

Tales from Illustratus: Night of Burning Passion

By Luis Burgos

In the city of Illustratus, there is no shortage of those with a fondness for the arts. Music, painting, dancing, writing; the usual things one would think of. But the definition of art allows for expression of all kinds. Building new technology, racing cars, even martial arts.

During the coldest week of the year, the Seven Days of Burning Passion is celebrated for all to witness and take part in. Events for nearly all forms of art take place with contestants dressed down to as little as they're comfortable sharing. As strange as this may seem, it's their custom. Nothing to warm them but the burning passion for their craft to keep them warm.

Keeba, a young man training for his final bout in a martial arts tournament readied himself. The blinding white tile walls surrounded him as he stood naked. He shut his eyes tightly as the sound of squeaking metal filled the small room.

"God damn that's cold!" Keeba gritted his teeth as the cold water of his shower hit him. He really wasn't a morning person. And he couldn't trust himself to *not* fall asleep in a hot shower. His fight was tonight but, unfortunately for him, he had a day job. He was running out of conditioner. After rinsing the shampoo from his head, he applied the rest of his conditioner to his long wavy hair. Keeba finished bathing and brushed his teeth. He definitely needed a nap after work, but last-minute training may have to take priority.

He rushed out of his house with nothing but buttered toast to get him through the workday.

Keeba made it to work just barely on time. He worked at a small café with a few friends.

Keeba's friend, Kalira, confronted him. "Yo, Keeb. You look like death. What's up?" She was slightly older than him but acted like his mother.

"Sorry, I've been busy," Keeba said quietly.

"Your final fight is coming up right? You gotta stop training in the middle of the night. Make time during the morning or something."

Keeba let out a sigh. "Yeah, I know."

"Could you get this latté over to the lady by the window?"

"Yeah, sure."

Keeba brought the latté over and greeted her. The lady in question was beyond beautiful. Straight black hair, caramel brown and almond shaped eyes, with a sweet smile to boot. She wore a brown overcoat that covered her torso, along with a pair of jeans.

“Good choice of latté. It’s actually my second favorite. My go-to when we run out of caramel.”

“Really? It’s my first time trying hazelnut.”

“You’re gonna dig it.” Keeba gave her a smile.

“You look very tired. Are you in one of the events tonight?” She asked with look of concern.

“Uhh, yeah...” Keeba stuttered. “I mean I’ve just been getting ready is all.”

“You’re a fighter in the tournament?”

“How’d you know?”

“You’re kinda built like one. Nice and strong. Also have a little cut on your cheek. I have a band-aid if you want.”

Keeba’s face nearly flushed red. But he kept up his “cool” act as best he could. “Oh, sure, I guess. Thank you.”

She reached into her purse and placed a band-aid on his cheek. “So, it’s tonight, yeah?”

“Yup! Last night of the Seven Days!”

“Are you nervous about your opponent?”

Keeba smiled and stretched his arms. “Hell no. I’ve been training way too much for this next guy to beat me. Whoever he is, I’ll be ending it in the first round. Hopefully, at least.”

She giggled at his bravado and played with her hair as she looked up toward him. “My name’s Tatsu by the way. I was in the calligraphy event a few days ago.”

“Calligraphy? The painting thing?”

“It’s a form of decorative handwriting. Martial artists could benefit from it. Especially swordsmen. But guys like you can use it too, y’know?”

“I guess,” Keeba said, “did you win?”

“No, unfortunately. I couldn’t practice as much as I wanted for it. But that’s ok. I got third place at least.” Tatsu gave him a sweet smile before sipping her latté. “Wow, this *is* pretty good.”

He noticed the change in topic and decided not to press further on her calligraphy. "I'm glad you dig it as much as I do. If you need anything else, just let me know, ok? Name's Keeba."

"Keeba... Is it alright if I get your number?" She asked.

Keeba's heart stopped for what felt like an eternity before he was finally able to speak, "My number? Yeah, sure. Here." He wrote his number down on a napkin and handed it to her.

Tatsu shook her head, her face beaming as she stifled a laugh. "This might be why you need calligraphy. I can barely read your handwriting." She wrote her number down and gave the napkin back to him. "Here."

Keeba blushed and laughed along with her. "Thanks, I'll text you when my shift is done."

"Would it be ok if I came back to make sure you get some food and rest?"

"Oh, maybe? I think?"

"You're gonna need rest before your fight. And decent food."

He wanted to decline, but why deny such a pretty girl? "Fine, okay. You win."

"Good! Text me when you're done. I don't live far."

Keeba nodded and made his way back to Kalira with haste.

"Got yourself a little girlfriend?" Kalira snickered.

"I... Guess so? She kept telling me to rest before my fight. She seems like she cares about me."

"Yeah? What time did you go to sleep last night?"

"I dunno. Like 4AM or something?"

"Your shift started 8AM, dumbass. I'm letting you go early today. You can leave at two, ok?"

Keeba let out an exasperated sigh, but he nodded in acceptance. "Fine."

"Good! You're lucky it's a slow day today."

2PM came by quicker than expected. Keeba texted Tatsu as she asked, and he got a reply in just a few moments. She asked him to wait outside the café. Fortunately, after a few minutes, she was outside wearing the same cute outfit. Tatsu gave him a hug and held his arm. It felt nice.

"You in the mood for pizza?" Tatsu asked sweetly.

"I love pizza, sure!"

"Nice! You know Giuseppe's? I love their pizza!"

“Hell yeah! I ate there all the time back when I was in high school!”

The two walked to the pizzeria and had a couple slices of pizza each. They had their fill and soon after their two-hour conversation Tatsu made another proposal.

“I’m gonna head home. You should do the same before your fight. Make sure to take a good nap, okay? I’ll call you and make sure you wake up on time! Is that alright?”

“Alright, I promise. I’ll go home and take a nap.”

“Okay good! If you don’t get any rest I’ll beat you up!” Tatsu gave him a hug before leaving.

Keeba smiled as she left. He headed home and laid on his couch. He closed his eyes, and before he realized it, he ended up falling asleep.

His nap felt abnormally long. He woke up in a panic after napping for what felt like hours. He looked frantically at his phone. His fight starts at eight o’ clock. But it was only five.

He laid back down and wondered what Tatsu was up to. She was a rather small lady. He texted her to make sure she made it home alright. Ten minutes passed and still no answer. She did say she was going to rest as well. So that must be why she wasn’t answering.

Keeba closed his eyes and felt the band-aid on his cheek. He wasn’t exactly fond of the neighborhood they lived in. It could be dangerous at times. Especially in the colder seasons when the dark of night took pleasure in arriving so early. He took a deep breath and shook his head. Dwelling on these thoughts would do nothing. He sat up and watched some TV instead. He felt rested enough anyway.

As soon as seven o’ clock hit, he got a call from Tatsu.

“Hey, Keeba! You ready for the fight? It’s downtown on East 5th Street, right?”

“Yeah, are you gonna come watch me?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world. You better be rested!” Tatsu hung up and it was time to get a move on.

After a quick train ride, Keeba made it to the tall and wide building hosting the fight. He made his way to the elevator. The fight was to take place on the roof. The silence of the elevator was soon replaced with thumping music. The music bumped louder and louder. The doors

opened and the bright flashing lights of the arena flickered, contrasting against the dark blue night sky.

Keeba stepped out and was immediately met by Kalira.

“Keeba! Come on, buddy! Get over to your corner! Announcement’s ‘bout to start!”

Keeba followed along and not too long after, the announcements did indeed start.

“In the red corner, at 5’9” and weighing 145lbs... Keeba Lobo!”

Keeba walked out on stage wearing only a pair of boxer shorts along with his padded gloves and footwear. He was ready to fight his next opponent.

“And in the blue corner, at 5’3” weighing 115lbs! Tatsu Maki!!”

Time stood still. The only thing moving was the beautiful lady he’d met at the café. The sports bra and shorts, along with her gloves and footpads were a far cry from her overcoat and jeans. Her muscles were finely toned and clearly visible as she raised her fist to greet him.

Time seemed to function correctly again as soon as her same sweet smile met his gaze.

“No excuses for you to lose, Keeba.”

Keeba hesitated to fist bump her, but Kalira shouted from the side of the arena, “Keeba! Don’t get your ass kicked!”

The announcer continued, “Ladies and gentlemen! Get ready for the final night of Burning Passion!”

Keeba couldn’t hear the crowd roaring. The cold was starting to get to him. So much so that he shivered only briefly. The crowd fell silent upon seeing him shiver for just that moment. His fist was heavy. He fist bumped her and the bell rang, initiating the fight.

The way Tatsu’s footwork danced upon the floor of the arena was graceful. As mesmerizing as it was, it was cut short with a fierce kick to the chest. Keeba’s vision was focused on the night sky as he laid on the floor gasping for air. He slammed his fist on the ground, regaining his focus. As Keeba stood up, he spat on the floor and put up his hands. He didn’t want to hurt her, but he wanted, more than anything to win.

Tatsu let out an onslaught of punches. He blocked as much as he could. Each strike seemed to hit harder than the last. After the strikes, Tatsu took a quick step back. Once Keeba looked up, he was nearly met with a powerful kick to the face. She was absurdly fast. So fast that the kick he barely dodged swiped the band-aid off his cheek. And just before her next blow could land, the bell rung, signaling the end of the first round.

Keeba walked back to his corner and Kalira gave him a quick smack to the face.

“What the hell was that?” Kira yelled.

“I... I just went on a date with her.”

“I don’t care, and she *clearly* doesn’t. Look Keeba, I know she’s pretty but right now, you two are fighters. Didn’t she say something to you before the fight started?”

Kalira was right. She *did* say something. *No excuses.*

Keeba took a deep breath, recalled what world he belonged to, and let out a deep exhale.

“Alright. I’m ready.”

The bell rung again. Tatsu walked back into the ring.

Keeba looked into her eyes as they both entered their own personal battlefield. The world they lived in was bathed deep in the blood and sweat of a martial artist. That first round was disgraceful to them both.

The cold air stopped affecting him. His fist no longer felt heavy. He raised it up to her and spoke plainly, “I won’t disrespect you.”

Her smile was still as sweet and genuine as the one she gave him at the café. She completed their fist bump. “Good. I wanna earn this win.”

He couldn’t help but smirk at her. His admiration for her was at an all time high. With that, they got right to it.

The pounding of punches being blocked and the quick whiffs of kicks being dodged filled the air around them. The crowd ceased to exist. All that mattered now was giving the fight everything they’ve got. Going for the win. Round after round their bodies were battered more and more. Cuts and bruises that weren’t felt until after each bell sounded. Each round started slower than the last but ended with just as much ferocity.

Keeba and Tatsu were, quite literally, on their last legs. Keeba had to end it now. The split-second opening she left him gave him time to sweep her leg and go for the knockout. He followed through with his plan. His other leg however, seemed to stumble. As if someone had pushed it where it shouldn’t be.

The night sky greeted him. It didn’t take him long to realize what happened. The moment his left leg was lifted, she knocked him down with an oblique kick to his right leg.

Brutal. Tactical. Clever and quick-witted. That was the kind of martial artist Tatsu Maki was. Compassionate, fair, and loving. That was the woman she was.

He could feel himself being picked up, but all he wanted to do was lay down.

“Are you alright? I’m so sorry!”

He heard Tatsu loud and clear. The kick didn’t break his leg, thankfully. All he could do was smile and look up at her as she wrapped his arm around her shoulder.

“I think I’m down to try calligraphy with you for a while...”

He chuckled weakly, and she along with him. Their battered faces made it difficult to smile.

“Sounds good, Keeba,” Tatsu replied.

The crowd roared, screaming their names out loud as the perfect finale to the Week of Burning Passion.