of each shoulder, giving him six arms in total.

"U-Unbelievable! H-He grew new arms?!"

Iida stared down at the ring in shock. Meanwhile, Yaotome calmly analyzed this new technique.

"I see... He isn't just hardening himself, he's fundamentally transforming his body. Not only will this allow him to launch three times as many attacks, it'll massively increase his defensive power as well!"

"Gah ha ha, that's exactly right, miss! My Device, Raiden, lets me turn my body into steel! But it also lets me reshape that steel however I want! This is my new Noble Art! I call it Steel Asura! I spent five whole years perfecting this technique just to beat you, Ouma! Prepare yourself!"

Kaga crouched low, preparing to charge. He then smacked a fist into the ground to raise his upper body and launch himself forward. His punch left a deep imprint in the ground as he shot forward like a cannonball.

"M-My god, he's fast!" the announcer exclaimed. "How does such a massive body move so quickly?! And how will Ouma respond to this charge?!"

However, Ouma just did the same thing he had during his first two matches.

"What the?! Ouma isn't moving to block or dodge! He's just walking straight toward Kaga! He doesn't seem even the tiniest bit scared!"

"He sure is confident. But I feel this might be a tad reckless," Yaotome said.

The crowd seemed to be thinking the same thing. Not even Stella Vermillion could completely neutralize Kaga's offensive might with just a basic mana barrier. There was no way Ouma would come out unscathed if he took Kaga's blows head-on. Still, he didn't make any move to block. That made Kaga furious. It was as if Ouma was looking down on him. In fairness, he'd never once managed to beat Ouma, so it was only natural that Ouma thought Kaga was beneath him.

Fine, I'll open your eyes with this first palm thrust!

"Hraaaaah!"

Kaga thrust his palm toward Ouma's face, concentrating all of his strength and weight into a single point. There was a thunderous roar as he made contact, and a massive shock wave spread out across the arena.

Having taken the blow directly, Ouma's body bent backward, and he started to slump toward the ground. Naturally, Kaga took full advantage of that momentary opening. He launched his famed Hundred Thrusts at Ouma.

Hundred Thrusts was, as the name implied, a simple technique where he unleashed rapid-fire thrusts at lightning speed. It was simultaneously an offensive and defensive technique since it let him attack his opponent while also deflecting any counterattacks they attempted. But now he was doing it with six arms instead of two, which made the attack thrice as deadly. In fact, it was basically a new technique unto itself.

"Take this! Asura's Hundred Thrusts!"

"Kaga's trying to end things here and now! What an impressive series of thrusts! I can't even follow them with my eyes! Will this actually work on Ouma?!"

Since he'd been knocked back by Kaga's first blow, Ouma wasn't able to dodge the consecutive thrusts. He was trapped in the barrage, and Kaga could tell that his blows were, in fact, having an impact.

I can win this.

Ouma looked like he was on the verge of dropping to the floor.

Just a little bit more!

Sensing that the victory he'd spent five years training for was within his grasp, Kaga put his full strength behind the final thrust.

What?!

But a second later, he became far less certain of his victory.

I'm the one on the offensive, so why am I suddenly so worried?

Every single one of his thrusts had landed squarely on Ouma's body, so there shouldn't have been anything to fear. In addition, he'd felt his blows doing real damage to Ouma. But despite that, Ouma refused to fall.

Why won't he go down?!

"So this is the technique you created to defeat me?" Ouma muttered, and suddenly, everything became clear to Kaga.

As Ouma straightened back up, Kaga realized that while he'd felt resistance in every thrust, that hadn't meant he was doing damage. As he looked down at Ouma again, he felt like he'd been pointlessly slapping his hand against a massive boulder that towered all the way to the heavens.

He isn't fazed at all! I didn't actually hurt him!

Even Kaga's prized thrusts of steel hadn't been able to reach Ouma. Ouma hadn't been knocked back by Kaga's first thrust; he'd simply leaned back, then crouched low in order to drop into the optimal stance to swing his sword.

"The past five years were a waste, Renji."

"What?!"

There was a loud whoosh, and Kaga suddenly felt the right side of his body grow lighter. In one slash, Ouma had cut off his three right arms. Chills ran down his spine. His body was as hard as steel, yet the Gale Emperor had sliced through it with seemingly no effort at all.

"Raaaaaaah!"

He didn't let that deter him, though, and he continued showering Ouma with blows using his remaining left arms. He refused to back down. Kaga was a short-range fighter to his very core. He didn't even know how to fight at long range, so he would rather go down doing everything he could to win than retreat and slowly wait to get whittled down. But if six arms hadn't been enough to match Ouma,

then three arms definitely wouldn't be. There was another flash as Ouma swung his sword back down, cutting off Kaga's other three arms. He then swung his blade horizontally and severed Kaga's legs.

"Ngh!"

The steel body Kaga had honed solely to defeat Ouma had proven to be far inferior in both offense and defense. Without his legs to support him, Kaga's torso dropped to the ground. As he looked up at Ouma, he realized just how massive the gap was between them. It was truly despair-inducing.

So this is how strong you are? No, wait...

As someone who'd fought Ouma numerous times in the past, Kaga could tell. Ouma wasn't supposed to be a knight of this caliber. While he'd certainly been a talented Blazer, his potential hadn't been so great that he could have become this strong in just five years. Ouma's offensive and defensive capabilities were clearly unnatural. He'd acquired some source of strength that Kaga couldn't see. He couldn't have blocked Kaga's thrusts with magic and mana alone.

"Just what did you—" Before he could finish his question, Kaga suddenly started coughing up blood. "Gah?!"

He looked down to see that Ouma had stabbed through his chest with his bare hand. And held in it as it stuck out of Kaga's steel back was his beating heart.

"Sto—"

The referee tried to jump in and stop the fight, but before he could, Ouma crushed Kaga's heart in his fist.

◆◇◆◇◆

The audience began to scream as Ouma ruthlessly put an end to the match.

"N-Nooo!"

"No way! Did he really..."

"H-He seriously killed him! What a heartless bastard!"

"U-Unbelievable! It looked like the match was decided once he'd sliced off Panzer Grizzly's arms and legs, but the Gale Emperor took things one step further and c-crushed Kaga's heart! What a

merciless Blazer!” Iida shouted, trying his best to maintain his composure as he commentated.

The medical team rushed into the ring, as did Hagun’s director, Shinguuji Kurono.

“Clock Lock!” Kurono shouted, summoning her silvery-white pistol —Ennoia—and shooting Kaga with it.

As the bullet hit Kaga, his entire body froze. Kurono had stopped time around him. Thanks to that, he stopped bleeding out, and his brain stopped decaying from a lack of oxygen. Kurono then turned to the medical team.

“Hurry up with that stretcher! Get him to a capsule before my power wears off!” she ordered.

“O-Okay!”

Kaga was on the verge of death, and if Kurono hadn’t been present, he almost certainly would have died out there in the ring. But Ouma didn’t even watch as his opponent was carted off to the medical ward. He just turned on his heel and walked away.

“Ouma doesn’t even spare a single glance for his defeated foe! He doesn’t seem to care at all about his old rival! It’s as if he considers Kaga beneath him!”

“Eek...”

“Wh-What a scary guy...”

There was no applause from the audience as Ouma walked off. They were too terrified by his brutal display. Of course, duels between adult knights were no game. People often got seriously injured, and in rare cases, they lost their lives. That was the reason none of the schools forced their students to take part in the Seven Stars Battle Festival. Everyone who’d come to this tournament was a hardened warrior who was prepared for death. Therefore, no one could truly blame Ouma for nearly killing Kaga.

At the same time, the audience couldn’t help but feel as though Ouma had gone too far. He’d made it clear that he was the superior fighter. That being the case, taking his opponent’s life as well felt like overkill. But as everyone watched on, stunned, one person suddenly started clapping.

“Ah, there’s applause coming from someone! Who is it?!” Iida

looked around the stadium, then gasped in surprise as he caught a glimpse of flaming red hair. “It’s Stella! The Crimson Princess, Stella Vermillion, is the only one applauding Ouma as he walks out of the stadium!”

The audience all turned to her in confusion, but Stella ignored them and spoke directly to Ouma.

“That was a splendid match, Ouma.”

To everyone else, it had looked like a one-sided beatdown where Ouma went too far. But Stella had called it a good match. Of course, that was because she understood it on a deeper level than the rest of the audience. They all thought it had been a one-sided victory, but that wasn’t the case. Panzer Grizzly had been stronger than Ouma had made it seem.

“Kaga perfected his Noble Art to the point where he can grow more arms. Cutting his limbs off might not have been enough to stop him. You needed to kill him or you wouldn’t have been able to ensure your victory, isn’t that right?”

Someone of Ouma’s caliber could have avoided dealing a fatal blow and simply kept fighting until Kaga’s spirit broke. Had Kaga tried to use some kind of ploy to outwit him like his first two opponents had, Ouma might have done just that. Stella knew, though, that the reason he hadn’t was that he’d taken the battle seriously. Kaga hadn’t made him go all out, but he had at least forced him to get serious.

It was precisely because Kaga had fought him head-on without cowering that Ouma had considered their match one that was worth truly winning. And Ouma was the kind of man who went that far against opponents he considered worthy. He was willing to kill if that was what it took to secure a guaranteed victory. But even though he was such a ruthless knight, he’d left Stella alive.

“Back then, you didn’t kill me even though you could have,” Stella said, referring to the first time they’d fought. Ouma certainly could have killed her if he’d wanted to. Back then, there’d been a huge gap in strength between them. “You were careful not to break me when we fought.”

Even though Stella was also a Rank A Blazer and ostensibly a

more dangerous opponent than Kaga. She wasn't sure why Ouma had left her alive, but she did know that it meant he hadn't considered her a worthy opponent back then. Beating her had meant nothing to him. She'd never felt more humiliated in her life.

"I'm sorry I wasn't worth your time back then," she said as she glared down at him. "But things are different now. Tomorrow, I'm going to make you get serious. I'll make you go all out, draw on every ounce of strength you possess, and then...I'll crush you."

Ouma met Stella's fiery gaze, not flinching in the slightest.

"What a coincidence. I was thinking of doing the exact same thing to you," he replied, giving her a feral grin.

◆◇◆◇◆

A few seconds after Ouma's declaration, the announcer called out that Kaga was steadily recovering, and the crowd breathed a collective sigh of relief. A few people started excitedly discussing Kaga's battle, while others began hurling insults at Ouma, saying that he'd gone too far. Stella just sighed as she looked down at the ring, which was being cleaned up for the next match.

Just what is Alice doing? She thought, looking back at the entrance to the stands. She hadn't seen Alisuin since she'd left to help Shizuku prepare for her match. Shizuku and Ikki both had matches coming up, so it made sense that they weren't here, but there was no reason for Alisuin to still be missing. *I guess she wants to stay by Shizuku's side for as long as possible. Shizuku's next match is going to be a hard one for sure.*

Just then, Stella heard someone laugh from behind her.

"Ku ku ku! Well said, Unbowed Scarlet Dragon Empress. No one else would be so confident after witnessing that display."


© Won

“That’s not a nickname I’ve heard anyone call me before,” she said, turning around to see a familiar face. Beast Tamer Kazamatsuri Rinna had come out to meet her, wearing her signature pink dress and eye patch. As always, her maid, Charlotte Corday, was with her as well.

“Heh, that’s because I’ve granted it to you just now! Rejoice, for now you have a name worthy of your stature!”

“What do you want, Kazamatsuri? You guys destroyed my school, remember? We’re not friends,” Stella said in a curt voice. It wasn’t as if she’d forgiven them for what they’d done.

“Heh heh, did you hear that? She beat us to a pulp and burned us to a crisp, and she’s still not satisfied?”

“Indeed, milady. I can’t believe such a barbaric woman is royalty. What has the world come to?”

“Ngh...” Stella couldn’t argue back since she had indeed beaten them all quite badly. “Look, I’m not saying I want to beat you up again or anything! I just want to know what you’re here for!”

“We’re here to watch the match, obviously. After all, our sworn soul sister, Bloody da Vinci, is up next!”

“‘Soul sister’?”

“Allow me to translate. Sara-sama is the adopted daughter of Kazamatsuri Kouzou-sama, milady’s father. That makes the two of them stepsisters.”

“Precisely!” Kazamatsuri exclaimed.

“I still have no idea what you’re saying half the time...” Stella muttered.

“Don’t think, feel. Then you will be able to understand milady.”

“It’s not like I particularly *want* to understand. Anyway, you’re here to watch the match, right?”

“Indeed. But it would be boring to watch alone, so I thought I’d seek out the company of my royal, red-haired companion. Aren’t you honored?”

“No, mostly just annoyed... Also, wait, you’re not alone. You have your maid, don’t you?”

“Ch-Char and I are one in body and soul, so she doesn’t count.”

“Aaah, I’m not worthy of such high praise, milady. I’m just a

useless mutt...” Charlotte said, blushing.

Rinna’s expression stiffened, and she leaned into Stella.

“The truth is, Char’s gone a little crazy,” she whispered. “She feels responsible for not being able to protect me during our battle, and whenever it’s just the two of us, she brings out all sorts of horrifying torture implements and begs me to punish her for being a useless failure. It’s gotten to the point where I can’t stand being alone with her. So please, let me stay with you to watch the match!”

“Y-You’ve sure got it rough...”

“Indeed... I told her I don’t blame her for our loss, but she’s too loyal to listen...”

I don’t think she’s doing this out of loyalty. She’s probably just a masochist.

As someone who’d been in Charlotte’s shoes recently, Stella understood—though in her case, she hadn’t been quite that extreme. Suddenly, the two of them heard a crunching noise, and they turned back to see Charlotte chewing angrily on her nails as she glared at Stella with bloodshot eyes.

“How dare you get so close to milady... You’re close enough for your breath to reach her... I must give her a bath after this...or your stench will stain her!”

Holy crap!

Stella hurriedly took a few steps away from Rinna. She wanted to avoid getting involved in that relationship at all costs. That being said, letting Rinna watch the match with her wouldn’t hurt too much.

“It’s not like I own the space around me. And none of my friends are here to watch either, so there’s room. You can stay if you want.”

“Splendid! The more the merrier!” Rinna exclaimed with a smile. She sat down in the seat next to Stella’s and took the bag of popcorn and can of soda Charlotte offered her.

Where did that maid pull those out of?

“I was surprised he brought out his trump card in the first match today, though. He can only use that once per day, right?”

Rinna tossed some popcorn into her mouth as she turned to Stella. Naturally, she was referring to Ikki’s earlier match this morning.

"That's just how dangerous an opponent Byakuya was for Ikki. Byakuya's power is pretty annoying to deal with, so I can understand why he made that choice."

"Our sister on paper has a much more troublesome power, though."

"Is that really how you're going to refer to her?!" Stella exclaimed, but Rinna ignored her outburst.

"It's true that the power God's Eye possesses is difficult for someone like Another One to deal with. But surely now that he's seen Bloody da Vinci's true strength, he's concluded that she will be the tougher opponent, correct? The Blazers she clones using her Purple Caricature can even use their Noble Arts. In other words, she could simply create a copy of God's Eye and have him use his teleportation powers. Though she doesn't even need to rely on such roundabout methods, she can simply create an army of Another Ones and have them use Ittou Shura as well. How is he going to stand up to that without his ultimate trump card? Is this not where his win streak will finally be stopped cold?"

Rinna purposely phrased her words in a way that she hoped would make Stella anxious. Not because she held a grudge over her loss, but just because she wanted to tease Stella a little. However, Stella didn't seem fazed in the slightest.

"Ikki's definitely at a disadvantage, but as a Rank F knight, that's been true for every battle he's fought. But he never gave up. He never accepted defeat. That's why he's standing here today. He's proven he's one of the top eight Blazers in Japan, and he's going to win this match too and make it into the top four."

Stella had absolute faith in Ikki. After all, this was par for the course for him. He'd overcome far harsher obstacles during his journey here.

Besides, it seems like he finally managed to find an answer to whatever was bothering him, so he's in top shape.

Stella smiled to herself as she thought back to the confident smile Ikki had given her when they'd parted ways at the stadium. He'd looked like he'd been freed from a great weight, and that made Stella happy.

"You guys better prepare yourselves," she said, turning to Rinna. "The Ikki you're about to see today is stronger than ever!"

◆◇◆◇◆

While Stella and Rinna were discussing the upcoming match, Ikki was waiting not in the waiting room but in the hallway that led to the VIP box seats. After a few seconds, the person he was waiting for finally arrived.

"What took you so long, Dad?"

Kurogane Itsuki narrowed his eyes sharply and stared at his son.

"What are you doing here? Isn't your match about to start?"

"I was waiting for you. I finally have a response to your proposal from this afternoon." Ikki was, of course, talking about Itsuki's proposal that he disown Ikki and cut him off from the Kurogane family. "I'm afraid I have to refuse."

Itsuki's eyes widened in surprise. While it was selfish of him to want to exile Ikki simply to maintain the family's name and honor, it was a proposal that would have benefited Ikki as well. After all, once Ikki was no longer part of the Kurogane family, they'd have no reason to interfere with his dreams. Itsuki had been certain Ikki would accept, so Ikki's reply came as a shock.

"I can't live the kind of life you want me to, Dad. I know I'm just getting in your way, but I don't intend to change my path. I can't. I know deep down that this is the only road for me. That's why I also thought it might be better for us to cut our ties and go our separate ways. But I've come to realize that when all's said and done, I'm still *Kurogane* Ikki." And Ikki wanted to remain that way. "So I'm afraid I can't cut my ties to the Kurogane family. At the very least, I won't sign off on it."

In truth, Ikki wasn't sure why he didn't hate his dad. He certainly had every reason to. Even so, he didn't want to lose his connection to the man who'd never done a single fatherly thing for him. That being the case, there was no reason for him to put his feelings aside and do what his dad wanted.

"Are you sure this is what you want?" Itsuki asked after a few

seconds, his voice tinged with confusion. It was unlike him to show his feelings so openly.

Naturally, Ikki's answer didn't change. He'd decided to prioritize his feelings over his father's desires, so he was going to stick to his guns.

"I'm sure I'm just a nuisance to you, Dad, but—"

"This isn't about what I want," Itsuki interrupted, much to Ikki's surprise. "I'm asking you if *you're* happy with this."

"Huh?"

Ikki's thoughts froze. He hadn't been expecting Itsuki to ask that. This was perhaps the first time the man had ever asked him what *he* wanted. The shock was clear on his face.

"I am the head of the Kurogane family," Itsuki added. "I have a duty to manage this country's Mage-Knights and ensure that law and order are upheld. This has been my duty since I was born. I was raised to do this job, and I personally believe it's what I must do as well."

Itsuki was strict with everyone, including himself. He keenly felt the responsibility he bore on his shoulders as the man who'd inherited centuries of Kurogane family tradition and philosophy.

"I know of no other way to live, nor am I capable of choosing any other path," he continued. "That's the kind of man I am. I cannot support you as you walk down the thorny road you've chosen, for it goes against the rules of the Kurogane family. Nor can I congratulate you for crawling your way up to the nation's top eight Blazers, even though I know how much blood, sweat, and tears you must have shed along the way. No matter what you do, that won't change. That's simply the kind of man I am. So I ask you once more, are you sure you want to continue calling this man your father?"

For the first time, Ikki thought about what kind of life his father must have led. What it must have been like to be the son of Kurogane Genma, Ikki's grandfather. Despite being the son of Japan's greatest hero, Kurogane Ryouma, Genma had been opposed to Ryouma's ideals, as they'd gone against the traditional beliefs of the Kurogane family. He'd banded together with the other elders of the Kurogane family who disapproved of Ryouma and basically exiled

his own father from the family. After that, he'd become the new family head and the leader of the conservative faction within the Kurogane family.

As Genma's only child, Itsuki would be the next family head, so Genma and the elders of the clan had pushed all of their ideals and beliefs onto him. From basically the moment he'd been old enough to talk, he'd been given a strict and thorough education that firmly aligned with Genma's beliefs. They'd completely crushed whatever individuality he might have had as a child and carved their ideals deep into his psyche.

The result was the man that stood before Ikki today—the famous Iron Tyrant. A living embodiment of law and order who slavishly served his country, never compromising and never showing any mercy. That was the man Ikki's father, Kurogane Itsuki, was. Initially, Ikki had thought Itsuki wanted to cut ties with him because he didn't want to deal with a wayward son who was causing trouble for the family.

But no, I was mistaken...

In retrospect, Ikki should have realized that something had been off about his father's proposal. If Itsuki had wanted to get rid of Ikki because he was a troublemaker, he wouldn't have bothered asking for Ikki's opinion. He could have simply disowned him. There was only one reason for Itsuki to have asked if he wanted this too. For a man who believed wholeheartedly in his mission and the ideals instilled in him, who put his duty to his country and to the Blazers under him above everything, even family, who knew of no other way to live, and who was shackled by the responsibility he bore, this was the best way he'd been able to come up with to care for his son. His unwavering gaze told Ikki that better than any words ever could. Ikki couldn't help but smile.

I guess we have to be related by blood after all. Now I know where I get my awkwardness from.

Now there was even less reason for Ikki to change his mind.

"I'm sure. You're the only dad for me, Dad," Ikki said with a nod. "Not all parent-child relationships have to be perfect. You're not the only dad who's tried to push his ideals onto their kids, and I'm not

the only rebellious son out there either. Sure, we're always at odds, and our paths will probably never intersect. Who knows, maybe we'll end up fighting each other someday. But so what? Plenty of sons fight with their dads."

Ikki brushed aside all the pain and suffering Itsuki had inflicted on him like it was no big deal. Upon hearing that, Itsuki closed his eyes, ruminating on his son's words.

"I see. I suppose parents do quarrel with their children all the time. It's not such a serious matter that it warrants disowning you," he finally said with a sigh. There was the faintest hint of a smile on his lips.

"It looks like they've finished cleaning up the ring. The next match will begin in five minutes."

That announcement was Ikki's cue. He needed to head to the waiting room now, or he wouldn't make it in time for the match. And so, he turned on his heel.

"See you later, Dad."

"Ikki," Itsuki called out to him as he walked off. He only had one thing to say to Ikki, who'd called everything he'd ever done to him, including some horrific things no father should ever do to his child, a simple father-son quarrel. "You've grown into a splendid young man."

Upon hearing that praise, Ikki blushed a little.

"Heh heh."

Chuckling to himself, he ran off toward the waiting room. As he ran, he finally realized why it was that he'd never been able to hate his father. *"Since you can't do anything,* don't *do anything."* Every time Itsuki had told him that, he'd had the feeling he'd never truly meant it.

After all, you're the one who gave me the name Kurogane Ikki! Written with the characters for "one" and "radiance," you clearly wanted me to find the one place I can shine brighter than everyone else. In which case, I just have to show you how bright I can shine on this stage! I've gotta live up to the name you gave me, after all!

This was the path Ikki had chosen despite the hardships he knew it would bring, and he would walk it until he reached its end.

Let's do this. Just three more battles until I reach the top!

◆◇◆◇◆

"Thank goodness. It seems like Kaga's going to survive. I was worried that not even a capsule would be able to repair his heart."

"While it was certainly a shocking spectacle, at the end of the day, Kurogane Ouma simply crushed one of his organs. iPS capsules are capable of repairing any human organ within an hour."

"Medical technology really has come a long way."

"The real praise should be for how quickly the tournament staff responded. Shinguuji-san in particular knew just what to do to keep Kaga alive long enough to get him into a capsule. That quick thinking is what let her climb all the way to third place in the KOK rankings."

"Allow me to amend my statement, then. It's thanks to both the power of modern medicine and the skilled Mage-Knights who are willing to oversee the tournament that we can have an event as hyped as the Seven Stars Battle Festival."

As Iida and Yaotome chatted about the previous match, the buzzer signaling the end of the rest period rang. Iida cleared his throat and focused his attention back on the ring.

"Now then, everyone, it's time for the second match of the third round of the sixty-second Seven Stars Battle Festival!"

The audience burst into cheers, and they were much louder than they had been for the Kaga versus Ouma match. This was without a doubt the most anticipated match of the day.

"It's time for the fighters to enter the ring!"

The first person to step into the well-lit arena was Sara.

"Coming out of the blue gate, we have Akatsuki first-year Sara Bloodlily! With her ability to manipulate the concepts we associate with colors, she's more than earned the nickname 'Kaleidoscope.' But that's just a tiny fraction of her true power. Not only does she have a multifaceted fighting style, she can also create copies of other Blazers that are capable of using their Noble Arts thanks to her Purple Caricature! Truly a Noble Art like no other! Earlier this

morning, Muroto said she'd probably be classified as a Rank A Blazer now that we know the full extent of her abilities. She's an up-and-coming dark horse who might just sweep the whole tournament! What kind of show will we see in this battle, I wonder!"

"Oh? Is it just me, or does Bloodlily look a lot more focused than she did this morning?" Yaotome asked, looking down at Sara. Iida took a closer look at her and nodded.

"Now that you mention it, she's wearing different clothes too. I'm sure a certain subset of the audience is disappointed she's opted for a less risqué outfit, but the TV stations must be happy they won't have to censor anything!"

"No, um, she did change her outfit, but I was referring more to her expression."

"What about it?"

"Well, so far, I haven't seen Bloodlily look all that interested in her opponents. It seemed like her thoughts were elsewhere and that she didn't care about this tournament at all. But right now, she looks extremely motivated to fight."

Once Yaotome pointed it out, everyone in the audience noticed it as well. In her previous two matches, Sara had looked listless. Now, however, she was glaring intently at the red gate like a hunter locked onto her prey.

"Yaotome's right, Bloodlily's a lot more focused for this match! Maybe she doesn't see any point in keeping up a facade now that she's revealed her true powers?! I'm looking forward to seeing how she fights in this match! Speaking of which, her opponent's making his entrance right now!"

Everyone turned toward the red gate. Ikki strolled into the arena under the watchful gaze of tens of thousands of eyes.

"He has the least mana of any Blazer, but his swordsmanship is peerless! He's fought his way up from the bottom, taking down countless famous Blazers! And now he's here in the quarterfinals of the Seven Stars Battle Festival! It's the Rank F Blazer who defies all convention, Hagun Academy first-year Kurogane Ikki!"

"Squeeee! Kurogane-kun! I'm rooting for you!"

"You've got this in the bag, kid!"

The audience cheered louder than ever as Ikki stepped into the ring. With every match, his popularity grew.

"That's some impressive cheering! Kurogane's got himself quite a few fans now! The whole stadium's shaking!"

"The majority of the audience is from Osaka since the tournament's being held here. I suspect they appraise Ikki rather highly since he defeated two of Osaka's local heroes, Seven Stars Sovereign Moroboshi Yuudai and God's Eye Jougasaki Byakuya. But also..."

"What else?"

"Girls really love strong men who have gentle features like him. In truth, I've become a fan of him as well..."

"I-I see! But please keep your commentary impartial, even if you're an Ikki fan."

"Don't worry, I will. I know how to do my job," Yaotome said, a hint of indignation in her voice. She adjusted her glasses and took a closer look at Ikki. "Much like Bloodlily, Ikki's expression is different from usual."

"Why do you think that is?"

"I'm sure most of you are aware, but as a Rank F knight, Ikki possesses very little mana. His Noble Arts, Ittou Shura and Ittou Rakshasa, can only be used once a day because he lacks the mana to activate them more frequently. And since he used Ittou Rakshasa in his match against God's Eye earlier today, he won't be able to use either Noble Art here. Despite being in such a disadvantageous position, he seems quite relaxed. There isn't even a hint of worry in his stance. I suppose I should expect no less from a Rank F knight who's fought his way up to this point. He possesses both physical and mental fortitude in spades."

Ikki walked up to his starting position and looked over at Sara, who was still staring intently at him.

"I talked with my Dad before coming here," he said in a cheerful voice. He felt like he should tell Sara what had happened. "I wouldn't exactly say we made up, but I guess our relationship's better than before. It's all because you shared your story with me, Sara. Really, I can't thank you enough."

Sara's expression didn't change at all.

"Like I said, if you want to thank me, become my model. You better keep your promise."

Indeed, Sara didn't care for Ikki's thanks. All she wanted was to make him model for her. Now that he knew her past, Ikki fully understood her obsession.

"Of course. I never go back on my word," he replied with a nod. "But that's why I can't afford to lose. I promised to fight Stella in the finals. Besides, this is the path I've chosen to walk, even if it means I have to fight with my dad."

There would be no half measures. Ikki was fully committed now.

"I'm going to win and become the Seven Stars Sovereign," he continued. "Since I've decided to be true to my feelings, I can't afford to lose!"

As he said that, he summoned Intetsu. He pointed it at Sara and glared sharply at her. But Sara didn't back down.

"I have my own promise I need to keep. Even if it's a promise my father never agreed to, it's still the only connection I have to him...so I won't back down." Sara summoned her Device, Demiurge's Brush. "I'll beat you and make you model for me!"

"Sounds good. Let's find out which of us is more determined to fulfill their promise—and which of us has a stronger soul!"

The two of them stared at each other so intensely that it looked like sparks might start flying. After a tense couple of seconds, the announcer finally rang out.

"Both fighters have reached their starting points! That means it's time to start the battle! Let's go ahead!"

At long last, the battle began.

◆◇◆◇◆

Sara Bloodlily made the first move. She dipped her paintbrush into one of the colors on her palette and swung it out at a speed so fast that even Ikki had trouble following her hand.

"Color of Magic—Bright Yellow."

As the golden paint flew everywhere, there was a blinding flash

that robbed everyone in the stadium of their sight for a few seconds.

"Ngh!"

"Eeeek!"

"Whoa, that's bright!"

"The battle's barely begun, and Bloodlily's already dazzled us all with her Color of Magic! That was quite the flash-bang! Even I've been blinded by it!"

Iida squeezed his eyes shut, and tears leaked out of the corners of his eyelids. Meanwhile, Yaotome had swapped out her glasses for sunglasses a second before the flash-bang went out, sparing her retinas the pain. The flash only impaired everyone's vision for a few seconds, though, and before long, everyone could see the ring again.

"Okay, I can finally see again, and... Holy moly! A-Already?!" Iida's jaw dropped open as he looked down at the arena. The audience was equally stunned. A hundred skeletal soldiers wielding assault rifles were standing in neat rows in the ring. "That's the Necro Battalion that Bloodlily showed us in her last match! I can't believe she's brought it out this early!"

"Since we've seen them once before, she probably doesn't see any point in holding it back."

"Oh, she's getting serious rather quickly this time," Rinna said as she watched Sara throw out Noble Arts in quick succession. She'd known Sara for a while, and she'd almost never seen her take a fight this seriously. "What has her so motivated? Are she and the Worst One in some sort of quarrel?"

"They have a bet going for this match," Stella explained. "If Sara wins, Ikki will model for her. But if she loses, she has to give up on making Ikki her model."

For a second, Rinna looked confused, but then she started laughing. She'd been at the party where Sara had tried to strip Ikki naked, so she immediately figured out what was going on.

"I see. I suppose he doesn't want her hounding him all tournament. However..." Rinna lifted her eye patch, revealing an eye of a completely different color, and grinned at Stella. "That might have been a mistake. He ignited a blazing fire in a soul that's slow to

kindle but burns brighter than anything. The Worst One may be a skilled fighter, but at the end of the day, all he can rely on is martial arts. That's nothing more than an extension of the prosaic strength humans possess. How can he hope to defend against concentrated fire from modern weaponry with mere human prowess?"

Rinna's conclusion was a logical one. Ikki was one against many, and all he had was a sword against guns. There was nothing fancy to the difference in numbers and strength here, but that was precisely what made it so difficult to overcome. Especially since Ikki possessed no long-range abilities and was capable of no wide-area attacks. Sara had effectively targeted all of Ikki's weak points in one fell swoop.

That's a smart decision. She really has been watching me closely, Ikki thought, smiling slightly as he stared down the hundred gun barrels pointed at him. Kurashiki Kuraudo had managed to break through the Necro Battalion by using Celestial Counter, the crowning technique of the Ayatsuji Sword Style. Ikki was capable of using the same technique, but that didn't mean he could do the same thing Kuraudo had. Kuraudo had only been able to parry that hail of bullets because he also possessed the superhuman Marginal Counter. *Sara knows well what I can and can't do.*

However, Ikki wasn't worried.

"But that's only a problem if those bullets hit me!"

His slight smile turned into a wide grin, and he did something no one watching could have possibly predicted.

"Wh-What on earth?! Kurogane's walking *toward* that undead army?!"

Instead of trying to run or block, Ikki just started slowly walking toward the armed skeletons. Naturally, though, the skeletons didn't wait for him to leisurely make his way over, and they opened fire.

"Here come the bullets! How will Kurogane react?!" Iida shouted. The storm of bullets slammed into the ground and pulverized the stone, creating clouds of white dust that blocked everyone's view of Ikki. "I-Is the battle really about to be over this quickly?!"

Everyone else also thought it was over, but then they realized that they hadn't needed to worry.

"Wh-What the?!"

"No way!"

As the audience started shouting in surprise, Iida also stared down at the arena in shock. Ikki was continuing to walk forward out of the dust cloud, completely unharmed.

"He didn't get hit?! Not a single one of those bullets hit Kurogane! H-How did he manage to dodge them all?! Is this some new magic he's devised?!"

Yaotome shook her head.

"That wasn't magic."

"Then did he use the same Celestial Counter that Kurashiki did earlier today?!"

Yaotome shook her head again.

"No, it's not that either. In the first place, Celestial Counter is meant to be used against other martial arts techniques. It's not the kind of thing that can normally parry a storm of bullets. The only reason Kurashiki was able to do that was because of his Marginal Counter. No one else has the superhuman reflexes to do what he's capable of. The technique Ikki is using here is something very different. Rather than parrying the bullets, he's ensuring none of them actually hit him. Do you remember the second D-block match this morning?"

"Of course! Asagi Momiji versus Kurogane Shizuku! Ah!" At that, Iida realized what was going on. "Is this Stealth Step?!"

This time, Yaotome nodded.

"Indeed. Right now, he's rapidly swapping between Stealth Step and a normal gait to mess up the Necro Battalion's aim. And since they're all concentrating their fire on one point, that makes it very easy for him to dodge. Of course, assault rifles do have a bit of spread in their shots, but at this close range, that spread is minuscule."

"I-I see! The techniques War God Nangou Torajirou devised truly are impressive!"

"They are, but what's even more impressive is how Ikki managed to adapt the technique to suit his needs. Stealth Step was originally designed to be used against a single opponent, but he's modified it

to work against a group as well. I suspect the only other people who could manage such a feat would be the War God himself and the Demon Princess."

Just then, there was a change among the ranks of the undead soldiers.

"Uh-oh! It looks like the Necro Battalion has changed its formation!" The skeletal army gave up on aiming at Ikki and instead all aimed straight forward in an effort to cover the full width of the arena. "Kurogane can't mess up their aim anymore! What will he do now?!"

Though it looked to Iida like this was the end of the line for Ikki, Yaotome couldn't have disagreed more.

"What a foolish decision," she muttered.

A second later, everyone witnessed why Sara shouldn't have done that. The moment the Necro Battalion had switched from aiming at him to aiming straight forward, Ikki had stopped slowly advancing via Stealth Step and crouched low. From that position, he kicked off against the ground and dashed forward.

Naturally, the undead soldiers fired once more, but unfortunately, the attack was meaningless. The reason Ikki had been forced to use Stealth Step earlier was that concentrated fire at his position meant there were too many bullets for him to block. But with the army now firing in straight lines, there were far fewer bullets reaching him.

Even I can parry this number of bullets with Celestial Counter!

If he focused on parrying, Ikki could handle the lower-density barrage.

"My god, Kurogane breaks through the hail of bullets and slices his way into the Necro Battalion's formation!"

Ikki started slashing in all directions, cutting down skeleton after skeleton. The Necro Battalion tried to fight back, but he was so close and moving so fast that they couldn't draw a bead on him. Ultimately, no matter how powerful guns were, they could only fire in a straight line. They were extremely effective at that, but they only worked well at a distance. In close quarters, a sword was much faster and much stronger.

"H-Holy crap!"

The audience watched in awe as Ikki cut down a hundred skeleton soldiers with just his sword, using no magic whatsoever.

"Can humans really do that without using any magic?"

"H-He's so cool..."

Even the Mage-Knights watching were impressed by Ikki's swordsmanship. The head of the tournament organizing committee, Smiting Lightning Kaieda Yuuzou, turned to Itsuki, who was sitting next to him on the sofa in the VIP room.

"That's quite the kid you've got there," he said. "I doubt you could name five other people in Japan who are capable of accomplishing this much through martial arts alone."

"He has nothing else going for him," Itsuki replied in a voice devoid of emotion.

However, Kaieda knew Itsuki's stance and hadn't been expecting a real response to begin with. He turned back toward the arena.

He really is amazing. It's like I'm watching the Last Samurai back when he was in his prime. To think his techniques have the same amount of polish when he's still a boy who just came of age last year.

At the same time, he felt it was a shame that Ikki had to be Rank F. A Rank F rating meant one's magical power was so low that it wasn't worth recording. Even a Rank E Blazer could take a bullet and feel it as nothing more than a slightly heavy punch. That was how much a basic mana barrier could protect the body against attacks. But a Rank F Blazer didn't even possess enough mana to do that.

Most of a Mage-Knight's duties involved fighting, which made it dangerous for a Rank F Blazer to be officially accepted as one. That was why the international ranking system considered Rank F Blazers too weak to adequately fulfill the duties of a Mage-Knight. The Federation, which required member nations to train all their Blazers at officially run Mage-Knight schools, had the same stance. In other words, Rank F Blazers weren't even considered Blazers by the leading international Blazer organization. That was just how weak they were. No one thought they were capable of surviving in the world of Mage-Knights.

In a sense, it was only natural for Itsuki to be against letting Ikki

become a Mage-Knight, both as a parent worried about his son and as an administrator who was worried that other Rank F Blazers would try and follow in his footsteps. Being able to fight Rank A Blazers on even footing while being Rank F wasn't something just anyone could do. It was a miracle that took an immense amount of time and effort to accomplish. Most people weren't willing to put in that kind of effort. Kaieda understood that, which was why he couldn't help but feel that it was a shame Ikki was Rank F.

If only he'd at least had Rank E-tier mana, he would have had a much easier time climbing his way to the top.

Meanwhile, in the ring, Ikki had just finished mopping up the last of the Necro Battalion soldiers.

"Kurogane's wiped out the Necro Battalion! I-I can't believe how strong he is, even without Ittou Shura! Not even Bloodlily's Purple Caricature is enough to keep him down!"

The crowd cheered themselves hoarse as Ikki stood in the center of the ring. But his expression was taut, and he looked around cautiously.

"How will Bloodlily fight against— W-Wait, what?!" A second later, Iida realized why Ikki looked so tense. "What's going on?! Bloodlily is nowhere to be seen!"

Indeed, she was nowhere to be found in the giant, hundred-meter-wide ring. The audience looked around in confusion, wondering if she'd run away or been knocked out of the ring. But if that were the case, the referee should have started counting down.

No, she's here, Ikki thought to himself.

He knew she wouldn't run. This had to be another one of her Colors of Magic—likely the same one she'd used to escape notice in the afternoon. Stone Gray, the color she'd used to make her presence no greater than that of a roadside pebble.

Back then, we'd at least been able to keep track of her, but right now, she's completely gone. Her magic was potent enough that even Ikki couldn't find her with his eyes. *But you'll have to do better than that if you want to escape* my *notice!*

Ikki had ways of finding Sara that didn't involve sight. Her Stone Gray wasn't the kind of perfect stealth that the Hunter possessed;

he just couldn’t see her. So instead, he tried to listen. The stadium was circular, and the cheers of the crowd could be heard from all directions, but there would be a human-shaped hole where the sound waves coming from the audience were being blocked by Sara’s body.

“Found you!”

It took Ikki less than a second to pinpoint her location. He dashed toward her, preparing to cut her down. Now that he’d figured out her location, Stone Gray’s effect was completely neutralized. She had nowhere to run.

“So what? I bought enough time to finish drawing.”

However, Sara had no need to run. There was a loud, metallic clang as Ikki’s blade was blocked by another blade. But Ikki wasn’t fazed. He knew Sara wasn’t the kind of opponent to go down in one or two blows. Having seen her battle with Kuraudo, he’d been prepared to fight whatever Blazer she conjured up with Purple Caricature.

It didn’t matter who he was up against; he just needed to overpower them. If one slash wasn’t enough, then he’d keep on attacking until they were defeated. But when Ikki opened his eyes to see who he was facing, his resolve wavered.

No...way...

Staring back at him was a woman clad in all white, a pair of pure-white swords in her hands. He’d never forget that figure for as long as he lived.

“Purple Caricature—Twin Wings Edelweiss,” Sara said softly.

Ikki was once again facing down the world’s strongest swordsman.

◆◇◆◇◆

The appearance of Edelweiss stunned both the crowd and the commentators into silence. There wasn’t a single person who didn’t know that name, regardless of whether they were a knight. As the oppressive silence stretched on, the conjured Edelweiss spread her arms wide, readying her swords to strike.

"Ah?!"

Stella shivered and hugged her body. The moment Twin Wings had adopted a battle stance, Stella had felt such a powerful wave of bladelust that she couldn't look directly at her anymore. She was terrified down to her bones.

Th-That's the scariest thing I've ever seen!

Edelweiss's focus wasn't even directed at her, but still, Stella was overwhelmed. She broke out into a cold sweat just from witnessing the aura Edelweiss exuded.

I'm so far away from her and still it feels like her blade is at my throat! It was as if Stella could physically feel the cold metal of Edelweiss's swords. She knew instinctively that there was an enormous gap in strength between her and Edelweiss. *So this is the world's strongest swordsman...*

"U-Unbelievable! That's the world's least wanted criminal, the greatest swordsman in all of history, Twin Wings Edelweiss! Sara Bloodlily's created one hell of a Blazer for Ikki to fight!"

"M-My god... To think Bloodlily can create even Blazers of her caliber!"

"H-Holy fuck..."

"That's insane..."

Stella wasn't the only one overcome with fear. Iida, Yaotome, and every single person in the audience were trembling even more violently than Stella. While the Edelweiss in the ring was a fake that Sara had created with her Noble Art, it possessed the same intimidating aura as the original. Ikki, who'd fought the real Edelweiss once before, understood that better than anyone.

"Ngh!"

That was precisely why he chose to run. Without bothering to even maintain his stance, he just ran away as fast as he could. At the same time, he tried to steady his pounding heart. He realized now that he'd underestimated Sara's artistic talent. He hadn't expected her to be able to re-create the world's strongest swordsman with such perfection.

"I thought I'd mentally prepared myself for anything. I imagined how I'd deal with Stella or even Ouma-niisan...but this... To think

you can even draw someone of her caliber, Bloody da Vinci!”

“She’s the only swordsman you couldn’t beat. It’s only natural that I’d draw her. It took almost all of my mana to summon her, but she’s the strongest illusion I could possibly hope to create, and the only one I know of that’s certain to defeat you!”

As Sara proudly proclaimed her victory, the clone of Edelweiss soundlessly closed the distance between itself and Ikki, swinging its blades down at lightning speed.

“Ngh!”

“She’s so—”

Edelweiss moved faster than the commentator could speak. Its twin blades bore down on Ikki like twin bolts of white lightning. Just like the real Edelweiss, the copy’s motions were completely soundless, as were its attacks. Its every movement was perfectly calculated to reduce air resistance and friction to a minimum. There was no energy loss from its muscles to its blades. For that reason, its slashes made no sound.

Furthermore, since it went from zero to a hundred in an instant, tracking its motions with the naked eye was a challenge. Ikki couldn’t rely on sight or hearing to track it. The average person would have been cut down without even realizing they’d been struck. Sara’s copy was just that perfect. But Ikki had faced Edelweiss before.

“Rah!”

Because of that, unlike the average person, he was able to deflect its first swing. But surviving the first attack didn’t grant him even a second’s reprieve. He’d blocked Twin Wings’s left sword with Intetsu, but the right one was still coming straight at him.

“Haaah!”

He managed to avoid a fatal blow by leaning his neck back at the last second, but the tip of the sword still grazed his cheek. To the audience’s surprise, he even managed to swing Intetsu afterward for a counterattack. In response, the Edelweiss copy crossed both its blades in front of itself.

“Graaah!”

As black and white clashed in a storm of steel, sparks flew.

Before, Ikki had needed Ittou Shura just to barely keep up with Edelweiss's swordsmanship, but now, he was managing to do so without using any of his mana. It wasn't because the copy was inferior to the real Edelweiss. Having crossed swords with her once before, he was certain this copy was at least as strong as Edelweiss had been when he'd fought her at Akatsuki Academy. It had the same sharp swordsmanship, peerless strength, and even the same intimidating aura.

But I've gotten stronger since then!

Indeed, the reason Ikki was able to keep up was because he'd absorbed Edelweiss's techniques with his Blade Steal. And during his battle against Moroboshi, his brain had rewired itself so that he could make full use of those techniques. Ikki's duel with Edelweiss had granted him a vast wealth of experience, and his combat abilities were exponentially greater than they had been just a few weeks ago. He could handle an exchange of this level without relying on Ittou Shura now.

In which case, I should be able to whittle her down!

"Haaaaah!"

With a ferocious battle cry, Ikki managed to push Edelweiss back.

"H-Holy shit! He actually repelled Twin Wings! The world's strongest swordsman!"

"You can do it, Another One!"

"Gooo, Ikki-kuuun!"

Ikki didn't have the time or the wherewithal to respond to the crowd's cheers, but he was certainly hoping to live up to their expectations. It didn't matter how close to the real Edelweiss the copy was; now that he was facing her in the ring, his only option was to defeat her. At the very least, he doubted he could slip past the clone to strike at Sara directly. So he leaped forward, chasing after it.

Wait, no! That was a bad idea!

Unfortunately, that turned out to be a mistake.

"Gah?!"

The moment he stepped forward, his vision was dyed red, and his body burned as gouts of blood sprayed from numerous wounds all

over his body. Ikki had been cut dozens of times in less than a second.

So that was your game!

"The moment Kurogane stepped forward, he started bleeding all over!" Iida shouted. "What just happened?!"

"She's creating spatial tears!"

"What do you mean, Yaotome?!"

"I've heard stories about this! Twin Wings's swordsmanship is undoubtedly the best in the world. Her slashes are faster and sharper than anyone else's. They're fast and sharp enough to literally cut through the air and leave vacuums in their wake!"

Just as Yaotome had said, the fake Edelweiss had cut Ikki with vacuums. As it had jumped backward, it'd slashed the air dozens of times, leaving a deadly trap for Ikki when he followed after it. It was similar to how Ayatsuji Ayase's Noble Art, Windscar, worked. But while Ayase needed magic to make that happen, the Edelweiss copy could do it with swordsmanship alone.

The clone hadn't truly been pushed back by Ikki. In truth, it had just made it seem that way to lure him into its trap. Ikki had realized it at the last moment and tried to stop himself, but because he'd been using Edelweiss's own movement techniques to accelerate to full speed instantly, he'd been unable to. As a result, he'd been cut deeply all over his body.

"Nnnnngh!"

He didn't have the time to lament his own foolishness or even assess the damage he'd taken, though, as Edelweiss didn't give him even a second to rest. As it bore down on him again, he used whatever precious little mana he'd managed to restore in the past few hours to boost his legs and leap backward. This was a simple trick that Stella and other Blazers did all the time in battle, but for Ikki, it meant using up every last bit of his reserves. Still, it proved to be the correct decision.

A millisecond later, there was a white flash as the Edelweiss clone's sword passed through where his neck had been a second ago. Because of how fast its swords moved, they could only be seen as flashes of light. In other words, if Ikki hadn't gotten out of there

as fast as possible, his head wouldn't be attached to his shoulders right now.

"Haaah, haaah!"

That didn't change the fact that Ikki had been forced to sacrifice all of his remaining mana just to survive a single clash. To make matters worse, he hadn't managed to land any hits in return. It had taken his all just to stay alive. After experiencing that exchange, there was one thing Ikki was certain of.

Forget being weaker than the original! This one is...stronger!

At the very least, the Edelweiss Ikki was facing off against right now was much stronger than the Blazer he'd fought at Akatsuki Academy. That was because back then, Edelweiss hadn't gotten serious until their final clash. She'd just been holding Ikki at bay without seriously trying to take his life. The Edelweiss Ikki was fighting now was different. It was showing no mercy, which meant its slashes were sharper and faster. Not only that, but it was also using techniques the real one hadn't shown Ikki when she'd been toying with him.

"Wha—"

Ikki put some distance between them to try and get a few seconds to think, but then the fake Edelweiss did something new. Rather than chase after him, it spun the sword in its right hand around and thrust the point into the ground. A second later, new cuts appeared all over Ikki's body.

"Gaaah?!"

He was a good twenty meters away from the fake Edelweiss, yet he'd been slashed again. And this time, the cuts were accompanied by a searing pain, as if he'd been struck by lightning. To the crowd, it looked like she must have used magic of some kind, but Ikki knew that wasn't the case.

That was...Venomscale Cut?!

When Ikki had tried to use that move on the real Edelweiss, she'd countered by using a far more polished version of the exact same technique. By vibrating one's blade at a specific frequency, they were able to deliver shock waves into the human body that damaged the internal organs. It was similar to a high-level martial arts palm

thrust, but done through a sword. Ikki had to use Intetsu to deliver vibrations to his opponent and needed to be in sword range for Venomscale Cut to be effective, but the Edelweiss clone had used the entire ring as its medium and sent those vibrations to Ikki through the floor.

As Ikki staggered back in pain, the fake Edelweiss dashed forward in order to finish him off. It closed the distance at lightning speed, swinging both of its swords down at him.

"Tch!"

Though Ikki's body was spasming in pain, he nevertheless reacted immediately. He raised Intetsu horizontally above his head in an attempt to block both cuts. However, when the swords made contact, Ikki felt no weight behind the blows. It seemed the Edelweiss clone had realized that its slashes wouldn't connect and transferred all of the energy it'd poured into them into its legs instead.

"Gah!"

Since Ikki had left his torso wide open, it kneed him in the stomach and sent him reeling backward. It was a full-powered kick that landed squarely on Ikki's solar plexus, so the wind was knocked out of him as he sailed through the air. He flew out of the ring, over the lawn surrounding the arena, and crashed into the chain-link fence protecting the spectators. But even that didn't stop him. He plowed through the fence and started sliding up the stairs that divided the bleachers in the spectator stands. The individual steps were pulverized as he slid up them, and he only came to a stop after reaching the top floor.

Upon witnessing such a brutal display of violence, the audience was too stunned to even scream. All they could do was stare in horror at the streak of blood that coated the ravaged stairs like a red carpet. Meanwhile, Ikki lay face up on the ground, not even twitching.

◆◇◆◇◆

"Wh-What a kiiick! She sent a human body flying like it was a

cannonball! Kurogane's out of the ring, and the referee's starting the countdown! Will he be able to make it back before the count hits ten?! Is he even alive?! Either way, it's clear that this Twin Wings is just as strong as the real one! The famous Another One took down the Seven Stars Sovereign, God's Eye, and Thunderbolt with his exceptional swordsmanship, but he wasn't able to do a single thing against Edelweiss despite fighting at close range! The copy Sara Bloodlily created is in no way inferior to the original!"

That being the case, Iida didn't think it was possible for Ikki to win. A mere student couldn't hope to stand against the world's strongest swordsman. They were in completely different dimensions. The rest of the audience shared Iida's bleak outlook—including Stella, who'd had the utmost faith in Ikki up until this moment. Having seen how unceremoniously he'd been blown away, she gritted her teeth.

"Ikki!" she muttered. *Even you can't win against this!*

No matter how hard she racked her brain, she couldn't come up with a way for him to beat the clone. She was a good enough fighter that she knew it instinctively. The difference between Ikki and Edelweiss was like that of a housecat and a tiger. Bloody da Vinci truly deserved praise for being able to create a replica so perfect that even Ikki looked like a housecat before it.

I didn't think she was this *strong!*

"Five! Six! Seven!"

"Rrrgh..."

Stella bit her lip in frustration as the referee continued to count. No one was cheering for Ikki now. The audience was just watching in silence, their faces taut with despair. Even amateurs like them could tell that there was a huge gap in strength between the Worst One and Bloody da Vinci. It was clear to them that there was no point in dragging this fight out any longer.

For a Rank F Blazer, he'd done far better than anyone could have expected, but at the end of the day, the person with greater magical strength won. That was just how it worked in the world of Mage-Knights. Everyone began to think that perhaps this outcome had been inevitable from the start. It was why no one noticed that the

man who should have been despairing the most, the one who was still lying face up on the ground, was smirking to himself.

◆◇◆◇◆

"Eigh— Huh?!"

Before he could finish counting to eight, the referee gasped. Ikki was back on his feet as if nothing had happened, and he leaped down to where the broken fence was in one bound. He then jumped down into the arena and walked into the ring.

"I-I can't believe it! Kurogane got back up as if he didn't just take the beating of his life, and he even walked back into the ring! With such sprightly movements too! How can he appear unhurt after taking such a devastating blow?! What's going on?!"

Iida stared down at the ring in shock. However, Yaotome figured out what was going on immediately.

"In truth, he hasn't taken much damage at all yet."

"What?! But he slammed through those concrete stairs hard enough to smash them!"

Yaotome nodded in response.

"Yes, and that's exactly why he's unhurt. The average knight would have smashed into the stands somewhere and been grievously wounded. Ikki, however, purposely chose to slide and roll up those stairs in such a flashy way because doing so allowed him to redirect the kinetic energy propelling his body downward into those stairs. That's what smashed them."

She was right. The force that had destroyed the fence and the stairs was all kinetic energy that had originally been meant to wreak havoc upon his body. But through the skillful use of martial arts, Ikki had redirected all of that energy outward, destroying the stadium around him instead.

"That's why that kick did a lot less damage than it seems," Yaotome concluded.

"I-Is something like that even possible?!" Iida exclaimed.

"Theoretically, yes. It's similar to a concept used in judo. Technically, you don't even need to be a Blazer to do that. Anyone

can learn how. But properly redirecting that insane amount of energy effectively requires superhuman levels of training and discipline. I imagine it's the kind of thing only someone like Ikki, who's practiced every form of martial arts in order to hone his swordsmanship, could pull off in a real battle."

In truth, Ikki could have jumped back down into the ring at any time. He'd simply waited for the count to reach eight to catch his breath. As a result, he was in better shape than he'd been when the fake Edelweiss had kicked him.

"A-Amazing!" Iida was overwhelmed, both by the insane level of technique Ikki had displayed and the fact that he was still raring to go despite having seemingly been backed into a corner. "Kurogane's one fighter who truly never gives up! Everyone in the audience thought the overwhelming might of Sara Bloodlily's Purple Caricature would decide the match, but Kurogane doesn't seem at all daunted even though he should be the one feeling the most hopelessness! After all, the world's strongest swordsman took all of his best techniques head-on and didn't even break a sweat!"

Iida had nothing but respect for the boy who was young enough to be his son standing resolutely in the ring.

But that still won't be enough, Yaotome thought quietly as she listened to Iida's praise.

It didn't matter how good Ikki was at shrugging off damage or how unbreakable his resolve was. If he'd had Ittou Shura, maybe he would have stood a chance, but as he was now, he couldn't do anything against the Edelweiss copy Sara Bloodlily had created. Guts and willpower alone wouldn't be enough to bridge the massive gulf in strength between the two of them. Ikki had no cards to play, and he'd been forced to use up all the mana he'd managed to recover during their first exchange. Sara, meanwhile, was completely unhurt. Worse, Ikki hadn't even landed a single blow on the Edelweiss clone she'd created. The odds were stacked so heavily against Ikki that this could hardly even be called a proper match at this point.

I can't imagine there's any point in continuing.

Yaotome's thoughts were echoed by everyone else in the arena, even the referee.

“Kurogane...are you sure you wish to continue?” the referee asked hesitantly. He hadn’t asked whether Ikki *could* continue, but rather whether he *wanted* to.

Ikki smiled wanly at the referee. He could tell how worried the ref was for him. It was clear he wanted Ikki to step down and surrender. After all, it wasn’t as if his reputation would take a hit. There was no shame in throwing in the towel against an opponent of this caliber. No one would blame him. Hell, people would praise him for putting up such a courageous fight for this long. But of course, Ikki had only one thing to say in response.

“Definitely.”

He wasn’t backing down here. Not out of stubbornness, though. No, he simply had no reason to give up.

“After all,” he continued, “I’ve figured out that counterfeit’s weakness.”

◆◇◆◇◆

“K-Kurogane just made an extremely bold claim!” the announcer shouted. “The ref looks pretty taken aback by his confidence, but it looks like he’s allowing the match to continue! Kurogane said he figured out the counterfeit’s weakness, but does he really have some trick up his sleeve to overcome this desperate situation?!”

“He’s gotta be bluffing, right?”

“Y-Yeah. You saw how badly he got his ass handed to him earlier.”

“B-But Ikki-kun’s not the kind of guy to make exaggerated claims...”

The audience muttered worriedly to one another. Most of them didn’t believe Ikki could actually turn the fight around. Considering how badly he’d been beaten in the last exchange, their doubt was only natural. Sara, too, thought Ikki was just bluffing.

“Purple Caricature may not re-create the person themself, but my artworks possess potential equal to the people they’re inspired by. Don’t bother trying to act tough.”

Naturally, Sara understood her Purple Caricature’s strengths and limitations completely. That was why she was confident Ikki didn’t

stand a chance. He was using the swordplay he'd stolen from Edelweiss, but it was an inferior copy of her technique. Conversely, the Edelweiss copy Sara had created with Purple Caricature could use the real one's swordsmanship to its full potential. It was precisely because there was such an insurmountable gap in skill between the two of them that Sara had chosen to draw Edelweiss. Twin Wings was the one person Sara was confident wouldn't lose to Ikki no matter what.

"It's true, your copy's swordsmanship is so impressive that it's honestly stronger than the real Twin Wings I faced," Ikki admitted. "But I'm afraid that once you peel back its layers, you can see the counterfeit for what it is. In the same way that a painted apple won't taste sweet no matter how impeccably it's drawn, or how a painted flower won't have any scent no matter how brilliantly it blooms on the canvas, your illusion is ultimately just a pale imitation of the real thing too."

Ikki pointed Intetsu defiantly at Sara.

"Bring it on. Using everything I have, I'll tear apart your perfect counterfeit!"

◆◇◆◇◆

Seeing Ikki's confidence, Sara hesitated for a second. No matter what he was thinking, though, she couldn't imagine Edelweiss losing to him. Though he'd kept up with her Purple Caricature for a short while in their first exchange, ultimately, he'd been overpowered and kicked out of the ring.

There's no doubt that the victory I've drawn will come to pass!

As if sensing Sara's determination, the fake Edelweiss shot forward without a sound, both swords poised to strike.

"Haaah!"

Ikki raised Intetsu in response, and white and black clashed in another storm of steel. However, he had just one blade against Edelweiss's two, and Edelweiss was a much better swordsman as well. With every exchange of blows, Ikki was forced back a step. Finally, after a particularly brutal clash, Intetsu was knocked aside,

leaving him wide open. Pouncing on that opening, the Edelweiss clone swung one of its swords down, aiming to split his head in half.

It's over!

Sara was sure she'd won. But to her surprise, Ikki casually leaned back, avoiding the slash as if he'd predicted it perfectly. He also blocked the horizontal follow-up slash from Edelweiss's other sword and knocked the clone back.

Huh?

In response to how easily Ikki had evaded defeat, Sara could only stare in shock.

"Hey, did he just..."

"Push her back? I think so..."

"Maybe she just fell back to lure him into a trap like last time?"

The audience didn't fully believe Ikki had really pushed Edelweiss back. They'd been tricked once before, after all, and Ikki had been faring pretty badly until just now. Edelweiss charged forward again, this time launching a thrust aimed at Ikki's forehead. Ikki turned to the side, easily dodging the attack, and countered with a powerful slash that once again forced the fake Edelweiss back.

"Whoa!"

This time, the audience had no doubt. Ikki was starting to win his clashes against Edelweiss. The skeptical voices started turning into cheers, and even Iida sounded excited.

"H-He pushed the fake Edelweiss back! At first, I thought she was just trying to lure him into a trap again, but that's the second time now, and she's shown no signs of laying a trap! Kurogane's finally beating Edelweiss in swordsmanship!"

"Holy shit! That last thrust was basically at his nose when he dodged it!"

"He must've seen through it to execute such a perfect dodge! He wasn't bluffing!"

The audience's cheers didn't even reach Sara's ears. She was too busy trying to figure out what was going on.

How did he suddenly start reading my Purple Caricature's attacks?! They're just as fast as they were before, so how?!

After a few seconds, she remembered hearing that Kurogane Ikki

was a master of reading his opponent's thought patterns and analyzing their movements.

"Did you use your Perfect Vision to..."

"I didn't even need to for a counterfeit like this," Ikki replied. He hadn't needed to go that far to figure out the fake's movement patterns. "It just took a bit of thinking. After all, every Blazer has only one type of power at their disposal. That's an ironclad fact, true for all Blazers. While your powers may look varied at first glance, if you trace it all back, they're simply you materializing an image you hold in your mind, Sara-san. Your power is the ability to turn your imagination into reality."

Color of Magic was a Noble Art that let Sara materialize concepts based on the colors she associated them with. Purple Caricature, on the other hand, was a lot more direct. It was a Noble Art that let her re-create a person or object she had in her mind via a drawing. Her power didn't create perfectly accurate replicas of other people, though—just whatever she could envision them as.

"But how accurately can you envision someone like Edelweiss? Her appearance matches the real one well enough, as do her physical abilities. Your artist's eye is more than discerning enough to re-create those traits for sure. But what about everything else?"

Ikki and Edelweiss were swinging their swords at superhuman speeds. The naked eye could barely even register their attacks as blurs. On top of that, top-class swordsmen like them used subtle cues such as line of sight and body language to try to deceive each other with multiple layers of feints. Even something as vague as aura or presence mattered when two masters dueled. Each slash was only launched after a heated back-and-forth of feints and counterfeints. Was it possible for Sara to envision all of that in her mind's eye?

"You can't re-create all that," Ikki said definitively.

That was a realm someone who'd never held a sword before couldn't imagine existing, much less re-create in their mind. It was a sixth sense that only those who'd fought battles to the death with opponents far stronger than them could cultivate. The Edelweiss Sara had created had none of that. All it possessed was the

superhuman strength and speed of the real Edelweiss. Sara couldn't imagine what the real Edelweiss thought in the heat of battle, so she had no way of re-creating that.

"But then that begs the question: If this copy is empty inside, how is it able to move? How is it able to *fight*? That got me thinking, and I came up with a theory. And over the course of this battle, I've been testing that theory. When she did that overhead attack during our first clash, I purposely left my torso open."

"That was on purpose?"

"Yep. And seeing her response confirmed my hypothesis."

When Ikki had left himself open, Edelweiss had opted to kick him out of the ring. From a normal person's perspective, it wasn't a bad move. It would ostensibly do a lot of damage, and hopefully net Sara a win by ring out. But someone of Ikki's caliber possessed the martial arts techniques to neutralize a simple kick. In fact, anyone aware of Ikki's martial skill would have known it was a bad idea to knock him out of the ring since it would give him time to catch his breath and organize his thoughts while the referee counted down. He'd done just that, and as a result, it was the fake Edelweiss who'd come out of that exchange in a disadvantageous position.

The real Edelweiss was a master martial artist herself, so she never would have made such an elementary mistake. Rather than take the bait, she would have tried to find an opening to land a truly decisive blow. The fake Edelweiss, however, had gambled on getting a quick ring-out victory, which had confirmed Ikki's initial theory.

"In your head, you imaged 'an Edelweiss that can defeat Kurogane Ikki.' That's why she keeps recklessly trying to win even if that's not a good long-term strategy. Whenever I show even the slightest opening, she pounces on it, regardless of whether it's a real opening or a trap."

"Ah..."

"Once I figured that out, coming up with countermeasures was easy enough. I just have to give her fake openings that she'll get tricked by."

It was because Ikki had started showing those openings that Edelweiss's attacks had become so easy to read. The copy wasn't a

real person with thoughts of its own but an illusion programmed to chase victory. It couldn't learn, which meant it would fall for the same trap over and over.

"If her attacks become one-note, it doesn't matter how fast or sharp they are. They're not a threat," Ikki said with a confident smile.

"Ngh!"

Sara was clearly shaken. Ikki had, in fact, seen through the true nature of the copy she'd created with Purple Caricature. Like he'd said, she was incapable of envisioning all the things that went through master martial artists' minds during battle. All she could do was make use of her astute observational skills to draw a perfectly anatomically accurate model and imbue it with the drive to win.

Since it was programmed to win, the illusion did use combinations of techniques that the real person would use to try to get past an opponent's defenses, but at the end of the day, it was looking for the shortest path to victory. If its opponent showed an opening like Ikki kept doing, it would simply try to take it. That was all Sara could imagine making them do. This Edelweiss wasn't a living, breathing human, it was an illusion created to defeat Ikki.

"So what?" Sara finally said, glaring at Ikki. "You figured out the trick, but who cares?! You still can't beat my illusion! Your swordsmanship is still a pale imitation of hers! Twin Wings is stronger and faster than Another One! That's still a fact! It doesn't matter if my copy isn't capable of complex thought. Her specs are high enough to wear you down!"

Sara was shouting uncharacteristically loudly, and it was clear she was trying to convince herself. Meanwhile, the fake Edelweiss once again charged at Ikki. Sara was desperate for victory, and her creation was being influenced by that desperation. Ikki felt a wave of bloodlust wash over him.

"Yeah, you've got a point there," he said simply, preparing to meet the fake Edelweiss head-on.

Trying to take Edelweiss in a direct confrontation would be reckless of him. As Sara had said, her creation was far stronger than him. Even if it didn't have the mind of the original, the rest of its

specs were just as high as the real Edelweiss's. Sure, all it could do was blindly charge forward, but even that was a serious threat.

To make matters worse, Ikki was using an inferior copy of Edelweiss's own swordsmanship. He didn't have the same technical skill she did, and his mana pool was far smaller as well. While he'd managed to figure out the primary weakness of Purple Caricature, it wasn't enough to bridge the gap in strength. Sara had been speaking the truth. There was one thing she hadn't accounted for, however.

"Sara-san, you've made a grave miscalculation."

It was something Ikki had realized after clashing with the fake Edelweiss a few times. Sara had a deep-seated misunderstanding about the true nature of combat. She believed victory went to the stronger side. But that was incorrect. Being stronger didn't guarantee anything. It wasn't a simple game of numbers, where the bigger number won. Battle was all about finding the decisive moment and making sure you were ready to seize it when it came. Ultimately, victory went to the person who was able to capitalize on that decisive moment.

I don't need to be stronger than Edelweiss overall. I just need to be able to get that one hit in. If I can win the right clash, I'll win the fight. That being the case, Ikki's situation was far from hopeless. Sure, Edelweiss was so much stronger than him that it would take years of training to catch up to her. It was ridiculous to think he could bridge the gap in strength over the course of a single duel. *But if I know what angle she's going to strike from and what the timing of her attack is going to be, then I can counter it!*

The Edelweiss clone silently swung its pure-white blade down toward Ikki's skull, aiming to cleave it in half. At the same time, Ikki activated all of his muscles at once, accelerating to top speed in an instant. Furthermore, he switched Intetsu to a two-handed grip to increase the amount of speed and power he could impart to his blade. Then, to top it all off, he used his fastest technique, Thunderclap, to swing his sword horizontally at Edelweiss's torso. This was his plan for overcoming Edelweiss with one decisive clash.

Like Sara had said, Edelweiss's sword technique was far greater

than Ikki's. However, Ikki wasn't using the *exact* same techniques as her. It was true that he'd stolen her swordsmanship and was using it as a basis for his own now, but Edelweiss's Device was a pair of swords, while Ikki had a single katana.

Additionally, their combat styles differed, meaning they each excelled at different things. Edelweiss specialized in a hyperoffensive style of raining a flurry of blows on her opponent with both swords, sealing their movements. Anyone who got trapped in her storm of slashes found themself unable to escape, but because she had a sword in each hand, her swings weren't as strong or fast as those of someone wielding one sword in both hands. In contrast, Ikki had a single katana, so he couldn't attack as frequently, but each of his attacks boasted relatively more speed and power. In other words, for the very first swing, before Edelweiss could start her barrage, Ikki actually had the upper hand!

"Haaaaaaah!"

Both Ikki's and Edelweiss's swords moved at inhuman speeds, and a loud, metallic clang rang out through the night. Edelweiss's pure-white sword had managed to cut through the skin on top of Ikki's head, but that was all. Ikki's jet-black katana had sliced her cleanly in two before she'd managed to crack open his skull.

"H-He sliced her in haaalf!" the announcer exclaimed. "Kurogane actually defeated Twin Wings! It might have been a fake, but even then, he accomplished the impossible for an unbelievable turnaround!"

"A-Are you seeing this?!"

"He really won..."

"Your opponent's defenseless! You gotta end it now, kid!"

The crowd erupted into cheers at the development, which completely altered the trajectory of the battle.

"No...way..."

At the same time, Sara stared, dumbfounded, as her creation melted into ribbons of paper that disappeared into the night. Since she'd never studied martial arts, she couldn't even grasp how Edelweiss had lost that clash. But of course, Ikki had expected things to end.

"She might be the world's strongest swordsman, but your creation was an illusion born from the mind of an artist who's never held a sword. My Intetsu's different, though. This sword *is* my soul. From the moment I decided to walk the path of a knight, my life has resided not within my heart, but within this blade. Intetsu is an encapsulation of everything that I am."

Compared to Twin Wings's sword, Ikki's was a trifling thing. Nevertheless, his was the real deal. Packed within it were the hopes and dreams of a man who wished to one day become like his hero, Kurogane Ryouma, the pain and suffering he'd endured in order to walk the path he chose despite his parents' opposition, the dreams he'd inherited from the opponents he'd overcome on his journey, and most importantly, the irreplaceable promise he'd made with the woman he loved. With so much heart and soul squeezed into one tiny blade, it was hardly surprising that Ikki had come out on top.

"A true master needs to reach the pinnacle of body, mind, and soul. There's no way I'd lose against a fake that's missing two of the three essential elements!" Ikki crouched low, preparing to end the fight once and for all. "Looks like it's my win!"

He dashed forward, Intetsu raised high.

"Kurogane's made his move! Man, he's fast!"

"Hrngh!"

Sara stumbled backward, unsure of what to do. She'd poured most of her mana into creating that fake Edelweiss, and she only had a little bit of paint left to work with. Even if she had all of her mana left, she couldn't think of any model that would be able to defeat someone capable of besting Twin Wings. There were no moves left for her to make.

I can't think of anything! There's nothing I can do!

At the rate things were going, she'd lose. And a loss meant Ikki would never model for her.

"If you win, I'll be your model like you want. But if you lose, you have to promise to give up on getting me to model nude for you." That was the promise they'd made. And she'd never be able to complete her father's final work without Ikki as her model. She'd settled on Ikki after traveling the world for years, searching for the

perfect fit. There was no one who could replace him. Sara knew that even if she tried, she'd just keep thinking of Ikki instead. Her blood froze as she realized what future lay in store for her if she lost here.

I can't let that happen...

Her promise to complete that painting in her father's stead was the only link she had to him. She didn't want to lose that. That wasn't all either. As she'd honed her artistic talents in order to fulfill her promise, she'd come to realize something. The more she came to love art, the more she realized that she was *jealous* of her father.

Over and over again, she'd gone back to the canvas with the intent of filling in the blank space in the middle. And every time, she'd been too overwhelmed by the enormity of the painting and put her brush down. Her father had been a self-taught artist with surprisingly little talent. His use of color was off, and his linework was shoddy. Honestly, it wasn't surprising that he'd never made a name for himself as an artist. Despite all that, however, she could sense a smoldering passion from the half-finished painting that was still missing its messiah.

Sara was already a world-renowned artist. Her artistic sense was far greater than her father's had ever been too. Even so, she still didn't feel capable of finishing his life's work. It was galling. At the same time, it made completing the painting a worthwhile goal to strive for. One day, she wanted to be able to draw a messiah worthy of that painting, not just for her father, but for her own sake as well. She wanted to become an artist capable of making that kind of art. Sara Bloodlily wasn't just trying to finish that painting as a final parting gift for him; her pride as an artist demanded that she become good enough to complete it. That was why she couldn't let this chance slip by. In the same way that Ikki had dedicated his life to becoming a Mage-Knight, Sara had dedicated her life to becoming an artist.

I have my own reasons for not wanting to lose!

"Purple Caricature—Another One!" Moving her brush faster than Ikki's and Edelweiss's swords, Sara quickly drew four rough sketches of Ikki and sent the fakes after him.

Ikki's eyes widened in surprise. He'd thought Sara was out of

cards to play after he'd defeated Edelweiss. But while he hadn't been expecting this counterattack, he recovered from his shock immediately.

"Hiyaaah!"

With a quick horizontal cut, he sliced off the head of one of the fake Ikkis, reducing it to scrap paper. He then took a deep breath and cut down another with a reverse slash. All of the fake Ikkis were using Ittou Shura, but he was still able to mow them down with ease. Naturally, that was because Ikki understood himself better than anyone else. He knew what his strengths and weaknesses were, and what attacks he might use based on what stance he was in.

Because Sara was so good at capturing the outlines of the people she created with Purple Caricature, it was even easier for Ikki to read his fakes. He wouldn't have broken a sweat even if all four of them had come at him at once. But of course, Sara was aware of that as well. There was no way someone who'd defeated her strongest model, Twin Wings, would be stopped by copies of himself. Soulless illusions just wouldn't cut it against Ikki. However, there was one creation Sara was confident wouldn't lose to anyone, not even Ikki. A creation based on her passion for art and the path she'd chosen.

My spirit's just as strong as yours!

And she was going to prove it by drawing it—drawing a vision of her soul rather than a model of someone else. She knew she was capable of it. After all, art was about expressing one's soul through the act of creation.

As Ikki cut down the third copy, Sara took a deep breath and poured the last of her mana into Demiurge's Brush. Then, she visualized in her mind's eye what shape the avatar of her passion would take.

It has to be a man. And it can't be an effeminate, gentle man either. This is a man who prioritizes his own wishes above all else, no matter who might say otherwise. So he needs to be hard-faced and rugged. With thick arms like logs, capable of batting aside any and all obstructions, and legs as firm as pillars to resolutely walk

down the path he's chosen. Last but not least, he needs a greatsword made of diamond to cut down those who would bar his path. His body is harder than tempered steel, and his blood is hotter than magma. His bloodstained clothes are those of an ancient gladiator.

Eyes closed, Sara painted the incarnation of her soul in the air in front of her. To her surprise, the details came to her quite easily. She poured all of her inspiration and passion into this one drawing, determined to make it her greatest work yet. Finally, when most of the details were complete, she tried to envision this man's face. And as she did so, she realized something.

"Ah..." She let out a small gasp of surprise, but her hands moved automatically, her brush drawing out a face she thought she'd never seen, and one she'd been sure she didn't remember. She smiled wryly to herself as she gazed upon the man's face. "I guess I knew his face after all..."

She nodded to herself. This was, without a doubt, the perfect rendition of her passion as an artist. This was the form her soul took.

"Purple Caricature—Mario Rosso!"

She dumped all of her mana into the painting, turning it into reality. A three-meter-tall, middle-aged man dressed like a gladiator appeared in the ring.

"Ikki...let's duel!" Sara shouted. She was panting from exertion, but there wasn't even a sliver of worry in her voice now.

Ikki dispatched the fourth clone and turned to face Sara's ultimate creation. He could tell at a glance that this was no fake, that the passion poured into this illusion was a hundred percent real. Just like Intetsu was of Ikki's, the man was a manifestation of Sara's very soul.

"You're on!"

Grinning, Ikki crouched low and prepared to charge at the hulking giant of a man. Before he could leap forward, however, the man rushed at him—faster even than the fake Edelweiss—and swung his massive greatsword down at his head. Ikki could tell that one swing had enough power behind it to cleave him in two, and the ring along

with him. However, the sword never reached him. With perfect timing, he dashed forward, barely dodging the blade's arc.

"Rampage Thrust!"

Focusing all of his strength into a single point, Ikki thrust his blade into the man's forehead. It was a direct hit, but the man known as Mario Rosso didn't even flinch. Ikki's blade didn't even go more than a few millimeters into his skin. Mario Rosso flicked his head to the side, brushing Intetsu away, and swung his sword at Ikki again. There was no way for Ikki to maneuver in midair, so he hurriedly held Intetsu up to block the blow.

"Gaaah?!"

The moment the diamond sword touched Intetsu, Ikki felt an intense shock wave ripple through his body, and he was sent flying. He flew a few dozen meters through the air and came to a rolling stop at the other edge of the arena. Like when Edelweiss had knocked him away, he'd avoided taking too much damage by redirecting a lot of the force, and he immediately got back to his feet.

"Ngh..."

However, both of Ikki's arms were broken from the wrist to the shoulder. The swing had been too strong for Ikki to redirect all of its force. Indeed, he'd even been forced to let go of Intetsu, which flew in an arc over the ring. As it started to fall, Mario Rosso leaped forward in order to deal the finishing blow. He raised his diamond sword high and swung it down with the resolute drive to slice through everything in his path. Meanwhile, Ikki was unarmed and unprotected.

"I did it!"

Sara was confident that victory was hers. A second later, there was a huge spray of blood—blood that burned like magma.

"What?!" Her eyes went wide as Mario Rosso was cut down instead of Ikki. *How? He doesn't even have his weapon anymore!*

But then she realized where Ikki had rolled to after Mario Rosso had sent him flying.

How could I have missed that?!

Ikki was in the area where Edelweiss had created tiny vacuums

with her sword. He'd immediately realized that he didn't have enough mana to cut through Mario Rosso, so he'd lured his opponent here instead.

As blood spurted from numerous cuts all over Mario Rosso's body, Ikki leaped forward. He kept his body low to the ground, ducking under the vacuums the fake Edelweiss had created, and dashed past Mario Rosso. He caught the handle of Intetsu with his mouth as it fell and bowled into Sara, turning his head so that Intetsu cut deep into her stomach.


© Won

◆◇◆◇◆

"Gah..."

Sara coughed up blood and dropped to her knees. Simultaneously, the avatar of her passion, Mario Rosso, turned into ribbons of paper. The match was over.

"Looks like I win," Ikki said softly.

After a long silence, Sara nodded, accepting reality.

"Yeah," she replied. She'd used up everything in that battle. All of her passion, her skill, and her technique had gone into her final creation. Still, it hadn't been enough to win. She had finally accepted that bitter truth.

"But...I'm sorry, I don't think I can keep my promise to you," she added. She knew it was selfish of her to say that, and Ikki looked quite taken aback, but she didn't care. It didn't matter if he called her a coward, or a liar, or an oath breaker. "I'm the daughter of a worthless man who picked art over his own child and died facing the canvas. No matter what happens...I can't give up on the passion I inherited from him."

Though Ikki seemed surprised at first, he eventually just let out a long sigh and smiled at her.

"You really are one hell of a girl, you know that?" Despite it all, he looked happy to hear that Sara had broken their promise.

Knowing that he was willing to accept her selfishness made Sara jealous of Stella for the very first time. As her consciousness began to fade, one final thought ran through her mind.

If...I ever end up falling in love...you're the person I'd want to fall in love with.

◆◇◆◇◆

Bloody da Vinci slumped onto the floor, and the referee announced Ikki's victory to the crowd.

"And there you have it, folks! Another One has defeated Bloody da Vinci! It was a hell of a fight with countless upsets! Bloodlily

really showed some perseverance there, never giving up, but in the end, it's Kurogane who's still standing!"

"H-Holy shit, he really won!"

"He actually beat someone with an ability as OP as Bloody da Vinci's?!"

"Squeeee! Ikki-kun, you're so cooool!"

As the crowd burst out into cheers and applause, Kazamatsuri Rinna let out a sad sigh.

"Hrm. Not even my Prophetic Eye could have predicted that Sara would lose here. How will we ever make this up to Uncle Tsukikage?"

"Don't lose heart, milady. Ouma-sama and Amane-sama are still in the tournament."

"I suppose so... But I fail to comprehend how this happened. While it's true that copies created by Purple Caricature can only take action based on the artist's understanding of them, Sara should have nonetheless been able to accurately re-create the White Summit's full strength. She was present when the White Summit cleaned up those scoundrels in the Middle East, and she saw her fighting up close. How was Another One capable of defeating her? Surely his might doesn't equal hers."

"That may be true overall, but if Kurogane-sama was aware of how she would attack, then thanks to the difference in their fighting styles, it would have been possible for his strength to surpass hers in specific instances."

"What do their combat styles have to do with it?"

"The fake Edelweiss and Kurogane-sama both fought by activating all of the muscles in their body at once, allowing them to reach maximum speed and strength from the moment their swings began. However, the two use very different Devices. Kurogane-sama has just one katana, while the fake Edelweiss used twin blades. As a result—"

"I understand now! By wielding his blade with both hands, Another One was able to muster more force and speed in a single blow than the White Summit could!"

"Correct. That meant Kurogane-sama was able to imbue his swing with twice as much arm strength, and that translates to

exponentially more kinetic force. Furthermore, he knew what kind of slash the Purple Caricature would make because its movements were so simple, which allowed him to choose a counterslash he knew would be faster."

"Fascinating... The world of martial arts is quite deep."

"This is only something Kurogane-sama is capable of thanks to how much he's honed his swordsmanship, however. A normal martial artist may be able to understand the theory behind what he did, but they would never be able to match up to Edelweiss, be it the real one or a fake. I can see why the alternate nickname he's earned for himself is Another One."

Rinna wasn't happy about seeing her friend lose, but at the same time, she was genuinely impressed by Ikki's strength. He'd managed to defeat Bloody da Vinci without even using his trump card, Ittou Shura. But while Rinna and her maid were praising Ikki's skill, Stella was just staring silently down at the ring, her whole body trembling. Not because it had been such a close match, but because she'd realized something the other two had missed. It was something only a fighter of her caliber would have been able to notice: the real reason Ikki had been able to win.

Though it was true that Ikki's slash had been faster and stronger due to him gripping his sword with both hands, that wasn't why he'd won. Even after figuring out the Purple Caricature's primary weakness and making full use of the advantage his fighting style gave him, it had still been the fake Edelweiss whose sword had been faster. Despite lacking a mind and a soul, the world's strongest swordsman had still been faster than Ikki. Stella had been watching the fight closely, so she was absolutely certain of that. In fact, she'd been prepared to see Ikki lose the moment that decisive clash happened. Contrary to her expectations, however, Ikki's sword had sliced through Edelweiss.

At first, Stella had been confused, thinking she'd missed something in her observations. But then she'd figured out what Ikki had done, and that was what made her tremble. He'd attempted a truly devilish gamble, and it had paid off.

Ikki must have realized that he wasn't strong enough, which was

why he had done something so risky...

Kurogane Ikki was the one person who'd never misjudge the gap in strength between himself and his opponent. He'd known that even if the fake Edelweiss could only perform simple actions, even if his two-handed grip would give him a boost in strength and speed, his opponent's sword would reach him first. In order to fill the remaining gap, Ikki had taken advantage of the Purple Caricature's attack patterns. He'd purposely left his head unguarded to bait in a downward slash, because of all the parts of the human body, the skull was the hardest.

Of course, no matter how hard a person's skull was, Edelweiss would be able to cut through it with ease. However, cutting through such dense bone was slower than cutting through flesh. Ikki's skull had only bought him a fraction of a second, but both of them had been swinging their swords so fast that normal people couldn't even see their slashes, so even that minuscule delay had been more than enough time to change the outcome of the battle. It was because Ikki was willing to take that sort of risk that he'd been able to win against an opponent Stella had thought he had no chance against.

You really are something else, Ikki...

No sane person would consider using their own skull as a shield against the blade of the world's strongest swordsman. The mere idea that you could do so wasn't something that would cross people's minds, but to then actually execute it was patently insane. However, not only could Ikki come up with plans like that, but he could also enact them without hesitation as well.

As a Rank F Blazer, Ikki's opponents were always far stronger than him. His mana pool was so low that he wasn't even considered a real Blazer by the International Mage-Knight Federation. However, by struggling with all his might and losing over and over, he had learned what he needed to do to win. He had continually fought opponents whose abilities eclipsed his own. His countless battles had given him a wealth of experience to draw on, as well as a variety of tricks and techniques to make up for the things he lacked.

Stella and the others couldn't even fathom doing what he had to just to give himself the slightest chance of victory. It was his

willingness to take those gambles, as well as his dogged pursuit of victory, that allowed him to win matches that everyone else thought were hopeless. That was what truly made Worst One Kurogane Ikki, the loser of a thousand battles, such a terrifying foe—and why Stella was trembling with so much excitement.

You're the only one who's going to make me earn my victories, Ikki!

No matter how huge the gap in strength was, Ikki still managed to overcome the odds. There was no scarier opponent to face for someone strong like Stella. It was precisely because Ikki was like this that Stella loved him so much. She was confident he was the only person who could accept all of her. The only person who could take her full strength head-on without breaking apart.

Just one more battle...

Stella needed to win just one more battle, and she'd be able to have the duel of her life against her beloved. She'd been dreaming of that day for months, and it was almost within reach.

Hagun Academy Bulletin

Character Intros Journalist: Kusakabe Kagami

Sara Bloodlily

■PROFILE

Affiliation: Akatsuki Academy

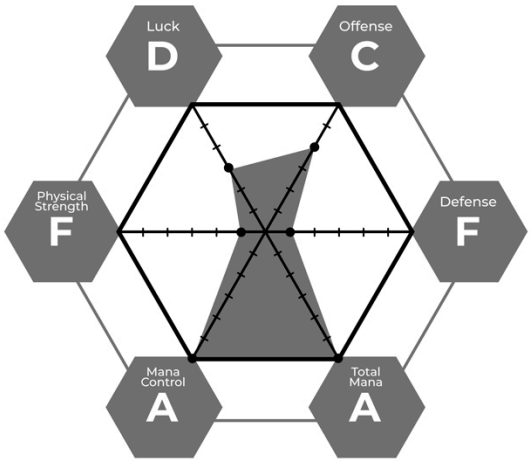
First-Year

Blazer Rank: C → A

Noble Art: Caricature

Nickname: Bloody da Vinci

Summary: Rumor has it she might be a world-famous painter...







Kagamin's Thoughts!

We got to see her true power in the second round! The ability to summon a copy of anything she envisions and draws really is something else. She was able to overwhelm the Sword Eater just by summoning multiple copies of Another One. However, it seems this power isn't exactly omnipotent. Her copies can't take any actions she herself can't envision them taking. She makes up for it by making her copies exceedingly detailed, but even so, Ikki-senpai was able to take advantage of that weakness to seize victory in his match against her.

© Won

Interlude: A Bloody Conclusion

Ikki headed to the infirmary to get treated, and once his arms were healed, he went over to the section of the stands reserved for the fighters. He walked over to Stella, who was alone since Rinna had gone off to visit Sara. Naturally, the first thing Stella did was congratulate him.

"Congratulations on making it to the semifinals. I guess you're as hardheaded as your dad."

"Ha ha, I should have known you'd notice that."

"You came back pretty fast, are you sure you don't need to spend some time in a capsule? Your arms and head got hit pretty bad."

"I had one of their Blazers perform basic treatment, so I should be fine for now. My arms got broken pretty badly, so I'll have to go back later and get those properly fixed, but the head wound was light."

The Edelweiss clone's swordsmanship was so perfect that none of the energy in its swing had dissipated through Ikki's skull. As a result, rather than cracking his skull, it'd just cut a small slit into it, which was much easier to heal. It was hard to really think of it as a silver lining, though, since Ikki knew it meant that the fake's cut had been so perfect that it would have bisected his brain in another few milliseconds.

"Besides, this is Shizuku's big moment," Ikki added. "As her brother, I can't be lying in a capsule during her match. I'll get in one afterward."

"Do you think she can win?"

"I'm not sure. We still don't know everything her opponent's capable of."

Shizuku was up against Shinomiya Amane, aka Nameless Glory. He had the power to make anything he wished for happen, which was simultaneously quite simple and quite devastating. As a Blazer

who could interfere with fate itself, his ability was in the strongest category of Blazer powers. He'd won his first match by default, forcing his opponent, Doctor Knight Yakushi Kiriko, to abandon the tournament to tend to her patients. His second match had also been a win by default. That time, his opponent had gotten food poisoning and was unable to show up for their match. There was no telling what he would try to do to Shizuku.

"Shizuku mentioned that she'd come up with a plan, but do you know what it is?" Stella asked.

"Nope. I gave it some thought myself, but I can't think of any effective strategies."

For starters, Ikki didn't even know what kind of fighting style Amane used. On the other hand, though, Shizuku was a skilled enough Blazer that she was a viable candidate to become this year's Seven Stars Sovereign. It would be rude to Shizuku to worry too much about her. She was Ikki's sister, but she was also a knight.

I should have faith in her and cheer her on from here with everyone.

As he thought that, Ikki realized something.

"By the way, where's Alice?"

Stella shook her head and replied, "I haven't seen her since we split up this afternoon."

At first, Stella had assumed that Alisuin was just staying with Shizuku for moral support, but it was practically time for Shizuku's match to start. There was no point in her staying in the waiting room anymore.

"Maybe she got lost somewhere?" Stella asked.

"I can't imagine Alice getting lost..."

Ikki considered having Stella call her, but before he could make a decision, the announcer's voice rang out.

"Everyone, it's time for the third match of the evening!"

Knowing her, there's no way she's not cheering Shizuku on from somewhere, so I guess I shouldn't worry.

Ikki opted to just let it be and turned his attention back to the ring.

"Who will become the victor of the D block? Hagun Academy first-

year Kurogane Shizuku, or Akatsuki Academy first-year Shinomiya Amane?! It's time for our fighters to take the stage!" As soon as Iida said that, the floodlights rotated, focusing on the two gates. "Incidentally, I notice we have a Kurogane fighting in all three matches this round. I suppose we shouldn't expect any less from the family our nation's great hero is from, right, Yaotome?"

"Indeed. Though if Shizuku wins here, that means the semifinals will become a family feud. Honestly, I'd like to see that matchup, so I'm hoping she does win here. That being said, Amane has won both of his matches by default so far, so we have no real clue what kind of Blazer he is. I'm curious what kind of match we'll see tonight."

"His opponent in the first round had to leave to treat her patients, and his second opponent got food poisoning. He's quite the lucky kid. What kind of battle will he show us for his first real match of the tournament?"

As he listened to the commentators' back-and-forth, Ikki grew certain that they weren't aware of what Amane's power was. Furthermore, if they knew that Amane had won all of his selection matches in Kyomon Academy by default as well, they probably would have sounded a lot more suspicious.

Of course, they'd had no reason to look into his records. The Seven Stars Battle Festival Management Committee's only job was to run the tournament itself; it left deciding the fighters up to the participating schools. Not all schools even held selection matches, and the ones that did didn't necessarily publicize their records. Besides, even if Ikki had brought Amane's battle record to the Committee's attention, he had no actual proof that it wasn't simply the result of astronomically good luck. The real question was, how was Shizuku going to handle this tricky foe?

Just then, Ikki noticed something odd, as did everyone else in the stadium.

"I wonder what's wrong," the announcer wondered. "Neither fighter seems to be entering the ring."

They had already been given the signal to enter, but neither Amane nor Shizuku had shown up in the arena.

"Ah..."

A sudden, horrible premonition went through Ikki's mind, and his heart started to pound.

"They were told to walk out already, weren't they?" Iida questioned.

"They should have been..." Yaotome replied. "Let's see what the waiting rooms' cameras show."

The big screen in the stadium flickered as they swapped displays.

"...Huh?" Iida muttered, flabbergasted. Ikki had been right to worry.

"Heh... Aha ha ha..."

The waiting room was soaked in blood. So too was Amane, the boy laughing maniacally as he looked upon Kurogane Shizuku—who'd been nailed to the wall with countless swords, her arms outstretched like Christ's during the Crucifixion.


© Won

“Aha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

“Sh-Shizukuuuuu!”

The bloody image reflected on the giant screen signaled the end of one battle and the beginning of another. Worst One Kurogane Ikki’s greatest trial yet, his nightmarish semifinal bout, was about to commence.

Afterword

Thank you, everyone, for picking up volume 7 of *Chivalry of a Failed Knight*. It's March while I'm writing this, and my allergies are killing me. I don't actually get a runny nose or watery eyes from pollen, but it makes my skin incredibly itchy. I'm allergic to cedar pollen, so this season is really rough for me.

That aside, I was finally able to get a cat. He's super cute! But he also runs away from me all the time, lol. I adopted him when he was already six years old, so I can't blame him for not getting attached. I hope one day he'll let me rub his belly, though.

Getting back to the actual story of the series, as you can see, we're fast approaching the climax of the Seven Stars Battle Festival. Volume 8's going to be about the semifinals, and it'll have one of the big moments of this tournament arc. I'll do my best to write satisfying battles for everyone, so look forward to it! (I know I'm raising the bar for myself by saying this.)

Also, we can't ever forget the acknowledgments. A big thank you to my editor for constantly improving my manuscripts, and to Won-san for drawing everyone in extremely cute Japanese clothes. (Those of you reading the manga got to see Shizuku and Stella wearing yukata already, but for you novel-only readers, this was the first time.) I'd also like to thank all of the staff working on the anime production as well.

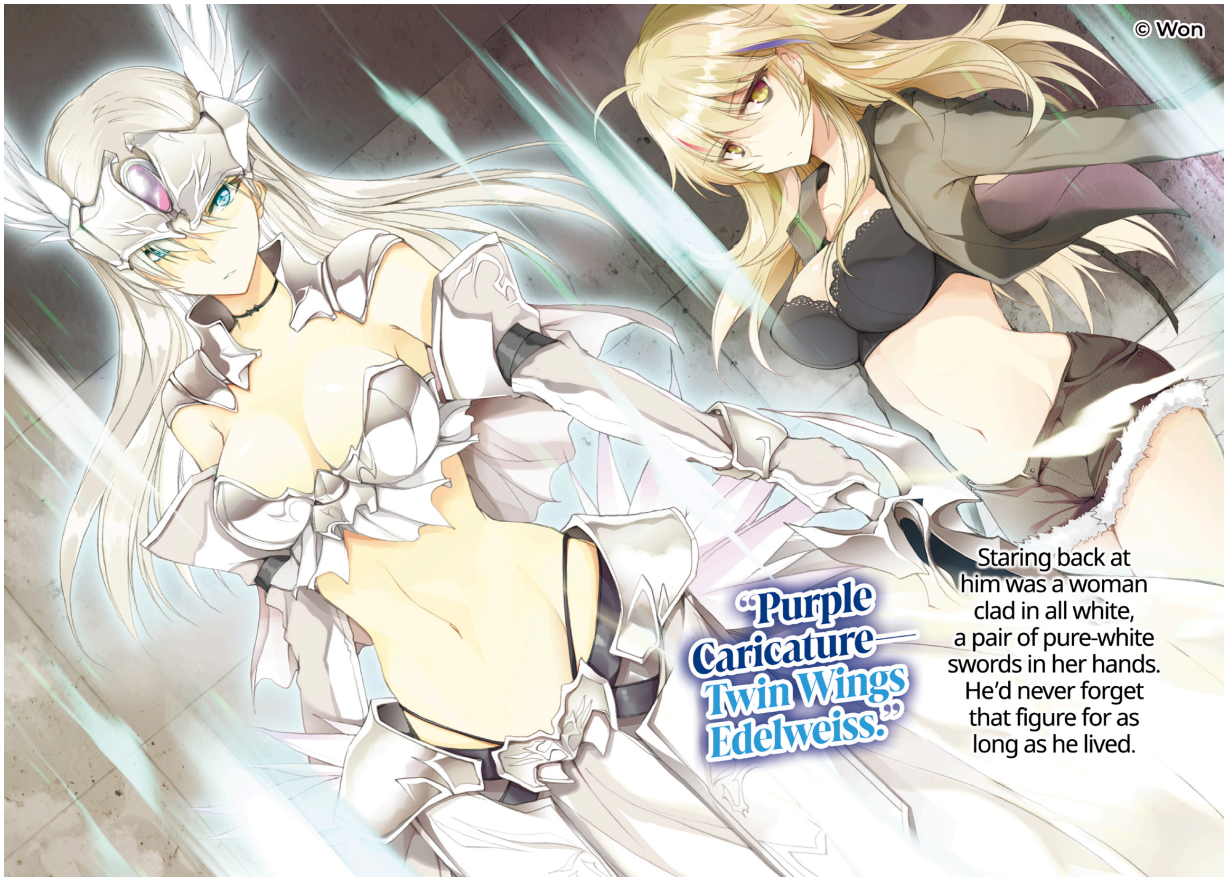
Last but not least, a big thank you to all of my readers. May we meet again in volume 8.


Chivalry of a Failed Knight
7




© Won
"I kind of look like a goldfish. It's really cute..."
"That looks better on you than I thought it would, Stella-san."


© Won
"I've become a cute bunny to
hop right into your heart, Ikki!"


© Won
"Purple Caricature— Twin Wings Edelweiss."
Staring back at him was a woman clad in all white, a pair of pure-white swords in her hands. He'd never forget that figure for as long as he lived.

Riku Misora

Illust. Won



7

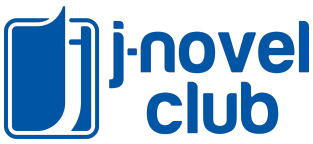
Chivalry of a Failed Knight


Chivalry of a Failed Knight
7


© Won
"I kind of look like a goldfish. It's really cute..."
"That looks better on you than I thought it would, Stella-san."


© Won
"I've become a cute bunny to
hop right into your heart, Ikki!"


© Won
"Purple Caricature— Twin Wings Edelweiss."
Staring back at him was a woman clad in all white, a pair of pure-white swords in her hands. He'd never forget that figure for as long as he lived.



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!
Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 0 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:
J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

Chivalry of a Failed Knight: Volume 7
Originally published as RAKUDAI KISHI NO CHIVALRY 7
by Riku Misora

Translated by Ningen Edited by Adam Haffen

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2015 Riku Misora Illustrations © 2015 Won

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2015 by SB Creative Corp.
This English edition is published in arrangement with SB Creative Corp., Tokyo All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC
j-novel.club
The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.
Ebook edition 1.0: September 2025
Premium E-Book for cbg