

SIXTY

Pushing open the door, Jurou found Chaka splashing cold water on his face at the sink. “You’re up,” he said as he entered. “You missed Nakiko’s match.”

“What is the point in that,” Chaka drawled and ran his hands through his loose ashen hair.

“Ittou cut her twice! Everyone was surprised.”

“Really now?”

“Kaminaritou is your opponent,” Jurou murmured.

“Oh?” Chaka shut off the water and left the sinks. Jurou grabbed Chaka by the arm before he passed and Chaka paused, glaring down at him with blue-gray eyes.

“There is no need to be unnecessarily brutal,” Jurou said seriously. “Keep that arrogant fiend in check or I will kill you here today.”

Chaka gave a weak smile. “For you, Saku.” He grabbed Jurou’s collar and threw him against the wall. Leaning in, he cradled Jurou’s head in hand and Jurou gasped as Chaka whispered in his ear. “What will you do to me if I win?”

“I know you won’t lose because that beast wants to hurt him as well.” Jurou reached out and Chaka grabbed his wrist, yanking it down at his side. Jurou used his free hand and gripped a fistful of Chaka’s hair, yanking hard. Chaka growled,

releasing his grip and Jurou shouldered him by the chest, sending the young man crashing to the floor. “I want you to throw the match,” Jurou said seriously over Chaka.

“You want me to lose on purpose?” Chaka hissed, glaring back.

“Yes, I want you to fail in this battle and when the previous winners fight you next after this.”

“What if I refuse?”

“I know you won’t!”

“What makes you think I will let you?” Chaka bared his teeth. “You also go up against me in exhibition!”

Jurou smiled shrewdly, kneeling down beside Chaka. “If you do what I ask you to,” he answered, “then you can do to me whatever you like.”

Chaka snorted. “What brought this on?”

“You’ll have to find out.”

Chaka pushed Jurou away then rose to his feet. Stepping over Jurou, he stormed for the exit and kicked open the lavatory’s doors. Entering the classroom, he caught sight of Kaminaritou Rouru holding a naginata and pacing the floor. Chaka passed him and retrieved a katana from the assistant instructor, then jumped the ring.

Ishida raised his hand to begin the fight and Chaka said nothing as he nodded at Kaminaritou Rouru who bowed to Ishida, then to Chaka before taking up his attacking stance.

“*I want to control this fight,*” Chaka thought as he stood unmoving, holding his katana at the hilt while Kaminaritou Rouru circled him, anticipating an opening.

“I will give you partial control,” Tannozone grumbled. “If you go too far, I shall take control back.”

“Go too far, eh? Don’t be so impatient!” Chaka smiled darkly at Kaminaritou Rouru as he approached, for the first time in control of his own body – a freedom he had not felt in many seasons – once Tannozone retreated.

Kaminaritou Rouru rushed Chaka, reaching out with his partisan. Chaka simply moved his body to the side, allowing the blade to pass without touching anything but air.

“Make your move!” Kaminaritou Rouru growled as Chaka continued to sidestep his attacks.

“If I strike back,” Chaka responded smugly, “it would inspire fear and it wouldn’t be fair.”

“I thought you would find it exciting fighting me,” Kaminaritou Rouru snarled. “If you were as skilled as you say, having earned the title of *Hasha*, then this match would be long over by now!”

“If it is action you want, then you’ll get it!”

Kaminaritou Rouru sliced under Chaka’s guard and Chaka brought up his sword, blocking the blow, then turned out and stepped back out of another swipe. Kaminaritou Rouru growled as Chaka easily deflected his fatal strikes then grunted when kicked back by the chest.

Chaka blew a heavy sigh, hoisting his katana over his shoulder. “This is utterly boring!” he complained. Kaminaritou Rouru staggered back and lowered his glaive, glaring at Chaka who pitched his blade into the floor. “I give up,” Chaka said and stifled a yawn. “You’re boring me to death and I do not find this exciting at all.”

“There’s something different about you,” Kaminaritou Rouru grumbled. “Any other time you’d give me considerable challenge in martial prowess.”

“Maybe it’s not my day, eh?”

“I am disappointed in you! You usually enjoy our bouts, but now you’re merely telegraphing your moves and slow to initiate them!”

Chaka smirked. “Then show me how it’s done!”

“I will!”

Chaka ducked out of a hard slash to the right, stepping out of a strike from the left, then jumped and turned his body as he picked up the fallen katana in one fluid motion. He planted his blade horizontally to Kaminaritou Rouru’s vertical, struggling to push the other back.

Kaminaritou Rouru growled and pulled back, then slammed his partisan repeatedly into Chaka’s chest, one blow after another. Chaka repeatedly blocked with ease then pushed him off, sending Kaminaritou Rouru flying backwards and landing with a sick thud on his right shoulder.

Kaminaritou Rouru groaned and staggered to his feet. He circled Chaka, moving close then away as he thrust the blade at him, only meeting air as Chaka swiftly twisted out of his attacks. When Kaminaritou Rouru swung the naginata in intricate maneuvers, Chaka stood still, flicking his wrist and blocked the halberd while countering the blade away.

“Do something!” Kaminaritou Rouru roared, growing enraged. “This is supposed to be a fight!”

Chaka just smiled. “Only because you asked me so nicely,” he replied, “if it is what you so desire...”

Chaka dodged the glaive's blade and immediately stepped inside Kaminaritou Rouru's defense, slamming the butt of the katana into his side. Kaminaritou Rouru faltered as the air knocked out of him. Before he had a chance to recover, Chaka delivered a snapping front kick into Kaminaritou Rouru's chest.

Kaminaritou Rouru stumbled back from the check and Chaka calmly walked back to his original starting position. Kaminaritou Rouru immediately charged, thrusting his partisan at Chaka in a vain attempt to cause injury.

Chaka moved before the blade lashed his face, barely escaping the blow and returned with a diagonal cut. Kaminaritou Rouru blocked and pushed him away in return, jamming the butt of the naginata into Chaka's chest and vaulted back, slamming the halberd down in a forward slash. Chaka grunted as the blade broke through his skin, slicing his cheek.

Capitalizing on Chaka's initial stun, Kaminaritou Rouru charged again with multiple thrusts, using the momentum to get through. Chaka deflected and countered just as quickly, bringing his katana right into its path.

Meeting the glaive head on, Chaka split the blade of the partisan right down the middle. While he held his katana in his left hand, Chaka brought up his right hand, gripping the remaining naginata and pulled forward.

With a spin, Chaka drove his right foot into Kaminaritou Rouru's stomach, sending him flying off the floor. Kaminaritou Rouru tumbled head over heels and struck the mats, heaving for breath. He crumpled on his side from his place on the ground, coughing up blood.

Dropping the partisan to the floor with a clatter, Chaka hoisted the katana over his shoulder and stalked up to Kaminaritou Rouru. “You won’t be fighting any time soon,” he snarled and kicked Kaminaritou Rouru on his back.

“I can still fight!” Kaminaritou Rouru snapped, glaring back at Chaka as Chaka placed his foot on his chest.

“Not when your fighting hand is gone!” Chaka raised his blade.

“Chaka, stop it,” Jurou called. Chaka looked up and around, then his gaze fell on the young man near the lavatory’s doors. “You already won this round and there’s no need to advance since it’s clear you’ve disabled him.”

“Then let’s finish this.” Relenting his stance, Chaka left the ring.

After assistants took Kaminaritou Rouru to the infirmary, Chaka battled against Shoda and Keitaro with his naginata, easily defeating them by breaking their reach weapons when they double-teamed him. Proving too fast for the two, they immediately declared a loss, leaving the next round to Tokiko.

She took up a single katana in her free hand and nearly gotten through to Chaka’s guard. Chaka reversed her, tripping Tokiko back and pinned her against the ropes with a strike upside the head.

When it was Nakiko’s turn to combat Chaka, she rushed him with her katana held high. A loud crack resonated as Chaka’s partisan met her sword in front of him and they pushed their weapons against each other in a test of strength.

“Go ahead; let your rage take over, girl,” Chaka growled. “That gives me less work to destroy you!”

“Shut your face!” Nakiko snarled and pushed Chaka back, causing him stumbling over his steps. She followed with a flash cut and Chaka withdrew his halberd, immediately blocking as fast as Nakiko delivered her strikes. She pressed ahead and Chaka swung out, avoiding a crushing maneuver intended for his wrist.

Chaka wondered about Nakiko’s barbaric style of attack as he moved forward with hard slashes to the left and right, blocking blow after blow she threw at him.

Nakiko abruptly turned away and jumped over Chaka, coming directly with a hit to the side of his head. Chaka lifted the naginata to block and pushed back, only meeting nothing but air as Nakiko whirled around him.

Advancing with a forward thrust, Nakiko rolled out the way and followed with a strike to the side of his neck. Chaka staggered back, stunned and dropped his halberd as he clutched his neck, growling.

“Damn you,” Chaka snarled through clenched teeth.

“Admit it, you’re finished,” Nakiko spat. “Even with your augmented demonic strength, you failed stopping my attacks and died thrice over!”

“You’re good,” Chaka grumbled. “I’m impressed with your skills.”

Nakiko lowered her katana and left the ring as Jurou approached.

“You wouldn’t listen to me and did what you wanted anyway,” Jurou reprimanded. “I’m your last opponent in this exhibition match, so let’s make it worth our while!”

Chaka snorted in response and Jurou entered the ring. They gave abbreviated kowtows to each other and took their stances. After Ishida gave the signal, they delivered punches at each other, having their fists connect with the opposite fist.

Jurou blew a hard sigh through his nose, tense as he fought from wincing in pain and astounded at Chaka’s strength than he had given credit. Chaka grunted, also stunned and surprised when he found Jurou did not recoil from impact.

Jurou released his hand and took a step back, throwing a high kick. Chaka stepped to the side, launching his own attack using his fist as Jurou’s foot flew at his head.

Jurou whirled around and brought down his hands; deflecting Chaka’s heavy smash aimed for his face. Delivering a swift elbow into Chaka’s abdomen, Jurou shouldered him with all his might and launched him across the floor.

Chaka staggered back and twisted out of Jurou’s flurry of kicks. He stepped out of a roundhouse and jumped back from a leg sweep, then grunted when Jurou’s knee connected with his groin.

Chaka stumbled forward and Jurou followed with a snapping reverse knee thrust to the chin, forcing Chaka seeing stars as he flew backwards from the impact. Chaka landed heavily with a slam to the floor several feet away and his body crumpled from the force. He wheezed weakly for breath, his limbs involuntarily twitching in response.

The other students reacted with audible gasps as Chaka took such a deliberate hit as they had ever seen. Rarely did anyone ever land a blow on Chaka, known as a superior fighter who trained hard to perfect his martial skill. Jurou dropped to one knee across from him, panting for breath.

“There’s no way anyone can get up from a blow like that,” Ittou remarked as the room became hushed in stunned silence.

Ishida noticed Chaka’s lack of movement and raised his hand, declaring Jurou the winner. “The match is over,” he called.

Jurou quickly rose to his feet, clearly disturbed when Chaka suddenly convulsed in laughter. He tensed, watching Chaka flip himself to his feet, and immediately cross the floor over to him.

“It’s been a while since I felt any pain like that,” Chaka remarked. “You put a lot of strength into that strike, Saku.”

“You’re abnormal!” Jurou cried and backed away as Chaka’s looming form easily closed the gap between them. “I didn’t expect you to get up!”

“Are you well enough to continue?” Chaka asked and grinned darkly once he approached. Reaching for Jurou, he grunted when Jurou slapped away his hand once grabbed and immediately took on his ready stance in response. “I want to try that again.”

“This match is over, Chaka!” Jurou snapped as Chaka also took on his ready stance. “Admit defeat!”

“I’m not through with you yet!” Chaka roared and rushed toward Jurou with incredible speed. Jurou quickly stepped and

moved out of punch after punch Chaka threw, barely managing to block each swift hit before they connected.

Jurou blocked his strike to the head with his arm and kicked him back, using the momentum as it struck Chaka in the chest to flip over and turned with a spinning reverse roundhouse, slamming his heel into the side of Chaka's neck.

Chaka grunted and staggered back from the force as Jurou followed with a snapping side kick, sending him reeling on the floor. Jurou brought down his heel and Chaka grabbed his foot, flinging him aside. Jurou stumbled rearward and fell to one knee, breathing heavily with increasingly shorter gasps of air.

"Is that all you have?" Jurou spat once Chaka stood and faltered.

"Damn you!" Chaka roared and charged Jurou again. Jurou jumped over him, delivering a hard kick to the back of Chaka's head that threw him down to the floor. Chaka struck face first on the ground and moaned, losing consciousness.

Chaka groaned once he felt a heavy armored foot press into his head in the darkness.

"What a pitiful performance!" Tannozone growled. *"Is that the best you can do?"*

"Ask me again," Chaka snarled and grunted when Tannozone stomped on his back.

"Do you wish to have my strength and agility?"

"Yes..."

"I won't allow you to do what you wish; I'm only coming to you because you wished me to!"

“You don’t have to honor that anymore... what right would that be?”

“*Listen!*” Tannozume shouted and withdrew his katana. “*Are you afraid that I hate you?*” Chaka screamed when the blade slammed into his shoulder. “*I shall insult your body again and again if you do not do as I demand of you!*”

“What more do you want from me?”

“*You have already promised to follow my words and copy my deeds unquestioningly... I shall even beat you to the point of weakness if you do not allow me to do what I want!*” Tannozume withdrew his blade and pierced him again in the back of his head. “*I shall hate you and you cannot change my mind!*”

“I take your threats seriously,” Chaka wailed, “but I will not stand down!”

“*Why do you upset me like this?*” Tannozume crouched before Chaka, his eyes glowing green behind his crimson mask. “*I own you, for you are mine to control!*”

The darkness slowly faded and Chaka groggily began to wake up. His jumbled mind forged in vain to make sense of his surroundings when he couldn’t remember where he was.

Unable to sit up when phantom forces restrained him in place, Chaka forced his eyes open. Although his sight was slightly blurred, he realized he was either dreaming or something was not quite right.

Once the blurriness began dissipating, Chaka heard someone calling his name, but didn’t recognize the voice.

“Kouji...” the faint voice called to him. “Kouji, please help me!”

Chaka tried to answer, but his voice refused to come. He closed his eyes and tried to focus them in the vast darkness. Suddenly noticing something else, the faint fear that he occasionally felt came on stronger than before.

Then the voice suddenly became clearer and his eyes snapped open, the haziness fading and he found Jurou standing over him. Chaka realized he couldn't recall what he felt as the fearful feelings subsided as quickly as they came.