Contain the Rot

"… And lastly, do *not* forget to bring the satchel back with you. You got all that?"

Alina timidly nodded as she stood idly inside the empty chamber, awaiting her next order. She fidgeted with her scarlet red hazmat suit for a while as she did so, the Crossguard tugging at the golden emblem embroidered into its strange material for a moment while she mentally prepared herself for what was about to come next. A compact leather satchel shuffled against her side while she waited, the muffled sounds of glass vials clinking inside causing her to make occasional glances down at the leather strap she'd kept wrapped around her shoulder. Though Saki's presence over the intercom had very much been a welcome form of reprieve from her nerves, Alina still found herself wishing that she hadn't even been subjected to this situation to begin with. At the very least, she wished she'd been able to pray to the God Eater for a blessing which might protect her during her time in Scythe's little pocket dimension. Wearing a protective suit was one thing, but having a divine blessing that granted her immunity from the demon's sickness would have been much more reassuring.

Alas…

"I said, do you got all that?" Saki repeated. Clearly, a simple nod hadn't been sufficient for an answer.

"Y-yes! Yes, ma'am." Alina answered, her posture straightening for a moment as if she were standing at attention. With a hum of satisfaction, Saki sighed into the intercom.

"Good, good…" Saki murmured. "The patient may be unresponsive right now, but we *cannot* risk her going without treatment for too long. Especially with the Madame being as busy as she is…"

Again, Alina looked down towards the small leather satchel which lingered at her waist. Somehow, Saki's words only served to add onto the pressure she felt as she nervously peered into the glints of blue that shimmered on the inside. Even so, she was right. The Madame had enough on her plate without having to worry about a contestant potentially dying outside her arena… or a plague somehow making its way into the Crossroads right under her nose. Both were PR disasters waiting to happen, and if there was anything that the Madame hated more than bad publicity, well… Alina couldn't think of it.

"R-right. Um… speaking of the patient…" Alina muttered, a hint of uncertainty now lacing her words. "Is she, um…"

A brief pause. She hadn't wanted to consider this possibility, but with the way Saki was acting right now, things very well could have been pointing in this direction.

"Is she what?" Saki asked. With a nervous twiddle of her fingers, Alina paused once more before eventually letting out a defeated sigh and directing her attention back up towards the speaker. There was no easy way to ask this, it seemed.

"Are you sure she's not… dead?" Alina finally asked. "Because if she is, we might have to-"

"I'm sure." Saki interjected. "At least, ugh… I'm as sure as I *can* be. Now concentrate – I'm opening the portal now."

A subtle frown colored Alina's expression at that particular response. Though Saki had understandably felt forced into this situation, it had rapidly become clear that the stress of it all was getting to her. Whether that was because of some small measure of care for her 'patient', a genuine fear of Ravi's illness, or a mixture of both, Alina couldn't quite tell. At the very least, it was obvious that Saki didn't want to consider the possibility that Scythe had well and truly died under her watch. From what the oni had told her, Ravi had made it quite clear what to do with those who had succumbed to their plague…

Alina still shivered at the thought.

"R-right. Yes, of course, ma'am." the Crossguard nodded. "It's just… I'm worried that maybe she's not-"

At that, an orange-rimmed portal materialized a mere few feet away from where Alina was standing – startling her and briefly causing her to recoil in-place. It seemed Saki was keen to get on with the examination, as evidenced by the stony silence with which she caused the portal to appear. Timidly, the Crossguard took a deep breath before stepping forward…

…and crossing directly into Scythe's quarantine room.

A shaky sigh left her lips. From where she now stood, Alina could see a large television screen which bore Saki's image – the oni looking down at the room in cold silence while the sound of a closing portal echoed out against its walls. She didn't say a word to Alina as the Crossguard took a moment to familiarize herself with her surroundings, the room's eggshell-white walls and its barren tile floor immediately instilling uneasiness in her as she gradually ventured inside. In the corner of the room, Alina could spot a petite figure hunched up underneath the sheets of their bed in what looked like a modest fetal position. A pointed, bubblegum-pink tail could also be seen poking out

from underneath the fabric as they laid there… though Alina couldn't help but note the distinct lack of reaction to Alina's entrance or to Saki's presence on the television screen. She briefly wondered if the figure underneath the bed even knew that either of them were there.

Or if her sheets were absolutely drenched with her blood.

Upon getting a closer look at it, Alina, too, went still.

"Miss Scythe…?" Alina called out. She waited for the figure underneath the sheets to reply, only to be met with an unceremonious silence as her eyes stared deep into the red. For some reason, the Crossguard now felt sick to her stomach.

"Believe me, you won't get a response out of her. I've tried…" Saki sighed, her attention briefly shifting down towards her feet as she did so.

"O-oh…" Alina nervously stuttered in response. Had Saki been in the room with her, she might have been able to perceive the subtle shiver in her body language now that she had stepped her way even further towards the small hospital bed. It really was a dreary little place that she'd found herself in, Alina thought as she approached; had she been the one to be locked up in this room, she couldn't imagine she would've been able to handle the isolation very well either.

"M-miss Saki, I really don't like the look of this – there's blood *everywhere*." Alina called out. "I thought the symptoms were supposed to take longer before they presented themselves?"

"They are. Or at least, they normally are…" the Oni sighed. "But things turned ugly for her after the end of Ravi's second round. Poor girl couldn't sleep anymore – would barely eat or drink. She started developing spots along her skin and hiding herself underneath the sheets after that. It's a long story, but basically, Ravi has done a lot of fucked up shit to get where they're at right now… and Scythe watched them admit all of it."

At this, Alina paused. 'Fucked up shit?' Her eyes remained fixed on the demon who still remained huddled up underneath their sheets before glancing back down at the potions at her side. The alchemical satchel that Saki had given her contained a good number of Fortitude Potions derived from the ingredients listed within Ravi's book. She trusted the oni's judgement when it came to their effectiveness, but with the condition that Scythe was in, she truly began to wonder if these potions would end up doing anything at all – especially to someone who didn't seem to want treatment to begin with. Still, she couldn't help but wonder…

"… Does this have anything to do with that 'Maren' child you had me looking for?" Alina suddenly asked. She didn't know for certain, but she didn't think it a coincidence that Saki had called off that search the moment that Ravi's second round had aired.

At the mention of Maren, however, Saki's expression promptly shifted back into one of distance and coldness. She quietly looked away from her side of the television screen, taking a deep breath for a moment before finally opening her mouth to speak.

"… Approach the patient, please." Saki merely replied.

Alina decided she wouldn't press on that issue any further.

Regardless, she did as instructed. With light, cautious steps, Alina approached the demon while clutching the straps of Saki's satchel – its leather now digging into the fabric of her hazmat suit while she carefully surveyed the outline of the girl who rested silently underneath their bedsheets. Vials of glass quietly clattered against one another as the Crossguard approached, and it was only when Alina stretched her hand out onto one of the sheets that the piercing sound of Saki's voice again made her jump in place.

"Wait." Saki said. Swiftly, Alina turned her attention back towards the large television screen – awaiting her next order.

"Y-yes? What is it?" Alina asked.

"She, um… I mean, when you go to treat her, she might…" Saki began, only for the oni to stumble over her words as she tried and failed to gather her thoughts. Alina's hand continued to hover over the sheets as Scythe laid still underneath their fabric.

"Her condition might be a little extreme." Saki finally decided on saying. "It wasn't on purpose, but Ravi's shown me what it looks like when this disease progresses. It's… not pretty."

With a nervous nod, the shake in Alina's body language became a little more intense as she finally clutched the demon's bedsheets between her fingers. 'Pretty,' Saki had said. From the scarce few glimpses of Scythe that Alina had seen, she knew the chaos demon might have been a little too obsessed with her appearance to take a disease like this in stride. Even so, whether she was hiding from the world or not, Scythe would eventually have to face the music if she wanted to be administered the treatment that Saki had so painstakingly prepared for her through Ravi's notes…

It was once Alina finally threw Scythe's bedsheets off to the floor, however, that she audibly gasped in horror of what she saw.

Blood. Blood trickling down from the demon's eyes like tears and seeping into the bedsheets below; blood drying into black rivulets and coagulating into pools underneath her gaunt cheeks; blood mixing in with pus which was oozing from the sores scattered across the length of her pale body. All Alina could see, it seemed, was blood, as Scythe quickly stirred atop the bed which hosted her – a scant collection of sheets still wrapped around her legs and cocooning her into a bloody, pus-filled nest. Even through the protection of her hazmat suit, Alina desperately fought the urge to vomit in reaction to what she saw… not to mention at what she smelled.

Fortunately for them both, Alina was still able to make out the fact that Scythe was still breathing as her limbs gradually shifted in reaction to the removal of her bedsheets. They had at least managed to confirm that Scythe wasn't dead, and that there was still time to treat her – but whatever sort of treatment that Saki had prepared for her had obviously been prepared far too late. Alina couldn't imagine that a potion of fortitude would be any sort of help at a stage *this* late…

"Holy shit…" Saki whispered, her cold exterior quickly faltering into a state of shock. "Scythe…"

"Miss Saki… what is-?"

"It's so much worse than I thought…" Saki replied, the tremble in her voice mirroring Alina's thoughts as she, too, fought the urge to vomit. "I knew the disease was progressing, but… fuck – I didn't know it was *that* fast!"

"What- what do we do?" Alina asked. The glass vials continued to clink inside her bag as she simply watched Scythe sit herself upright in her bed.

"We treat her. *Immediately.*" Saki replied. "She's in really bad shape, but if I managed to decipher Ravi's recipes correctly – and *fuck,* I really hope I did – it should at least buy her some time before the Science Division can figure out some sort of medication-"

A sudden gurgling retch echoed out into the chamber as Saki spoke, the noise instantly catching the woman off-guard and causing her and Alina both to jump in place. It was a line of projectile vomit that had caught their attention, the line shooting itself straight from the lips of Scythe's mouth and landing itself right onto the surface Alina's hazmat suit. The Crossguard gasped and shrieked in horror as the suit was instantly drenched in blood and vomit, and although Saki was quick to begin assuring her, Alina had already begun to panic underneath the protection of her suit.

"Alina! Alina, don't panic - stay calm for me, okay?" Saki reassured, her voice once again piercing its way through the room as shaking breaths escaped from Alina's lips. "You still have the suit on, remember? As long as you have that, you *won't* get infected."

"M-Miss S-Saki, I really don't want to do this anymore…" Alina stuttered. "This is too… too…!"

"You're almost done, okay? All you have to do is give her the potion." Saki instructed. "Once you do that, I can open the portal back up and have you sanitized in the chamber."

"I… I can't-!"

"You *can.*" Saki affirmed. "Just take it one step at a time, Alina. First, just take a potion from your bag…"

With shaking, whimpering breaths, Alina did as she was told – albeit quickly. She stuffed her hand into the satchel at her hip in order to remove a single blue potion, her eyes nervously examining it for a moment before rapidly turning away.

By the Madame, that *stench…*

"That's good." Saki assured her. "Now, uncork the vial and make your way over to the patient. *Slowly.*"

Her hands continued to shake as she clumsily wrapped her fingers around the vial's cork and pulled. A loud *pop* could be heard as she suddenly sprung it free from the glass – the sound apparently catching Scythe's attention in the process as her tail frantically began to twitch in response.

Regardless, Alina stepped forward. The liquid shook in its bottle as the Crossguard approached.

"Careful." Saki warned from behind the television. "Nice and easy…"

Alina shivered as she approached. Despite the twitching movements of Scythe's tail, there was an eerie stillness to the rest of her body which the Crossguard found deeply off-putting. With her hand still shaking and her mouth still quivering, Alina brought the lip of her vial up onto Scythe's once she approached, her eye watching carefully as the light blue liquid gradually began to climb its way up into the demon's mouth…

CRASH!

Alina yelped as Scythe blindly swatted the vial away from her hands with a snarl, causing the Crossguard to step back and the demon to retreat against the wall with a coughing fit. The sound of shattering glass reverberated throughout the room for a moment as Alina panted out of fright, the display causing Saki to quietly mutter something under her breath before again pinching the bridge of her nose in exhaustion.

"Shit…" Saki muttered. Quickly, Alina looked back up towards the oni with a panicked expression.

"W-what's wrong with her? Why did she do that?!" Alina asked.

"I was afraid this might be the case." Saki sighed. "I kept a vague hope that she only wasn't responding to me because she was upset, but now I'm thinking the disease has completely robbed her of her senses. She doesn't even seem to realize where she is anymore, much less know that we're only trying to help her…"

With panic still in her eyes, Alina looked back towards the demon who still sat hunched on her bed. Although Scythe was still reeling from the glass as well as her sudden stream of vomit, her unseeing eyes were hazily looking back and forth as frantically, she searched the room for signs of anyone else who might dare to approach her bloody nest. She looked so confused, so completely out of sorts that Alina honestly couldn't help but wonder if she even understood what was happening right now… or what she and Saki were saying. It was really no wonder that Scythe slapped the potion away, now that she thought about it; those bloody, unseeing eyes of hers contained only a fraction of the awareness they usually held.

Alina looked back towards the television screen.

"So what should we do?" Alina asked.

"We try again." Saki told her simply. "It'll be a bitch to make a replacement batch, especially since she's already puked onto the one I gave you, but I'll need to make more anyway if we want to keep Kiri and Azta treated too. Grab another vial from the bag, but this time, keep her held down while you administer it. We don't want her destroying any more vials – not while she can still use them."

A rock sank into the pit of Alina's stomach at that last command.

"Yes ma'am…" Alina nodded nervously. Then, with an uneasy paleness in her face, Alina stuffed her hand back into the satchel to pull out a second potion. She uncorked it a little more easily this time once she did so, though unfortunately for her, the sound wasn't any less distinct to the demon as she suddenly jumped in place on the bed

again – her ear and tail twitching in response to the sound of Alina preparing her second attempt. Now, she looked much more lively than before.

Slowly, Alina began to step forward again.

"Remember… keep track of where their limbs are going." Saki told her. "Don't want to be caught off-guard by any stray punches or kicks."

Alina nodded – this time a little more bravely. Her training as a Crossguard had ensured she'd know how to handle Scythe if a real physical altercation broke out between them, though she couldn't say for certain she'd be able to do so while keeping a bag full of potions intact. Even so, she steadily braced herself as she again brought the mouth of the vial to Scythe's lips – her hand shaking as she slowly brought it down onto Scythe's shoulder.

Again, Alina lifted the vial, funneling the liquid slowly towards Scythe's open lips…

"NO! Urgh!!!" Scythe screamed, the demon suddenly pressing her shoulder frantically into Alina's hand as she swatted, kicked, and struggled against the pressure being placed on her body. Desperately, she swatted at Alina's hand again – trying and failing to break the vial free from Alina's grip as she struggled back and forth amidst a chaotic series of slaps, scratches, and hits. Thankfully, the fabric of Alina's suit had easily managed to protect her from most of the demon's strikes – though it was once she finally managed to bring the mouth of the vial towards Scythe's lips again that the sharp tip of the demon's tail suddenly lunged into the glass of Alina's suit at full speed…

And punctured its glass with a loud and sickening *CRACK*.

"SHIT! Alina?!" Saki yelled, her cry immediately being followed by the sound of Alina squealing and gasping in utter horror. Though the tail hadn't come close to piercing Alina's skin or causing any immediate harm, the damage done to her suit had all but ensured that the Crossguard had been instantly exposed to whatever unholy disease that Scythe had been carrying. She could feel specks of dried blood from Scythe's tail splatter onto her face once it punctured her suit, and it was only when its arrow-like tip had been wedged free from the plastic-like glass that Alina suddenly felt her bag of potions slip free from her shoulder in shock. It then crashed down onto the floor in a fantastically heart-wrenching display, the impact smashing every vial and causing blue liquid to splash free from the mouth of Saki's leather satchel as it landed. Once more, Scythe retreated from Alina – this time scrambling on all fours into a particularly secluded corner of the bed which had mostly remained untouched from blood or pus.

With her entire body now trembling from fright, Alina paid no mind to the potions which now trickled onto the floor as she placed the tips of her gloved fingers onto the punctured glass of her suit and examined the point of impact. She let out another soft gasp as chunks of polycarbonate glass fell freely into her suit at her touch, the sight threatening to make her tear up while she slowly shifted her attention back towards the television screen and stared right at Saki.

"M-Miss Saki…?" Alina quivered.

"S-shit…" Saki trembled. Alina could see Saki's hands became a brighter shade of red as she shakily clenched them into fists.

"SHIT!!!" she screamed. Although the oni wasn't physically there with her, the explosive display of passion still caused Alina to jump back a little as the oni threw her hands off screen in a rage. Her hands crashed into what sounded like a nearby table once she did so, her fists sliding against its surface in a very heated and violent show of force that caused even Scythe to go silent as she listened and waited for any further attempts to approach her. The oni said nothing for a moment as she then panted under her breath, her back now turned away from the camera.

Eventually, the initial shock Alina felt subsided, granting the Crossguard a moment of much-needed clarity… or at least, as much clarity as she could experience in a situation like this. Although she was doing a good job of keeping it hidden from Saki, a violent maelstrom of emotions was wreaking havoc inside of her as she slowly came to terms with her situation. She wanted to cry, to scream, to throw her hands down onto the floor and retch in disgust. It was hard to believe she had actually just become infected, and it was even harder to believe that out of all the ways this little excursion into the quarantine zone could have ended, it had to end with her receiving the worst possible outcome.

Despite the intensity of what she felt, however, the words which came out of Alina's mouth next were actually ones of reassurance.

"I-it's okay, Saki. Really…" Alina finally said, the girl working to ease both the oni on the screen as well as herself. "I-I can just pray for the Madame to cure me, remember? I mean, it'll probably take a while for her to *notice* my prayer, but I won't be stuck in here forever."

Without a word, Saki simply sighed under her breath. She did not turn to face Alina as she brought her hands up onto her hips and looked solemnly down onto the floor.

"I-it's probably better this way anyway." Alina continued, the Crossguard quickly brushing away the anxious tear that was now trickling down her bloodied face. "Really! Miss Scythe needs someone to keep an eye on her in here, and it'll be easier for me to give her medication without having to worry about infection, so…"

"…Right." Saki mumbled in a voice that wasn't quite her own. She then sighed as she turned back around to face the camera, a hand still lingering atop her face as she frustratedly pinched the bridge of her nose to conceal the look of worry which rested underneath. "Fuck, Alina, I just- I'm so sorry. If I had thought there'd even be a *chance* you'd get infected, I wouldn't have-…"

From there, Saki's words quickly trailed off into regretful silence. Alina quietly shared in that silence for a moment, her breaths shaking and trembling all the way up until she shifted her attention back towards the demon who sat perched atop her bed. Her anxiety presented itself in the form of another worried look as she examined the demon's condition from afar, and soon, Alina found herself beginning to panic all over again as she allowed herself to stare at her bloodied eyes.

"Do you think, um…?" Alina began after a long pause. She watched as Scythe continued to wait and listen from across the room, her tail frantically waving about underneath her as her agitated state only seemed to intensify. "Do you think the Madame will even realize I'm in here…?"

"…She will." Saki answered. She then lowered her hand from her face more, the oni stubbornly clenching her hands into fists again as she glared back into the camera. "I'll make damn sure she will. I just… ugh, I'll need to bring word to her that the infection has spread again. Or at the very least, I'll need to tell Chiifu about this incident so she can petition your blessing on your behalf. Obviously, I can't let you out now that you're infected, but with enough rest and fluids, you should at least be able to delay your symptoms from developing for a little while longer."

Saki then turned her attention towards Scythe while she spoke, a thought seemingly occurring to her and causing a visible change in her expression as she watched the demon silently sit atop her bloodied mattress. Despite the anxiety and fear which was still racking her brain, even Alina could see just how concerned Saki was that Scythe had fallen into such a ghastly condition.

And it was easy to see why; simply looking at her was enough to cause Alina discomfort. After all, if Scythe's symptoms had progressed so quickly, that meant there was a chance – however small – that Alina's symptoms could do the same thing. There was also no telling how quickly a constant exposure to Scythe's illness could accelerate Alina's own, now that her suit was broken. She imagined that Saki hadn't anticipated the demon being strong enough to break it to begin with, and if she had, there was no way she wouldn't have sent a whole team in with Alina instead of having her go in by herself…

But that didn't feel like a sufficient excuse right now. Alina wished Saki *had* sent in a team – or at the very least, she wished she had petitioned the God Eater for a blessing of protection from the get-go. True, Saki had fitted her with a suit… but even with the hazmat, Alina and Saki both had just been proven woefully unprepared for the possibility of the plague actually spreading to someone else. It seemed it really *did* take nothing short of divine intervention to stop this plague in its tracks – pocket dimensions or not. Still, despite everything that had happened, Alina knew full well that if anyone could manage to gather the Madame's attention and fix her predicament, it was Saki.

At least, she really hoped she could.

Silently, Alina turned her attention towards the potions she'd spilt on the floor as another tear trickled down her cheek.

"I broke the whole batch, too…" she whispered, almost to herself as she merely stared at the puddle of blue which seeped its way into the floor's tiles. Ugh, how could she have been so careless?

"I can make more." Saki interjected. "I *will* make more. It's just… gonna take a bit of time, is all."

"How much time?" Alina quickly asked.

"Not nearly as much as the first time around." Saki answered. "There's no code for me to break, now – no puzzle for me to solve – so I can just take the notes I deciphered from Ravi's book and get to work. It, uh… will probably still take a while, though."

"What about the Science Division? Couldn't they help you make more?" Alina asked, not-so-subtly trying to find a way to pick up the pace.

Saki, however, looked off to the side again with uncertainty. "Ugh, shit – maybe? I really don't know. The eggheads over there are familiar with more conventional medicines, and they're already busy enough trying to make a *real* cure for this thing. I could probably send a fox for Nephro, though; he's not as experienced as me when it comes to this stuff, but he's a quick learner."

"Please do…" Alina pleaded. While it was unlikely that she would actually succumb to such an illness under the God Eater's employ, she still didn't want to take any chances. It was difficult to catch the God Eater's attention during a tournament… but Saki knew Chiifu, and Chiifu knew the God Eater. With enough pestering as well as a considerable amount of prayer, Alina knew she'd be out of here eventually.

That's what Alina would tell herself over and over again as she continued to stare at Scythe from across the room.

"Then it looks like I have more work to do." Saki said, the bags under her eyes looking no better for it. "Just hang tight, okay Alina? I promise I'll be back later with another batch… and some more help."

"J-just hurry…" Alina said. Her attention remained fixed on the demon in the corner of the room as she spoke. Saki would only nod in reply before reaching her hand off-screen to cut the feed.

"Oh, and Alina?" Saki said.

"Y-yes, Miss Saki?" Alina asked. There was a brief pause before Saki finally spoke again.

"… I'm so sorry." the oni settled on saying.

And at that, the television screen went black.