

## Maybe Call This An Ending... Part 1: Rebuild

Author's Note: This follows from the Summer Leagues OCT Round 1 written by Zack and not my own version of the same round. It isn't necessary reading, but for those curious, the link is here: [☰ Summer League Round 1: A Dance in Shadows](#)

"They don't feel the same..." Angelique muttered after a long silence.

"You told Nephro they were perfect," said Vivi.

"Both statements are true," the blonde replied bitterly.

Angelique went back to not speaking for a while and her dark skinned demon companion didn't blame her. Angelique had accepted an invitation to the Crossroads tourney against earlier apprehension and anxiety only for it all to be proven correct in the very first round. And while her magic control had come a very long way, it wasn't enough to defeat her opponent in the end.

Piano, a Devil Blooded, was a superior physical specimen that Angelique couldn't match kick for kick. And not only was Angelique's storm of sorcery weathered, her precious prosthetic arms were corroded and kicked into scrap, making a bad memory overlay with reality in the process. The field had been changed into something Angelique could more easily exploit and the red-skinned Piano couldn't even use magic - both variables meant little to the end result.

And that tore Angelique up inside. In fact, she would say it *shattered* her all over again to have such advantages - something she worked so hard to be good at - even matter.

Nephro, a tech expert with a shop in town, managed to make Angelique new arms. Whether the cost got covered by the Madame Chief or Piano was the least of Angelique's concerns. She was amazed at how quickly this was done - though Nephro wasn't working from scratch like when Angelique first had them installed. She wished she could have chatted him up more as she grew to be interested in that kind of work, but even if Nephro was a more chatty type, Angelique's anger was clouding any tech-based curiosity. Though she did make sure to thank him - and likely would again before she left Crossroads when she was more...well, stable. And of course, the fact Piano was there watching the construction of her limbs was *not* helping.

The walk back to the Kit Inn had plenty of stares - Angelique knew it would be coming no matter what. Of course, part of it was the explosive match and all the danger within. Another was being flanked by the taller Vivi, who appeared to be a threat in her own right. But she knew the biggest part was her new mechanical arms were on display since the sleeves of her hoodie were gone - corroded away with the original arms. With her hood on, most couldn't tell what mood the fair-skinned shadow user was in - which only added to the hushed nature. But Angelique didn't turn to look at any of them - she didn't want to hear the comments that she was sure would only make her feel worse.

Angelique was shaken suddenly by Vivi holding onto her shoulder; a couple of women - one some kind of rabbit-based species and the other some kind of aquatic race - were walking quickly out of a side street and would have bowled Angelique over if Vivi hadn't stopped her charge short. The aquarian was first to be upset by this.

"Hey, watch where you-- O-oh goddess..."

There was sudden fear in the duo when they realized it was Angelique they nearly ran into. As much as Piano knocked her around, it was the common consensus that Angelique was a bit of a savage herself given how much damage she dealt out to Piano and the arena at large. So to risk angering her didn't seem like the best idea, especially after a loss like that.

The more prominent reason they slightly feared for their safety was due to them being dressed like her opponent, Piano - from the coat with bells attached down to the fishnets and heels. The aquarian had even gotten herself fake horns.

Angelique just stared blankly at the two while the two were frozen like deer in headlights in her blue gaze, expecting their shadows to be violently used against them.

"Can you please move?" she asked, practically in a monotone.

"Yes of course!" said the rabbit girl hurriedly. "Sorry for the trouble!"

"Yeah, really sorry!" added the aquarian. "Great match - really!"

Angelique continued on without a word with Vivi catching up.

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Halfway up the steps to their rooms in the Kit Inn, Angelique suddenly stopped. Vivi was sure that the damage had simply caught up to her despite Angelique's denials regarding a medic.

“...I can never win, can I?”

“...Angie, you're really strong. This came really close--”

“CLOSE!?! It didn't feel close at all! She just...spun into another gear like she was taking it easy on me the whole time!”

“Or you pushed her to that next gear and you would have won otherwise,” reasoned Vivi.

"That last flurry didn't feel like it," Angelique said as she fell to her knees. "Felt like she could have taken me out at any time."

Vivi couldn't quite figure out what Piano did in the final stretch either. Well, she could figure out most of the "what", but it was the "how" that eluded her. For someone getting blasted and gravity kicked all over the place, Piano certainly moved with new life to get that win. The way Piano's black blood sprayed was a bit unreal and she certainly wasn't moving that fast when briefly sparring with Vivi. Angelique was right about it looking like a much wider margin of defeat from that angle...

"It wouldn't have lasted," said Vivi, the demon speaking in gentle tones. "Hard for you to notice when blocking like that, but the way her body was tensing up - the veins bulging and everything else - if she had to go on too much longer, she would have lost. Don't take for granted that you pushed her to that extent."

Angelique didn't answer.

“You don’t believe that?”

“Maybe...I don’t know,” grumbled Angelique. “But something else bothers me even more than that.”

“Not something to hold a grudge over, I hope,” Vivi said as she tried to help Angelique up. “She did apologize. Maybe even overdid it to calm you down.”

Angelique grumbled more remembering that Piano actually went to her hands and knees as she asked for some forgiveness, her face nearly touching the floor of Nephro's shop. As much as she *wanted* to hold a grudge, she couldn’t bring herself to do so quite yet after that - not when no one else had ever done that for her and Piano did it not for her favor, but just not to treat her as an enemy. Angelique didn't know where to stand with her yet.

“...it was something she said near the end of the match...before she carried me out of there...”

*I can't tell you how to make yourself confident to do what you want. That strength is for you to find. And I don't think you could've ever found it here.*

“That...why does it feel like she’s right...when she *shouldn't* be!? I was always fighting for them - in battle was the last time I felt sure of myself. Losses and setbacks didn't make me feel so...*crushed*. Without a ticking clock over my head, I thought I would

do better, but it feels like I did even worse. I just...I want some sense of...normalcy. To feel that me surviving all I did wasn't a waste..."

Vivi immediately felt a pain in her chest as she held Angelique close.

"Don't you dare... You are not a waste. Plenty of people owe a lot to you--"

"It doesn't stop me from *feeling* that way. I've spent years fighting and risking everything without a second thought - odds be damned. It's one of those things that still makes sense to me! If being lost in the fight isn't where I'd find myself again...then **where the fuck do I look now!?** ...because I don't know, Viola. I really don't..."

Then she started to sob. If Vivi hadn't been holding onto her, Angelique would have hit the ground as she slumped in her sorrow. The demon scooped up her blonde friend and carried her to her room.

*Angelique...most humans...hell, most beings in existence never encounter the struggles you had so early in life. Nor do they pay such a high cost they couldn't have predicted and still continue to fight. You are a beautiful little marvel. And the only reason it isn't more obvious to others is because it's not fully obvious to you.*

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Angelique took a long nap and by the time she woke up, it was fairly deep into the afternoon. She drowsily looked around to find herself alone and it didn't sound like Vivi was nearby.

*Well...it's set in now. But now what?*

Angelique dug out her change of clothes - her hoodie from the battle was more or less trashed and a bit of Piano's blood got on the rest of her outfit, lightly damaging everything else. She was thankful she packed another black hoodie - this one a zip-up with purple stripes on the sleeves. She almost forgot what else she had packed as a backup outfit - her "round 2" outfit as she briefly and bitterly remembered it as. A white t-shirt, gray skorts, black-and-gray hi-top sneakers, and black-and-white striped thigh-high stockings. Angelique got dressed slowly as she kept looking at her new arms; they moved just fine, but it still weirded her out to have new ones after years of having and maintaining her old ones. She mindlessly tugged on her hoodie's sleeves - slightly more of her hands were visible in this one and she hadn't realized it when packing. Not like it mattered - it wasn't a secret anymore.

She wasn't sure what she wanted to do, but for some reason, staying in the room didn't appeal to her - despite her claiming she'd do *only* that while still an entrant. Despite planning tomorrow would be the day to explore with Vivi while everyone would be too busy watching the tournament to bother her, she already felt annoyed with her own thoughts and wanted to crowd them out.

She was prepared for annoying comments for when she left the Kit Inn - and prepared for pity as well. What she *wasn't* prepared for was a familiar face suddenly appearing the instant she opened it.

“Hellllloooooooo, my sad little kitten!”

Angelique fell backward and instinctively tried to flick away the intruder, but her shadows went through the figure as well. It took another second to realize it was Miss X, the tournament announcer. She only seemed mildly disturbed and annoyed by an attack going through her, but she was back to her amused self right after.

“W-what the hell are you doing here!?” Angelique spat as she got back to her feet.

“I wanted to visit you and cheer you up!” said Miss X with a wide grin.

“So heart attacks are part of cheering up,” replied Angelique with narrowed eyes. “Uncle had it wrong all these years then.”

"Aw, don't be like that," said X as she floated all the way into the room, still dressed in the same outfit she was in for the rounds. "That was such a purr-fectly brutal mirror match! And I just had to talk to you!"

Angelique mentally grumbled. It only *looked* like a mirror match for the first half. And now she couldn't get rid of the overly cute and cat-pun filled MC - at least not physically. Yet she wasn't in the mood to try to hurt X's feelings either.



*Be careful what I wish for, I guess. I wanted to not be alone with my thoughts and this is what I get...*

"I don't know about perfect..." Angelique sighed as she sat back on the ground.

"Are you kidding!? The crowd was on the edge of their seats!" X exclaimed, manifesting a chair slightly behind her to illustrate her feelings. "You two were so awesome! I'm surprised both of you were awake by the end! Not that you were trying for that..."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Weren't you trying to melt her with the acid cloud? It scared the first two rows backwards!"

Angelique flinched. Her magic was definitely surging and her thinking was admittedly a bit cloudy with darker impulses - especially after being battered early on. She was surprised there wasn't still a hand shaped bruise on her chest after a particular palm strike.

Angelique muttered with a *mild* case of regret "Maybe not *kill* exactly--"

"You totally have a bloodthirsty side! It's fine though - it made your fight all the more interesting!"

"I'm not sure if I should be worried about you," said Angelique.

Miss X only giggled - which didn't help Angelique's thoughts.

"But when I heard you were looking really sad, I had to come see you!"

"Well, thanks...I guess."

"I'm sure your fans are used to you frowning, but not this gloomy! I had to help!"

Angelique couldn't help sputtering. "Fans? What fans?"

"The crowd loved you *both*! You're almost as popular as me!"

"...don't be silly. Maybe they liked the match, but they mostly liked Piano *and that outfit*." Angelique's sneering was slightly less biting this time around, but seeing others dressed just like her Devil Blooded opponent only stoked her envious fire.

"I'm sure some were drooling and they weren't just looking at Piano." The hearts in Miss X's eyes were fluttering.

"That sounds like some doctor's problem," said Angelique flatly.

Miss X wasn't put off by Angelique dour replies; if anything, it only made the magical hologram more curious.

"Why are compliments so hard for you to take?" X asked as she hovered over Angelique's head. "Are your dark feelings the source of your powers?"

"No."

"If you show too much happiness, you explode?"

"No."

"Then wh--"

"Because I know it's either fake or with some asterisk on it and I hate it!"

Angelique sighed, not meaning to suddenly raise her voice. "Sorry. But ever since my disability happened, most 'compliments' are either pity, backhanded nonsense or something with a hidden meaning that makes it less. ...they never mean it."

"Maybe the past ones did, but it doesn't mean the future will!" exclaimed Miss X. "People love *me* just the way I am! And they do for you too - I'm sure of it!"

Angelique felt slightly guilty about complaining about comparably lesser issues when realizing Miss X was born unable to touch anything or anyone - including who or what created her.

"Why do a lot of things people say make some sense but just not to me?" she muttered with a mildly amused shake of the head.

"It shouldn't be so surprising you have fans! You had to have been cheered before in the other tournaments, right?"

"You know, I never asked how you even knew about that..."

"Mommy told me. You know - the Madame Chief."

*Figures...* "...I was different then. If I went back to those places, I wouldn't be recognized as I am."

"Because you're so much cuter now, right?"

A snort. Angelique surprised herself with it and quickly covered her mouth with her hands.

*Better...like this? Not as-*

“That snort was so cute! Do you laugh like that all the time?” Miss X was just a bundle of curiosity in a tutu.

“...no. It’s been a while.”

Miss X proceeded to start telling a bunch of jokes to get it to happen again. Angelique managed to suppress it, allowing herself to snicker but being careful not to snort...right up until Miss X’s pouty face over not managing to prompt the action. It was so overdone that Angelique couldn’t take it.

“Okay, I need some air,” Angelique finally said as she got to her feet once more.

"Are hoodies all you wear?" Miss X questioned.

"I just like them and they're comfy," Angelique answered bluntly. "Besides, I don't...don't *believe* I look good in showy crap." *Anymore...*

"You should try it! It makes you feel good!" Miss X suddenly had light bulbs in her eyes instead of irises. "Wait, are you scared to try fancy clothes? Are you really shy? Or really really *really* modest?"

"I just believe such clothes on me would be a waste," Angelique replied, again swiftly dealing with the inquiry.

Angelique peeked outside her room to make sure no one was out there before strolling out. Miss X followed her out before she locked the door.

“You won’t even give it a try?” Miss X kept floating right behind Angelique. “I’m sure there’s copies of my outfit in the shops! Oh - or maybe you can wear something like Piano does and join the fun?”

“No offense, but it’ll be a cold day in Crossroads before I wear what you or Piano wear,” replied Angelique sharply.

Angelique strolled her way out of the Kit Inn with no clue of where she really wanted to go. But with Miss X right behind her, going unnoticed went from tricky to next to impossible. Miss X was a big neon sign made of cuteness; everyone saw her and had something to say. But in between that, there were words in Angelique's direction as well. Compliments...for her...about her appearance and what she dealt out and endured in combat. She’d be more in disbelief over the fact if Miss X hadn’t been wearing her usual cynicism down. She didn’t overly react to this, but she also didn’t go out of her way to frown, snarl, or otherwise be dismissive of it all.

“Going to have a drink?” asked Miss X. “Mommy says a lot of people are relaxed after they do.”

“...I’ve never had alcoholic stuff before.”

“Well, you should do ALL the things!” replied Miss X. “There’s no reason not to!”

“No reason, huh?” Angelique cocked her head in thought.

The duo eventually strolled their way to the bar and not only found Vivi there chatting with a witchy-looking stranger, but of course the kitsune Chifu was at her usual spot at the end of the bar.

“Angie? I thought you weren’t coming out for the rest of the day.” Vivi immediately walked over, gesturing to the green-haired, fair-skinned young woman to follow.

“I just had to wander,” said Angelique with a sigh. Miss X was behind her, waving. “Who’s this?”

“Oh, this is Wendy,” said Vivi, pulling said guest to be front and center. “She wanted to meet you after your match, but...yeah.”

Wendy definitely looked older than Angelique, but the blonde had a couple of inches on her. She was wearing a dress with a belt around her waist, puffy shoulders that hid the straps, thigh-high boots, and a large witch-like hat. It was all blue with hints of beige and white. She had wide glasses which made her green eyes seem huge. Her green hair was tied into two large braids.

“And before you say it, Wendy here isn’t a witch,” added Vivi.

Angelique blinked a bit. “But that is clearly--”

“I’ll save you both some back and forth,” said Vivi. “It looks like it’s just a coincidence.”

Angelique shrugged and let it go. “You wanted to meet me?”

“Yes, I was just worried given how much your magic was flaring and the damage you took!” Wendy was talking a mile a minute. “Are you alright!? Is your soul in pain? How did you handle so much energy at once?”

Wendy was asking a million questions at once and the fact Angelique didn’t seem to even lean into getting mad was a sign of her lowered self-esteem. Eventually she had to try to answer some of them before she was fully overloaded.

“I’m sore, but I’m fine. The swamp helped with the mana burn. And why would my soul be in pain?”

Wendy looked up in surprise. “You were using dark magic. Does it not threaten your soul? You were getting angrier every second. You tried to melt her!”

“Told you that was a big deal,” said Miss X.

“Okay, I was mad about her kicking my ass!” Angelique finally exclaimed. “Not even sure you can melt a Xenomorph!”

There was snickering from Chifu down at her end of the bar.

“But no, I didn’t enter some dark bargain for power,” Angelique finally continued. “...though I’m not sure that would have helped anyway.”

Vivi had warned Wendy that Angelique's mood would be different than anything she might have heard about pre-round one, but this was drastic. It's like Piano literally knocked the confidence and attitude out of her. Wendy was expecting talking to Angelique would be a scary prospect.

"Well, I was worried about your magic flaring so much," said Wendy with a little sigh, "since it usually means a spellcaster has lost control! But you kept fighting! And casting spells despite the hits you were taking! I'm not sure how *I* would have managed that! Could I ask you more questions about your magic?"

"Um...I guess? If I can ask you magic questions too?"

"Sure!"

So Angelique and Wendy sat at a table and began talking about magic. Almost every kind of magic - ones they've wielded themselves and some they've merely seen or read about. Angelique's mood did seem mildly better than earlier; she had an interest in the supernatural from quite a young age so this was quite fascinating to her. Though if questioned, if she had a choice of what magic she could have learned back then, it wouldn't be what she ended up with.

Vivi sat at a stool at the bar next to Saki, the oni bartender, while the young women talked fairly vividly about the arcane arts.

"She all patched up?" asked Saki.



“Only her arms,” sighed Vivi.

“Seriously? She got battered from what I heard. Quite a tough girl...or just stubborn.” Saki shook her head. “But there’s a risk she’s injured internally.”

"Not more than she is emotionally," Vivi replied. "And seeing so many people dressed like who kicked her ass is probably not going to help."

"They're gotten faster since the last tournament," remarked Saki. "It's usually about now they'd *start* on merch. Guess it helps that she and Piano were a *cute girl match*."

“I don’t think hearing that will make Angelique feel any better.” Vivi sighed, sipping on a drink Saki slid over. “You’re really familiar with these tournaments, huh?”

“I should be,” Saki said dismissively. “I won one of them.”

“A very late congrats, I guess,” said Vivi.

“I’ll brew the girl up something for her troubles,” said Saki casually. “But what happened to that girl? Former chosen one? Grew up in an evil regime? Terrible childhood?”

“Not sure she had much of a childhood,” answered Vivi. “I try to clear it with her before telling the story, especially with Forte around.”

Forte was a lot of things depending on who one talked to, but as far as Angelique was concerned, Forte was just Piano’s obnoxious brother that got under her skin in an attempt to learn more about her and only just got saved from a beating most thought he had coming. She wouldn’t let him learn one iota more about her.

“Yeah, he’s worse than the town gossip nosing around,” admitted Saki. “Can I at least get a hint? Helps making the drinks if I know what bothers them.”

Vivi looked around the bar a bit before answering quietly in Saki’s ear. Saki didn’t look surprised - like she had heard it all before - but it was sad to hear.

“Hasn’t really relaxed since, has she?”

“Not for a second. There’s always something else at her door.”

Later on, Vivi eventually walked her way over to the table and Angelique and Wendy’s conversation.

“You girls getting along?”

Angelique jolted a bit as if she was just remembering there was an outside world to deal with. She and Wendy had been talking for more than half an hour without stopping. “Yeah...I guess, yeah.”

“Hey, drink this,” Vivi said, placing the odd drink in front of Angelique. It had taken quite some time to brew by Saki and the demon had no want to interrupt Angelique enjoying herself until it was done. “It’ll help with your soreness.”

Angelique looked and sniffed at the drink with suspicion. “Vivi, are you sure?”

“It’s this or go to the medic like I said to hours ago,” said Vivi.

Noticing the mild bit of pressure, Angelique sighed and basically knocked it all back in one shot. She was surprised at her soreness drifting away, but she also felt...light.

“Uh...I’m feeling a bit weird. This a side effect?” Angelique looked amused but also worried about this feeling.

“It’s meant to relax you as well,” said Saki from the bar. “Maybe relaxing is a foreign concept for you. Maybe moderation too.”

“Hey, I relax...” Angelique replied with much less of her normal zap.

“You study your magic almost all the time with little rest,” Vivi pointed out.

“And what’s wrong with that?” Wendy was quick to defend her - though it only damned her slightly at the same time.

Through all the mild bickering with a slightly sedated Angelique, they didn’t hear Chifu stroll up.

“I know something that would be relaxing~” she trilled.

“You know something besides drinking?” snickered Vivi.

“Well, that can be later,” said Chifu. “I was thinking more about new clothes! Since a few of your things got a bit...melted, you can go shop for some more!”

“I didn’t come with a ton of spending money...” Angelique admitted.

“Oh, I’ll cover it! Your match was so good, I don’t mind at all!”

Angelique was skeptical, but she was also too relaxed to especially scrutinize Chifu at that exact moment. She glanced at Vivi to gauge her opinion. She naturally liked the idea, but she in turn looked to Saki.

“She rarely makes these kinds of offers,” said Saki. “I’d say take it.”

“...alright, I guess. Just nothing crazy.” Angelique resigned herself to trying it. It *literally* couldn’t be more stressful or painful than the match hours ago. “But you think Wendy could get something too?”

“M-me?” Wendy sputtered.

“You’ve been...really nice. Talking to you might have really been what I needed.”

“I-if that’s fine, sure!”

“It’s fine! It’s so nice you want to help your new friend!”

With that decided, Angelique, Wendy, Vivi, and Chifu went down to a shop called The Stylish Ribbon. From what the girls noticed, Chifu was on good terms with the owner named Matilla, who appeared to be some kind of catgirl. Though like every other non-human race Angelique she’s ever met, it’s hard to tell how old they actually could be.

“Well well well, I don’t usually get tournament competitors in my shop!” The catgirl had a strange accent none of the three visitors could recognize. “See anything you like, darlings?”

Angelique looked around with uncertainty that just barely pierced the relaxed mood the oni-brewed concoction caused. Not much in the boutique was the...casual style Angelique had settled into. She didn't fear dressing in nice clothes, but being...cute...

“Uh...I don't know yet. Hey Wendy, you can go first.”

Surprised, Wendy nodded and looked through a few items while Chifu giggled and made her way next to Angelique.

“I really thought you'd go first,” said Chifu. “You really are a good friend to someone you just met.”

“Wendy is nice and I'm just not in a rush,” replied Angelique.

“Just as I thought,” giggled Chifu. “Though one may mistake it as the dark magic warrior scared of wearing a little bit of finery.”

“A-absolutely not!” sputtered Angelique.

Chifu continued to slightly needle Angelique about her fashion until a slight clearing of the throat from Wendy. In that time, she had gotten a couple of items and had gotten her way to the dressing room.

She emerged in a white sleeveless evening gown with many black and gold frills. The bodice part was a halter top that looped around her neck and it showed a bit more

cleavage than her default outfit. It was certainly glamorous looking and the catgirl owner was applauding how she looked.

“Lose the glasses and a little hair done, you’d be a star, darling!” Matilla said.

Angelique did look quite fascinated by how Wendy looked in her dress, but something nibbled at her insides. For one, Angelique always had an issue with royal-looking attires. And the other issue was a separate sense of envy regarding looks. She was slightly aware of how buxom Wendy was in her regular outfit, but now it was more obvious now along with how effortless she made the dress look. Her insecurity started to batter the relaxed feeling she was trying to revel in.

*Chifu, Piano, Wendy too? Ugh, how can I not feel so much less around all of them - and not just in THAT sense...*

“Do you not think it looks good?” asked Wendy.

“N-no, you look gorgeous! Really!” sputtered Angelique. “Just--”

“I think Miss Dark Magic is actually a little envious,” giggled Chifu.

“What no maybe I guess I’m such an ugly duckling here,” grumbled Angelique, annoyed with herself about admitting it so easily.

“Well, you all know a taste of Angelique’s body issues now,” said Vivi with a pat of Angelique’s head.

“I’m sure you’ll find something you’ll look just as great in!” said Wendy.

“Darling, you just need something to suit your style better,” said Matilla. “And maybe believe in yourself a bit more!”

*If I even knew what I even am anymore...*

“...when Wendy’s done, I wouldn’t mind some suggestions, I guess.”

Wendy disappeared back behind the curtain to try on the next outfit - a crisp white blouse with a black suspender skirt with matching stockings.

“Quite a throwback, darling!” exclaimed Matilla.

Wendy reappeared once more in something more exotic - it was a sort of strapless crop top and a short pink skirt that were shaped like joined flower petals. It certainly gave the impression she was one with nature or fairykind.

“Just one more,” said Wendy.

“Take your time,” insisted Angelique with a genuine smile, trying to quiet the gremlin in her brain that made her hate being in any clothing store.

The last outfit did throw her for a loop though. It seems that it wasn’t just the other competitors’ outfits for sale - but versions of the God Eater’s strapless dress with a slit up the side, long sleeved shawl-jacket and tights with the ornate yellow and red

design were available as well. Well, to call them "tights" wasn't exactly right since one could still see skin if one moved a certain way. The dress and jacket Wendy had on was a similar shade of blue to her regular dress. Angelique and Vivi quickly clocked that this was Chifu's suggestion to try on since she was wearing said ensemble themed in black.

"Oh, it looks perfect on you!" cooed the kitsune lush.

"She's not wrong," muttered Angelique.

"Oh, why don't you try it too?" asked Chifu, but it sounded less like asking and more like an obligatory one to try out from the one holding the pursestrings for this little event.

Angelique groaned. "I doubt I'm buying it, but fine."

That outfit - hers an amethyst with gold accents - was piled on along with other outfits everyone else suggested for her since her kind of standby wasn't around. Mildly overwhelmed with how fast it was piled on, she walked into the dressing room and pulled the curtain across.

"Fashion is like combat!" called Matilla from the other side. "Accent your positives!"

This did get a repressed snicker and snort from Angelique as she imagined those runway shows actually being mixed with combat and actually being more interesting as a result.



She tried on the God Eater dress and legwear first just to get it over with. The sandals were found as well since Wendy was too uncoordinated to manage wearing those particular ones and Chifu just *had* to see them on someone else. Angelique still had lingering resentment about dressing like the one who invited her to this disaster; she still didn't know why she was picked and her mind was filling in the blanks as cynically as possible.

But the God Eater annoyance could be set aside for her own personal anxiety. She hadn't dressed fashionably in years - she even skipped all the dances to take place in high school, so she naturally wouldn't expect to be wearing a backless dress in this style. She questioned if this was just to embarrass her - or simply to enjoy her overwhelmed panic like a kitsune would. If it wasn't for X, she wouldn't have felt the latter as even a possibility.

Unable to delay it further, she pulled the curtain across with her eyes clenched shut, unable to bear looking at the others this second.

"Wow, you look great!" Naturally Vivi was the first to react, the supportive friend that she was. "Really classy!"

"Your kicks are one of your highlights - naturally, your legs should be highlighted!" trilled Matilla.

*I doubt I'll be able to fight in something like this,* thought Angelique as her eyelids finally raised to see the delighted faces. *Not unless I had to. Hard enough to even get used to wearing it. Not that it's...exactly bad on me. I guess--*

"Wow, look at us!" squealed Chifu, getting a closer look at Angelique in the dress. "We could be twins!"

After a brief moment looking at herself and Chifu, Angelique replied "Only if one twin was favored by genetics." But the others noticed it was much less of a sneer with that.

Back went the curtain and Angelique changed into the next outfit, psyching herself up with every step. Eventually, she finished and pulled the curtain across. While certainly a bit more modest than the last one, it was still a big step in the opposite direction. It was a black and purple layered dress in the gothic lolita style. Together with pantyhose, it definitely was less emphasis on Angelique's form and covered her, but even in her younger days, she hadn't worn anything with so many ruffles and frills.

*Even that dress wasn't this overdone.*

"It's certainly your color," admitted Vivi, adding a thumbs-up of approval. "It's so frilly too. But it's certainly not something you can fight in."

"A magic user can fight in anything," quipped Matilla, sounding like she was defending one of her selections.

"You need one of those little umbrellas with that," added Chifu.

"Maybe not *that* far," replied Angelique.

More returns to the dressing room for more and more outfits. The compliments being thrown at her was either helping her mood or just burying the worst of her

feelings. Either she was thankful for. Even Vivi noted quite the difference with each one she modeled. In the end, she only kept half the stuff she tried on, not wanting to abuse Chifu's random act of kindness. But the true test of Angelique's upraised mood would come with Chifu's latest suggestion - to wear one of her new outfits outdoors.

When given free choice to choose, Angelique immediately rejected the God Eater dress - while she did choose to "buy" it, she didn't feel comfortable wearing it next to Chifu, feeling that would torpedo her fragile state. Chifu seemed amused, but otherwise didn't argue with her. In the end, she chose a black halter top dress with a lace trim that ended at about her knees. She also had a pair of sandals with an one-inch heel to go with the stockings she had already come in with.

She noticed Vivi was still looking shocked.

"I didn't think I could shock you twice with the same clothes," said Angelique.

"Nah, not that," replied Vivi, scratching her head. "It's...I've never seen you with anything sleeveless."

"Eh, most of the place knows my arms are fake now," said Angelique, trying to downplay her decision. "For tonight, I'm fine with it."

"You look great!" added Wendy.

"How about that drink now, Angelique?" asked Chifu.

"You've been waiting this whole time to say that, haven't you?" Vivi could only chuckle.

"Well, maybe~ But I do find it easier to talk over drinks. And there is something I want to talk to you about."

Angelique paused mid-stride. Something about Chifu's tone that time just felt...different. No one else seemed to notice anything different, so Angelique briefly thought she was just hearing things. Then she turned her head to look at the kitsune. Chifu just giggled like usual, but Angelique felt like she noticed a glimmer in her eye.

“...I guess I can have time for a drink. They talk up the alcohol in this place - I might as well try it.”