

Gambler's Conceit

Summer Leagues OCT Audition by JadedStrayHyena

This feels worse than just boredom...as absurd as that even is. Is it that...ennui thing Cassidy mentioned? Maybe...but whatever it is, it's been going a couple of weeks too long!

Ignoring the sunlight pouring through the window of a random house on the outskirts of Congredior City, a redheaded fair-skinned woman laid on the room's sole bed, wine-colored eyes staring blankly at the cream-tinted ceiling with one hand idly twirling the fabric of her oversized t-shirt around her index finger while a bubblegum pink tail sticking out moved in time like a prehensile metronome.

Her name was Scythe and she found herself facing a problem that left her in deep thought. It was such deep musing on this new feeling that she hadn't done much since the day started beyond eating and taking a shower. While a lack of activity was something the Chaos Demon had disliked heavily ever since she was a child, she hated the depressive feeling that had settled on her mind weeks ago even more and was determined to solve it. Besides, wandering around and hoping to find a distraction and letting nature take its course wasn't going to do that this time – she had tried and it just ruined her fun by the end. But she was more comfortable doing nothing but thinking now that she suspected the root cause; that was the good news. The bad news was that none of the ideas she could come up with to deal with the problem so far felt tenable.

Really came to a head last night, didn't it? Just was way too vexed to notice until then...

The previous night...

With the moon hanging clearly on the wall of a cloudless night, Scythe flew in above the treeline of Kiteleaf Park before landing in a spot particularly dense with trees. She levitated just off the ground to avoid disturbing even a single blade of grass. She tilted her head just past one particularly thick trunk before tapping near her ear, activating a RuneTech earpiece.

“Yeah, I see him,” Scythe said. “He’s still searching.”

In a clearing was a male humanoid figure, short in stature with two heads and a slightly elongated neck for each. The pinstripe suit he was wearing had an obvious and absurd amount of visible stitching – like it was cut into pieces and put back together amateurly. This was one of the leaders of The Affliction, a syndicate that had spread incredibly far until collaborative efforts moved to squash them flat all at once that very night.

As for what he was searching for, Congredior City had become – for reasons both naturally occurring and not – a minor nexus of dimensional travel. And that meant there was always a miniscule chance of finding an uncontained rift, even if where it went was unknown or was a one-way trip – that was something a desperate soul escaping from the Peacekeepers might go all in on.

“Be careful,” said the male voice in Scythe’s ear. “You need to–”

“Uh uh,” said Scythe, who wasn’t in a great mood to start with. “You are not teaching *me* how to fight, Eddie.”

“How many times do I have to say my name isn’t–!” After he cleared his throat, the voice in her ear only got more tense as Scythe only grumbled more. “Maybe not, but you need to remember how to *detain*. I don’t care what special deal you have with the Chief – High Conflict class or not, you’re still a *Peacekeeper* and we have our ways of doing things in accordance with our laws. And with someone as vital as Berex to take down, that now means the laws of the *multiple* cities and realms he’s wanted in!”

Scythe knew she was being treated differently – the Chief had technically cut her a break by not forcing her to be a member of the rank and file and simply being

more of an on-call member. Ever since she literally fell into the city, she hasn't exactly shied away from many fights and it was one of her few "easily transferable skills" as far as she saw it. The offer basically got her paid to do something Scythe had a passion for, positioned her on the side of good and kept her out of potential consequences that even she could see on the horizon. Even so...part of Scythe wondered on occasion if she should have refused.

"Then should I leave then and let you have *someone else* to backseat battle with if you're so worried?" Scythe growled back almost immediately. "If your Chief trusts me to handle business and you don't, that sounds like a problem for *you*. Of all the nights for you to get on my nerves, this is probably the worst one."

"Then just make sure you do this *right* and not the messes I know you to make!"

There was a palpable silence before Scythe could hear "Eddie" briefly exclaim in pain – like someone nearby had hit him for his comment. But Scythe could not say the guy was *fully* off-base. Scythe knew she had made some messes when...indulging in combat a bit too much earlier on. She was a Chaos Demon after all, something a bit foreign to Congredior City and the wider realm it resided in, and that meant dealing with a certain bloodline trait. For Scythe, that was something triggered by combat. And beyond that, she had a certain other bit of baggage – something she's been trying to keep locked up for quite a long time. Some Peacekeepers were briefly familiar with it...and its sometimes disastrous results.

Scythe knew those were *big* issues – issues that sometimes had her debate finding other work if it wasn't for certain people openly against even a whisper of it...like whoever hit "Eddie" just then. She couldn't even blame him for throwing that in her face in tense times with a vital mission in front of them like a student's important exam...but it didn't mean she had to like it. Especially not now.

"...Scythe? Do you read me?"

"Eddie", along with many other people who knew her, had gotten way too accustomed to Scythe having something witty to return back with so the silence was

telling. He actually grew very concerned that she had already been attacked while they were arguing.

“Scythe?” he called out again.

“...the next time you guys need my help, have the Chief make the call *herself*,” Scythe said in a muted tone before taking off her headset and breaking it.

Scythe jumped into the clearing, purposefully letting her heels make noise against the ground to catch his attention. He spun around quickly to see the redhead standing there, wearing a red crop top, a black pencil skirt and a dark blue blazer. This was hardly the kind of outfit she typically wore for “work”, but she was asked to dress “professionally” in case the other forces in the city there for the Affliction see her at her more...immodest. Of course, no one thought to double check if she even owned any version of the Peacekeeper uniform and the only person Scythe checked in with before starting the operation did not seem to care.

“Aren’t you a tall glass of lager?” said one of the heads on the short syndicate superintendent – Berex’s lack of height was only highlighted standing next to Scythe, who was past six feet in her heels. “Dressed like a secretary too. I’d hire you on the spot~”

“My my, already have a position in mind for me?~” Scythe giggled with her left hand on her hip.

“Smarten up, you knucklehead,” said Berex’s other head, threatening to headbutt. “Why would she be out here *now* if she wasn’t here to help capture us!?”

At this point, the two heads started to argue with one another about the suspiciousness of the situation and how to move forward, including if to just take Scythe with them.

“Are you two really the boss of something?” said Scythe, seeing how much they bicker, causing doubt to creep into her mind.

“Was that a crack at our height!?” The heads both suddenly snapped towards Scythe.

“No!” Scythe earnestly wasn't taking a shot at their height – though admittedly a joke about “baby shoes” had just come to mind and she now regretted not taking it when she had the chance.

But whether it was only about the height or just any doubt they were the boss getting to them, both heads were angry and their flesh began to pulsate and grow. Soon they towered over Scythe; their massive form nearly passed the tops of the trees as their necks shrunk down and their two heads fused into one — though with an easily noticeable seam down the middle like surgery on a budget. The suit's seams stretched to accommodate his mass, looking now more like exposed tendons than sketchy tailoring.

“Hey, hold on there—”

They immediately reached out, grabbing Scythe before she could flee. But before he could close his hand enough to fully seize her, he recoiled in pain. Something had left a large, but shallow, gash across his large palm. Scythe had floated off the second she was able, but the boss didn't see her carrying anything to cause such damage; they only glimpsed a dagger in her right hand.

His opening move wasn't impressive... Scythe thought as she looked down upon her quarry. Big guys often try that kind of thing, so I shouldn't be surprised. It's worked for so many. But I can't help feeling...unimpressed. This may be another letdown...

Scythe darted about as the massive boss did his best to grab her, hit her or at least keep her still. His whirling limbs and swatting motions would occasionally graze her or force her to parry his scratches, but not enough to fully stop her or prevent her noticing him spitting some unknown liquid at her. She dodged as the liquid came into contact with the ground, watching the grass corrode and the dirt slightly bubble upon contact. Despite that sight, her own thoughts were what held most of her attention hostage. It wasn't just her own lack of excitement making itself bare beneath the

moonbeams. Something tugged at her from the inside – something she could more easily suppress if her mind was occupied by its lack of engagement with the battle at hand.

Getting the itch at a time like this? At least now I know this feeling I've been dealing with isn't the Dice messing with me. But still, normally it's easier to ignore. Still preferable to what I've been feeling, but I run the risk of actually ruining this guy. Though if I think about the thickness of his skin... You know what? Screw it. A couple of rolls can't hurt...might actually make this interesting...

Scythe looked up as another glob of the corrosive liquid came her way. In a split second, a glimmer of light between her fingers turned into a glossy purple ten-sided die. Each visible number seemed to be carved in silver. This was one of the Chaos Dice – a curse that had fooled countless others not from her home realm that it was a gift. A heavy piece of baggage that would always weigh on her soul, but something she could always weaponize.

With her hand behind her back, she flicked the die to the ground. As the liquid got closer, Scythe's form briefly flickered, turning into purple light and disappearing only to reappear barely a couple of inches later. This wasn't enough to fully dodge the acidic attack, getting on the back of the blazer she had on and nearly taking some of Scythe's crimson locks in the process. If she had rolled anything but a 1, that would have been a lot smoother, but a 1 was exactly what she got. She quickly took off the blazer – now essentially divided in two parts – and threw them to the ground before she got burned.

Well, that serves me right, Scythe briefly laughed to herself as her teleportation ploy failed. I already feel the itch to go again, but ugh, I can already hear what the others would say. High value targets like this guy can't be treated the same way as bounty hunting deals. Wheeling that pain in the ass into Judgment and whatnot. How careful I have to be. How careful they think I can't be. All these rules and doubts...they're stifling. Just thinking about all that nonsense makes me feel in a worse mood...

Before the thought could be analyzed any further, another swing from Berex came dangerously close to battering her. As Scythe evaded, Berex attempted to stomp

on the redhead. Scythe quickly dropped a pink die from her fingers, spawning a sphere around her.

It was only a 4 result, so it was already cracking under the weight of Berex's foot. But just before the shield cracked, the round shape made the titan Berex lose his balance and tumble back with a loud thud like a parent stepping on a child's toy. As she watched him fall, she flung a red die towards his legs. It settled and erupted into a roaring flame that quickly traveled up Berex's legs. Fortunately for him, Berex only took damage to his attire as his trousers were burned up until they were a pair of shorts per Scythe's control over the flames. Berex cursed as Scythe was out of sight once again.

"Enough games!" Berex bellowed, stomping about because of the heat. **"If you're going to fight, come out and fight!"**

"I'm right here."

Scythe had been near his feet since he regained a vertical base and the flames had been banished. In her hands wasn't the dagger she had been seen with earlier, but a massive broadsword almost as big as her and half as wide. Swinging it as easily as if it was mere decoration, she slashed at the back of his left ankle, chopping down the metaphorical redwood and sending him face down into the dirt. It didn't cut deep with Berex having tougher skin to go with his increased size, but the momentum had contributed to the project.

"Now I think you should just fold, sweetie," Scythe said, walking on the back of the massive malefactor. "Unless you really want to bet against not walking again."

"You think that little cut is enough to stop me!?" Berex roared, trying to reach backward to get at Scythe like an annoying itch.

But as Berex attempted to reach backwards, he felt something large and sharp digging into his back. He wrenched his neck to turn to see what Scythe was starting to stab him, surprised to feel that something was managing to pierce his skin to this extent. And that was when his blood ran cold. The culprit was a sword larger than the trees around them. It was barely cutting him, but in small increments, the sword

started to sink a bit deeper into his back. All the while, Scythe was looking Berex in the eye with a bored half-lidded stare.

“Will *this* be enough to stop you then?” Scythe said. “*Please* say it won’t.”

Berex glared, ready to call the redhead’s bluff, but Scythe’s silent response was unchanging. She seemed completely disengaged and a sword that size could do a lot more than stop him from walking if she wished it to.

“...fine, I yield,” said Berex. “You've got a real talent, honey. I'm sure whatever you're getting paid, I could double it if you'll let me go before—”

“Been there, done that,” said Scythe. “Now shrink down already.”

The first Peacekeepers to arrive weren't sure what to expect, having mobilized the moment Scythe abruptly disconnected. But all they saw was Scythe looking over the fun-sized version of Berex, trapped within a pink cube. Of course they hadn't seen the previous failed roll to manage this. Only when she saw other Peacekeepers attempting to take him in did she remove it.

The second she saw the one she called “Eddie” approaching, she was already starting to levitate away. But she noticed her friend Cassidy approaching as well. The catgirl’s pink and black hair popped against the various blues of the Peacekeeper uniform.

“Hey, nice work!” she said, running up to give Scythe a high five. “And in record time too!”

“Really?” Scythe shrugged slightly as she raised her palm to receive it. “Hadn't kept track.”

Cassidy’s ears dipped. “Still feeling bad, huh? But wasn’t the rumor that Berex grows to be giant and—”

“He did,” cut in Scythe. “Didn't take.”

“Wow, the lows can get really low to match your highs, huh?” Cassidy sighed, her ears falling flat. “Maybe you *really* need a break. A vacation! Even things you like and feel passionate about can feel less fun after a while—”

“This is a serious job and it shouldn't be *fun!*” piped up “Eddie”, which immediately got Cassidy irate about him ruining the moment.

“She isn't like you!” was the retort, claws extending on one hand. “Or any of us! Haven't you realized that yet? I know you, of all people, remember how she got here! Or did I hit you too hard!?”

I figured that was Cassidy earlier, thought Scythe with a shade of a smirk that quickly dispelled amidst the miasma of her bad mood. Only one I could imagine among them to do that. “Pink Tails gotta stick together”, she'd say...

Before “Eddie” could retort to Cassidy's fury, Scythe shoved right past him. “The day I quit, you can have the pleasure of passing the message along right up to the top. Then we can go right back to being enemies like you'd prefer~”

“You wouldn't...” Despite himself, his breath did catch in his throat. Before it was clear Scythe wasn't a hostile force, there were attempts to bring her forcibly into custody that were *far* from successful. Cassidy spoke the truth; he wasn't going to forget that day for quite some time.

“You'd be the second person to act like I'm bluffing in the last few minutes,” remarked Scythe, leaning in with her dagger already in hand. “Or do you want me to make a mess right now—”

“Hey hey hey, let's maybe calm down,” said Cassidy, nervously standing between the two before turning to her friend. “Maybe try that break idea before you do something you'll regret? Scythe? Please? *Pretty please?*”

Scythe sighed. If Cassidy didn't end up being one of her closest friends, her words would not have taken immediate effect. Of course, she'd be one of the bigger proponents of her sticking around.

“Fine fine,” relented the redhead. “I hope you realize me dealing with his ass isn't the thing I'd regret.”

“I know,” said Cassidy with a cheeky grin before it would turn back to worry. “Take some time for yourself. I'm sure you'll figure it out.”

Present Day...

Scythe sighed, turning over in bed, pressing her face into her pillow. She kicked her legs in mild frustration and her tail twisted into a slight spiral. She knew that Cassidy was right: after working so hard to fit in, she needed a break from everything associated with Congredior City – an ideal time away from it, its rules and her annoying co-workers. The problem is she hadn't the slightest idea of where to go and what to do. She had done various jobs before in other realms, but none had lasted this long nor had ever gotten boring enough that she even truly knew – or needed to know – what a vacation was. Adding to that, the relatively local vacation spots she had frequently heard about were either not detached enough for her taste or she had already been there for some reason and didn't exactly feel like returning at that moment. All were found a bit lacking. And while she could think of lands she had passed through ages ago that could work out, she hadn't the slightest idea how to get back to any of them.

At this rate, this break will only do me more harm than good... It's almost stupid....how much I've changed. That I'm having this much trouble knowing how to have fun anymore.

That was when she heard a short yip. Scythe raised her head to see a little white fox sitting on the windowsill. It had red eye-like markings on its forehead and tail as well as red and gold along its eyes. In its mouth was a red envelope with gold trim and a matching seal.

As Scythe sat up, she beckoned the fox over to see it and the envelope it bared. There was a ribbon attached to them near the base of its tail and the envelope's seal bore a lotus flower – something she hadn't seen in ages. She petted the fox with one hand while reading the letter with the other.

Scythe Bloodwrek, you are hereby cordially invited to the wondrous land of Crossroads to take part in a grand fighting tournament unlike any other: The Crossroads Tournament. You may bring another to assist you in battle if you so desire. For the winner, after three days of spirited competition, awaits a prize befitting such a challenge: a single wish can be granted by me, no matter the magnitude. Accommodations are included free of charge.

If you accept, the fox before you will handle bringing you and your potential other to Crossroads unless you would prefer to make your own way.

I look forward to seeing you here.

Yours sincerely,

The God Eater

Scythe couldn't believe her eyes nor the timing. A distant dimension she had never visited before felt like the perfect place for such a needed reinvigoration – and a place she had heard rumors about to make it better. She had little murmurings in almost every world she had ever been to about a place connected to all places yet hidden from most – a land that merchants, runaways, exiles and more all have found themselves ending up in. Talk of someone walking towards the crossroads and disappearing suddenly had another potential reason that was much more literal. Plus, as much as she was trying to not think about it, most of the fights she had been dealing with didn't satisfy as much as she had hoped between regulations to follow on her end and some more focused on running away. But those fighting to radically change their lives where the primary way to advance is to face her – with so much on the line, they wouldn't dare have kid gloves on.

A wide smile crept onto Scythe's face that she tried to temper as her imagination painted a broad and vivid landscape that was exciting to gaze upon. If she was a few years younger, she would have immediately accepted, not even getting dressed properly first. But Scythe did give herself pause.

She knows me by my full name and invited me to something I was likely to accept... that probably means she also knows my...past reputation. Gods can be nosy like that. Yet she invited me anyway. Does she trust me enough to let me try without getting carried away? Does she know I've changed – or at least tried to? Is the old me the kind of fight she wants to see? Or maybe it isn't and she is just assured she can just handle me if I get out of hand?

Still tops the last “tournament” I was “invited” to without a doubt. An actual invitation for a start instead of a kidnapping in all but name. Proper lodging, willing opponents, an actual defined prize, an organizer that seems like they can at least tie their damn shoelaces. It’d be crazy to turn this down! Especially when this is the kind of messenger she sent.

The celestial fox sat patiently, accepting pets and scratches behind the ears, while Scythe continued reading and made her decision. The truth was *her* decision was basically already made: it was talk of bringing another to assist her and the grand prize she was debating. The latter was easy enough to push aside until the tournament actually started...if she was going alone. Her first instinct was to do so, but she knew other people that would know immediately *exactly* what they would do with such a wish – and she lived with two of them.

“Let’s just see if my roommates want to come with me,” said Scythe, gently picking up the little fox. “It’s only fair.”

The first of her roommates Scythe checked with was the one that was easiest to find: Dremirtila or Drea for short. The young Quanomon woman was frequently in her basement workshop, either tinkering with something or studying various phenomena. While Scythe and Drea first came together because of the purview of Drea’s studies and sheer luck of where the void spat her out, they eventually became close friends beyond that.

Scythe tapped on a device near the door; her roomie must have been deep into her work to bother locking the door and forcing use of the intercom. “Hey Drea, want to be my plus one to a wish-granting fighting tournament?”

There was a long pause before the intercom sparked up – though the screen portion of it remained off. “...as much as seeing you compete ends up being...r-really f-fascinating, this feels like a trick I don’t want any part of and I’d advise you not to either. And besides, even if someone is capable of something so theoretical as reality warping, why would they give it away for something as simple as a *fighting tournament* of all things?”

The celestial fox on Scythe's shoulder seemed irritated, but Scythe gave it some pets in sympathy as she walked away from the intercom, not wanting to argue about the existence of deities and how wild – or irritating – some could get.

“Don't take it personally,” she said. “Nothing like this has happened here or in her homeworld. If someone had told me about this RuneTech junk a few years ago, I'd question their brain too. I'll bring her back a souvenir to remind her about how wrong she was.”

Beyond not wanting to argue with Drea, her value as an Assist was already questionable to Scythe: it was forcing Scythe to weigh Drea's technology and abilities against how shy she could be and her ending up collateral damage. The thought process was dampening her hype and making her regret not already packing. So Scythe just shifted over to finding their other roommate, Nikki.

Nikki was a dragon in her later teenage years. Despite being in her tan-skinned humanoid form, she had a few visible emerald scales scattered across her exposed forearms, neck and face. Her matching hair was cut very short, once telling Scythe she wanted nothing to get in the way of her martial arts training. Scythe's feelings on her and shifting moods were mixed, but Scythe would never say she didn't have skills or a drive to win, channeling every remark about anything she lacked into more of a reason to prove the world wrong. Even now, she was practicing in the living room, dressed in a sleeveless gi.

Scythe leaned on the back of the couch before addressing her. “Hey sweetie – going to a fighting tournament in another world. You want in? I'll even let you have the prize of a wish if our team wins?”

“For real!?” Of course Nikki loved the idea of being in a fighting tournament with there being no more local ones for her, so her eyes widened as much as Scythe's did earlier...before suddenly shunting to a squinting state. “Wait a minute, you're just trying to trick me. Bet the only prize is you getting me embarrassed!”

“Kid, it's real. Look, here's–”

Before she could show the celestial fox on her shoulder was indeed real and not a remarkably well-balanced plushie, Nikki rushed outside, ignoring all of Scythe's attempts to talk and calling her a succubus among other demon-themed insults as she escaped the scene. Scythe growled a bit, showing a rare bit of fang.

“No sense of adventure on top of being a brat sometimes,” grumbled Scythe. “That’s her loss.”

Beyond anyone calling her a succubus being something that irritated her, Scythe's first instinct to just go alone was only being proven right in the end. It was the best decision anyway – easier to deal with her past without two very big parts of her present. This was *her* vacation, and she should have been packed already.

Scythe immediately floated upstairs to quickly dress and randomly pack some other items. The celestial fox watched from where it sat down on Scythe's bed as clothing items were flung over its head.

“Hah! I forgot Cassidy even gave me this early on!” said Scythe. “Not sure I have even got to wear it more than once, but I guess it fits the occasion. The last time I was seen at a tournament, I was in black~”

Scythe stepped over to look at herself in the mirror, wearing a short black dress with only one strap near her left shoulder and the skirt slightly longer over her left leg, just passing her knee. There were also three cuts near her chest with the cutouts making it a bit more teasing than it would have been without them – which is why Cassidy seemed sure Scythe would like it. She took a little twirl while adjusting the sheath on her thigh. Pleased with the look, she put on her boots while tapping away at a tablet on the nearby wall.

“Right, *now* I officially accept,” Scythe said, grabbing her hastily packed bag and two bracelets she immediately put on. “Everything else I can do on the road. Let's go, foxy~”

With permission finally given, the fox raised its head. With a twitch of its tail, a gate opened in her room. Scythe could only see light from her side, but that didn't worry her. In anything, walking straight into the unknown was almost a comfort.

As Scythe walked through said portal and disappeared with the fox, something finally itched at the mind of Nikki. She had never seen a day that she had gotten off that many insults on Scythe without her getting her back in sheer irritation not too soon after. She crept back into the living room, not sure if the demon was lying in wait. Instead, she saw Drea out of her lab, equally inquisitive as she looked around.

Drea had a lanky, blue-skinned figure with four slender arms and four eyes – two of the additional eyes on the sides of her head. Her violet-freckled face showed a bit of curious concern.

“I was looking for Scythe to help me with something, but she wasn't answering the intercom.” Drea sighed. “Did you see her leave?”

“I was outside, so I would have noticed,” replied Nikki, knowing the window in Scythe's room pointed to the yard where she was. “She's probably upstairs. ...She mentioned something about a tournament. You don't think she was actually serious...do you?”

Drea's brow furrowed. “With a *wish* at the end? She mentioned that to me too. Probably packing her bags anyway. I don't doubt she was telling what she *thought* was the truth then, but–”

“SCYTHE, TAKE ME WITH YOU!” Nikki raced up the stairs, already planning on how to convince the redhead to forgive her *many* past transgressions.

“Nikki, no! You aren't buying into t-this too!”

Drea did her best to chase after the agile dragon, but the only reason she caught up was because Nikki ended up stopping short of the door. Next to Scythe's door was an electronic display – something Drea had installed in the earlier days of her knowing Scythe so the redhead could at least tell others if she was even home. On the display, it read “Gone Fightin'. See you in three days! Maybe more!”

Nikki's heart sank while Drea was more worried about Scythe's reckless move and how she managed to leave so quickly.

“As long as she isn’t *completely* cut off from the network, I’m sure we can just call her and see how she’s doing,” said Drea, patting Nikki’s head. “I just hope she isn’t regretting it.”

It took a moment for Scythe's eyes to adjust from the light of the gate. She was deposited in front of an ornate red structure that resembled a doorway, but without any doors. Atop it was a depiction of a mighty bird spreading its wings. Just past the vermilion gate could be seen the bustle of many shops, their owners advertising to anyone that passed by. To her left lay an enclosed area with two imposing towers standing at the edge – the only things taller than it was the building in the middle of the area and the mountain even further beyond. Behind her, down numerous steps, was an expansive and beautiful beach that appeared painted onto the landscape.

The combination of the sights and the architecture along with the smell of the sea and the work of the various food vendors made her feel relaxed – she hadn’t been to a realm with this kind of flavor and culture in ages. Congredior’s level of modernity and fashion wasn’t bad, but this was more like some of the worlds that she flitted through across centuries. The only thing that came even within the city limits of regret for Scythe was her not remembering to pack a swimsuit – and that barely lasted a second.

How nice of that little fox to place me in front of the gate that matches my hair~
Scythe took a moment to flick at her new accessory – a golden fox head hanging around her neck by a red piece of fabric – before adjusting the bag on her shoulder.
Now...what to see first?

Scythe took another look behind at the beach, debating going for a stroll first, but the sky had caught more of her attention this time around. It was just as clear and cloudless as the rest of the sky, but only the section above the beach itself was tinted with the purple of a peaceful night starting to tuck the golden glow under the covers despite the sun still being pretty high in the sky everywhere else. The timeless beauty wasn't in question, but she couldn't shake the feeling she had seen the phenomena

before – though not over a beach. The feeling actually bothered her; unlike the earlier nostalgia, it felt more like being stabbed in the tail because of where she had seen it last.

It's probably just a coincidence. Anyone would consider that a nice look. Was thinking about that place before I left, so of course it'd come to mind now. Couldn't help it. For Eris' sake, that isn't the part of my past I want to relive...

Scythe quickly headed through the gate, content to walk the beach another time. While she idly explored, picking up random things to snack on along the way, her curiosity had her pushed closer and closer towards what was on everyone's lips, each mention charged with anticipation – what the locals were calling the Cross Colosseum.

When Scythe reached there, she wasn't content to simply look at the structure from the outside. So she floated her way over the top to see the open air arena from the inside. It was certainly expansive – Scythe didn't doubt that this could hold the entire population and then some. But just when she was looking at certain aspects in more detail, she realized that she wasn't alone.

Floating only a slight distance away from her was what appeared to be at a glance, a humanoid in his 20's, napping and floating on air without a care despite being more heavily built than those she had passed by to get here. His hair was white but golden and burnt orange closer to the roots. Those colors seemed to be a trend with him: while the former dominated his accessories, his sandals, the antlers atop his head and the gem in the middle of his forehead while the latter was most notable on the scales across his exposed skin – and since he was shirtless, there was plenty of opportunity to notice the scales as well as his muscles.

He's...a dragon...

Scythe couldn't help appreciating his form. To top it off, she had been involved with a dragon before to cause her bias, but he didn't look anything like this. To be frank, she didn't know *anyone* that looked like this.

Despite appearing to be napping, the dragon in question was indeed awake and was not only aware of Scythe's presence, but just how long she had been staring.

"I take it you like what you see~" he said with a wily grin, turning to look at Scythe more directly and letting her notice his cyan eyes with more touches of gold.

"What can I say? I just have the intuition to find the most interesting sights~" Scythe's eyelids fluttered as she looked the dragon over once more. "Look at you, improving the value of gold in an instant~"

"Was it really the gold you were interested in as you were undressing me with your eyes?~"

"He says while he did half the work himself~"

He chuckled before floating closer. "I'm Tenki. I take it you're here to enter the tournament, miss..."

"Scythe. The pleasure is mutual, I hope. How'd you guess that I'm here to fight?"

"That's one of my secrets, crimson maiden. I can also tell you look like you have quite a few stories to tell."

"Maybe, maybe not. But why should I be the only one playing storyteller, sweetie?"

"Are you really that interested in *my* stories? Or are you just saying that to keep me talking?"

Before Scythe could reply, she felt the shock of panic go through her body, briefly numbing every nerve.

"Are you really sure that's what you feel? Or are you just saying that?"

"You think I say that to everyone, huh? Of course I mean it! I lo~"

"Are you alright there?" Tenki noticed that Scythe had briefly frozen up and something had seemed off in her eyes – though it could be said he only noticed

because the flattery had paused. “Was being in my presence finally too much for you?~”

“...heh, I'm fine,” Scythe said, quickly backing away from him and shaking her head. “Might just be tired. Dimensional travel can be a bit much sometimes, you know.”

What the hell? It's not like I've forgotten him, but I don't flashback like that! They aren't even that similar!

“Hey, watch it!”

Scythe didn't sense anyone behind her before this point, but sure enough, once she turned around there was a young woman with tanned skin and bright pink hair that reminded her of Cassidy...and her arm was currently partially *through* her.

Scythe's eyes were dangerously wide as she quickly moved her arm. “Sorry I'm so sorry!”

“It's alright, it's alright!” said the young woman, already smiling off the indiscretion. “Guess you didn't notice me. Just maybe be careful next time, okay?”

Despite those words from her, Scythe was still bowing and apologizing. She hadn't even gotten a good look at her because she was secretly panicking, concealing her shallow breathing.

Calm down, calm down... Maybe she isn't one. Scythe had never revealed her phobia to a soul due to how rarely it came up, so she struggled at times like this. *You've seen those prototype hologram things being worked on before. Maybe it's just one of those...but don't those need a big projector? Whatever, it's easier than thinking of her as...that...*

“Hey hey, I'm not mad – really!” The young woman floated closer, essentially popping up right in Scythe's face. “Are you okay? What's wrong? Are you sick?”

Scythe hadn't fully recovered, but like any other story she wasn't fond of telling, it was enough to hide it. "I'm fine! I was just dreading being on the bad side of someone as cute as you! Just look at that outfit!"

The young woman spun around happily, showing off the sleeveless short dress with the halter straps she was wearing. One of her tights went up to about her thigh while the other went up further while bearing vertical stripes. As she spun, Scythe saw the air around her flicker like brief pink sparks with no origins and her fox-like ears seemed to have a bit of gleam to them – like they were a piece of hardware.

"I'm Miss X, the idol of Crossroads and Master of Ceremonies for the Cross Tournament!" Her ears flicked up as she resumed getting close to Scythe, spinning around her like curiosity had created an orbit. "So what are you fighting with, huh? I don't see a lot of luggage with you. Or do you just use one of those pocket spaces?"

Scythe chuckled – Miss X's exuberance and adorable nature was proving beneficial for her. While she was curious how yet another person automatically knew she was here as a competitor rather than a spectator, she was happier to just be calm again. She'd figure out the trick later. "Where I come from, that's not something common. This is what I have. As for how I fight, I think it'll be more fun for you if that stayed a secret for now~"

"Ooooh!" This only seemed to excite Miss X further. "Are you sure you can't give me a *tiny* hint?"

"Come on, Mix," called another voice from below them. "Give the newcomer room to breathe."

Scythe looked down, seeing three figures – one male and two female – standing on the upper area where she, X and Tenki were floating above. For the most part they were dressed similarly – red jacket, a cap bearing the golden emblem that came with the invitation, black top with cutouts on the sides almost like a leotard, black pants with a red stripe up the side and golden suspenders – but the kitsune with cherry red hair about as long as Scythe's stood out. Where the others had standard boots, she was wearing platform heels that went up to her thigh and brought her height up a couple of inches. Her hat was slightly off-kilter, making room for the white flower in her hair. And where the other two bore more serious expressions with

tinted goggles, she had a curious smile and no eyewear to speak of; Scythe could clearly see a golden eye locked onto her.

Scythe landed to get a closer look – which only ended up highlighting how much taller she was than all three of them, even without the two inches of heel on her boots. The two flanking the kitsune imperceptibly jolted in surprise while the kitsune herself only smiled a bit wider.

Scythe crossed her arms under her chest and waited for the first word. *Got her beat in height, but it might be a close call in another area...*

“You may not have been aware, but the Cross Colosseum isn’t open just yet,” the kitsune finally said, taking a couple of steps forward. Scythe could hear the chiming of bells with each step. “The tournament starts tomorrow after all and things need to be prepared. You really couldn’t wait to see it?”

“Just couldn’t help exploring, jingle fox~” Scythe replied with a smirk.

The kitsune giggled. “Now that’s a new one. I’m Chiifu, Chief of the Crossguards. ”

Scythe could see the two Crossguards behind Chiifu glance at each other right when the word “Chief” was uttered. “Scythe, High Conflict Peacekeeper. At least for now.”

“And what’s your last name?” Miss X asked, quickly popping down to ground level as the two shook hands. “Do you have one? Or is it just one name like a celebrity?”

Scythe chuckled at the return of constant X questions. “Bloodwrek. Name’s most surprising thing about me besides the tail~”

And where most of the assumptions come from, Scythe added to herself.

Chiifu clapped her hands. “I knew there was something about you. Do you know someone named Vivi? A bit taller than you, black hair– ”

“Way lighter on her feet than she looks, sometimes carrying a club?”

“Yes!”

Scythe’s sudden laugh surprised herself more than it did the two Crossguards behind Chiifu. “I haven’t seen Cousin Vi in ages!”

Chiifu and Scythe started chatting away and giggling while the male Crossguard started to look concerned.

“I’m about done with my shift, so let’s keep this going elsewhere,” said Chiifu. “The Fox Den is the *best* place to have a drink you could ever go to~”

“Drinks happen to be one of the languages I speak quite fluently~” Scythe smirked. “You’re on. But I’ve had my standards raised pretty high by an old friend. I’m expecting something fantastic.”

“And Saki will oblige, trust me~”

As Scythe and Chiifu headed towards the exit, Miss X followed them. Tenki floated in place as he watched them leave, a curious smirk on his face. The male Crossguard finally let out a sigh.

“Great, now we may have *two* drunk redheads,” he said with an amused shake of the head while his comrade stifled a laugh with her hands.

If Scythe or Chiifu heard this, they didn’t turn back. They were too busy giggling amongst themselves.

Those little hiccups aside, I think I’m really going to enjoy myself. Show me what else you got, Crossroads – I’m waiting~