

Burn Card

Summer Leagues OCT: Sakura League Round One

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Readers be advised – this story contains instances of strong language, suggestive themes, blood and violence – both fantasy and realistic.

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A Silver Spark Illuminates

“Next thing I knew, I’m wearing the *flag* and my dress is on the *flagpole!*”

While the bar known as the Fox Den could usually be said to have lively sounds flowing from it as easily as the spirits did, a particular surge of giggling drew many an ear. The Oni bartender Saki was frequently refilling the glasses of the usual barfly Chiifu and what seemed to be her new friend Scythe – who had plenty of stories to tell each other and make each other laugh all over again. Saki immediately recognized Scythe as a Cross Tournament competitor and started one of her usual customs – observing them and planning custom drinks named after each one. But as she watched the redheads continue to chat, Saki had a brief concern that her usual Chiifu babysitting duties were going to be harder tonight. The two of them had been drinking before the sun had even set, but no alarm bells had struck yet.

“So what happened to the guy that was chasing you?” Miss X was sitting on her own holographic seat, enjoying the stories – or to be more exact, the more violent parts. While some might find that fact a sharp contrast if they were looking at the bubbly tan-skinned idol, it would suddenly seem less surprising when they would learn Miss X had refereed every Cross Tournament match there had ever been without exception and met every single one with the same level of excitement.

“Oh, him. Mister Patriotic.” Scythe chuckled. “He didn't notice the whole...predicament. Demanding I stop *desecrating it*. So I just flung it off and charged him. He wasn't paying attention, so I ended up returning the sword...into his chest.”

Miss X’s eyes lit up while Chiifu started laughing again. Scythe enjoyed the reactions she brought out of others; it always made the food and drink taste better than it already did.

“I bet Tenki would love to hear some of these stories!” said Miss X. “Maybe I should go get him!”

“I’m not too sure about that, sweetie,” said Scythe, her anxiety quietly spiking at the mere mention of the golden dragon. It was *way* too soon. “Place would be too crowded for him. Plus the stories aren’t about *him*.”

“That does *sometimes* happen,” said Miss X, not denying that aspect of her little brother. “But he really is interested in all the—”

At that moment, there was a bit of a disturbance, causing both Miss X and Scythe to turn their heads. Someone towards the back of the room had made some loud intelligible cry, leaving the young barmaid nearby a bit surprised. Whoever it was proved quite agile as well; they had somehow gotten away and bolted out the door before Scythe or X could spot any features – though Scythe could have sworn she smelled some off brand soap.

“Well, someone either can’t handle their drink,” snickered Scythe. “Or they handle merriment around them just as bad.”

Miss X giggled while Chiifu watched on with her giving no clue if she had witnessed more than they did.

Scythe continued drinking a while longer before finally taking her last shot, glancing towards the entrance. “Okay, this might be my stop,” she said, turning her glass upside down and fishing out money to pay. She had been assured Congredior’s currency would be welcome there before she sat down.

“Finally remembering you have a match tomorrow?” asked Saki, giving Scythe’s change back in Crossroads’ currency.

“Oh please,” said Scythe. “Just want to see how this place looks at night.”

“You sure you haven’t had a few too many to go exploring?” teased Chiifu.

“That's rich coming from y-” Scythe's body suddenly seemed to tip over, but there would be no thud. Scythe was floating a couple of inches above the ground and smirking up at them. “Made you look~ While it's good to fly, it's just as good for getting out of bed when you ain't feeling great.”

As Scythe strolled off with a wave, Miss X was still ecstatic as she started floating about. “I hope she's just as fun in the arena tomorrow!”

“For someone who was here to fight, she didn't do much scouting,” said Saki as she cleaned another glass. “There were a couple of other competitors here if she bothered to look around.”

Chiifu giggled, briefly glancing at a young woman in the corner savoring a glass of amber liquid with a sword loosely tied to her other wrist by a cord. “She just wants to have fun. Why begrudge her that? Besides, that meant I could hear all of those fun stories~”

“Of course,” said Saki, not remarking further.

“Although,” Chiifu continued, switching how her legs were crossed, “it did feel like she was leaving certain things out or skipping parts of each story like they weren't important. That's a bit disappointing.”

“Someone leaving out parts of their past – like you're one to talk,” replied Saki.

Chiifu only giggled in response while holding up her empty glass, wanting a refill.

Scythe smiled as she looked up at the stars – just visible above the lantern lights around her. After so much time in a large city and its suburbs, seeing the celestial bodies shine so clearly felt refreshing. But it was far from completely quiet; with so many visiting Crossroads just for the tourney, the vendors were still at it at a constant background hum amidst the closer conversations.

Scythe didn't know where she wanted to wander first in her wanderlust...but she knew where she *didn't* want to go. She could still see the beach's twilight sky from where she stood

and it still bothered her. Finding out it was called Ume Bay didn't help her thoughts since the last place she saw with such a sky had the same prefix – though not with any water to be seen for miles – and the last thing she wanted to think about was *that place*.

As Scythe made up her mind and turned a corner, she nearly ran into another who was making the same blind turn – though unlike Scythe, she didn't seem to be even facing forward. She was taller than average but still shorter than Scythe herself. At the very last minute, the stranger flipped clear, avoiding a collision with a flourish.

Her long white hair was loosely pulled into a ponytail. A pair of orange glasses weren't being worn on her face, but more nestled in said mane. She was also wearing a red jacket that split into two tails.

It's only when she heard her maneuver being applauded did the two finally make eye contact: hazel gazing into wine red. Then both pairs of eyes notice the pendants around the other's neck – the redhead with a golden fox head and the white-haired stranger with an emblem resembling a circular flame.

“Hey, didn't see you there!” she said with a wide smile.

“I could tell,” giggled Scythe, still under the influence. “But now you do~”

“That should be my line. After all, you're looking at the one who's going to win this whole tournament! I'm Kiriata!”

“Cute and confident – I like it,” replied an amused Scythe. “You're definitely one to root for. Such a shame I might end up in your way though~”

Even if it went unsaid, neither of them had really hidden what pointed out their status as Cross Tournament participants. There were more noticeable factors in play: Scythe's chosen attire and flagrant displays, and Kiriata's affable yet brash nature.

“So you think you can beat me?”

“Oh please, it's more about having fun for me.” Scythe slid a bit closer to Kiriata with a smirk. “You do know how to have fun, right?~”

Without missing a beat, Kiriata matched Scythe's expression. "Of course I do. Just most can't keep up with me~"

Scythe laughed at Kiriata's ability to quickly banter back. "I'm starting to wonder if our meeting really was by chance. You're a clever one, sweetie. And you're really getting me curious about your skill."

"Many are amazed at what I can do," said Kiriata. "I'm kind of a big deal where I come from. I'm surprised you haven't heard of me."

"Well honey, we can always correct that right now," said Scythe, one hand tracing the edge of Kiriata's jacket. "Not like we have to fully wait for the tournament, do we? We could have a little nightcap between us if you're up for it."

"You sure you wanna do this?" Kiriata's own smirk widened as she took a step closer – close enough to smell what Scythe had been drinking beforehand as well as her perfume. "Can you fight as good as you look?~"

"I haven't heard any complaints yet. So let's add some stakes – like maybe...the loser comes to the winner's room for a spell?~"

Before Kiriata could answer, a tall figure stepped out of the darkness. At first glance, they appeared to be just wearing armor or was some kind of automaton befitting the heavy clanks and thuds, but they had more fluidity of movement and no visible joints. All visible parts of their body was a dark charcoal with sections bearing orange veins like a volcanic flow. The jacket around their form was black and plainer than Kiriata's, but also longer and more frayed near the edges. Scythe couldn't recall seeing this kind of being before aside from some of the shows Drea found so interesting – the overdramatic animated ones. If one hadn't quickly gauged that Kiriata was a competitor, they could easily claim they were distracted by this colossal sentinel.

"I look away for one moment and thou have gotten entangled with the competition, Kiri," said the figure. "Thine usual risk-taking has only worsened."

“Oh come on, Azta! She’s fun!” Kiriata – or Kiri for short apparently – rolled her eyes a bit at the stuffiness of who seemed to be a companion. “Look at her!”

“Hath the Crossguards not warned ye already?” Azta huffed. “And yet ye already suffer yourself to be drawn into another conflict.”

Scythe snickered a bit imagining how much trouble Kiri got into daily. She decided to inspect the new stranger like she had Kiri, but not in the same manner. Her gaze was somewhere between a window shopper’s and a child with their newest plaything while she dwelled on the thought of Assists once more. She knew she could have tried harder to bring Drea or Nikki...if she really wanted to. But in the end, the cons overwhelmed the pros for her.

“So you’re her teammate, huh?” Scythe stared up into Azta’s eyes without fear despite how much he towered over her. “Must be nice having you as backup.”

“I hath no desire to be here,” responded Azta with half of a huff, “but she does, so here we reside, awaiting ruin.”

Scythe snickered. “You must be fun at parties,” Scythe replied with a snicker, “but in the end, the fight you’ll put up together is what matters. I have this...indescribable feeling you’ll be very interesting too.”

In her peripheral vision, Scythe noticed the cuffs on Azta’s wrists starting to slowly turn and the glow coming from the various veins increasing in small intervals.

“Don’t get revved up too soon,” she replied as she pulled away, doing a little twirl. “I’ll be seeing you two again soon enough. Good luck tomorrow, especially to you, miss confidence. It’d be such a shame if your high point came far too soon~”

It was when Scythe had finally faced them again that Kiriata noticed the redhead had taken her glasses off her when she was distracted and was currently wearing them. Before she

could raise a fuss, Scythe put them on Kiri's face, gave her a little wink and turned down the original corner they just avoided a collision at to continue on her way.

Azta's cuffs stopped spinning and their glow dimmed as they stared after the departing Scythe.

"That woman unsettles me," said Azta.

"You just can't handle how smooth she is," retorted Kiriata, fixing her glasses back into her hair.

Azta doesn't dignify that with a response, especially when they couldn't quite quantify what bothered them about her – at least beyond the sense it was more than skin deep. Instead, he just gave Kiri a tired glare.

"Like ye *handled it* any better. Ye seemed to take her offer quite seriously."

Kiri shrugged. "I haven't decided yet. Maybe when we see each other again?"

Scythe would continue being an observer of Crossroads at night and the area that most drastically changed was the Business District and connected areas – the only area that seemed to get busier when the sun went down. Some of the vendors that were shuttered when she first passed through were now bustling with even less room to maneuver and more people hawking their wares. Of course, some working under the stars and neon lights were to be expected. Some were clearly bootleg merchandise like plushies and figurines of Miss X and the God Eater – some with incorrect details, Xs for eyes or other imperfections – while others are more expected to only be open at night regardless, like the most low-key redlight district Scythe had ever witnessed.

This is nice and all, but I think I'll do more of my buying tomorrow, Scythe thought. Already bought so many drinks tonight.

Suddenly, Scythe heard a noise that was probably one of her least favorites in history: a child in distress. Following the sound, she finally saw what she thought was the cause: A young fair-skinned boy with walnut-colored hair was sitting on the ground with tears in his eyes. A black haired, brown-skinned boy with bandages on their head was standing nearby, shaking their head – though their back was to her. From what Scythe could glimpse, the brunette boy had scraped his leg pretty badly.

“I’m going to be in so much trouble!” he sobbed between the pain and whatever other consequences he feared were coming.

“You really shouldn’t have been running that fast around here,” grumbled the gruff kid, a gloved hand reaching into their pocket.

“But I had to!”

Before Scythe could walk out and intervene, the bandaged figure was actually planning to help rather than just chastise. They produced a little spray bottle, misting the contents over the scrape. With surprising quickness, the wound had started to heal and, judging by the brunette’s reaction, the pain had already evaporated.

“T-thanks...” The distressed boy didn’t seem fully relieved. “But Dad’s still going to be really mad at me if I’m home late.”

“Just tell him the truth,” said the bandaged one.

“That’s the *last* thing I can tell him!” fretted the brunette as he stood up, slowly dusting off his shorts.

“Well, you can’t avoid it,” huffed the bandaged one.

“Well, I don’t think that’s true, sweetie~”

Scythe had come out of hiding at this point. The bandaged one narrowed their sole visible eye at her, but it wasn't just from the "adult" suddenly appearing. The other "boy" was in fact a Halfling that was nearly into their thirties, and they had seen Scythe drinking the night away at the Fox Den earlier. In fact, they were the one who suddenly fled the scene, irritated by the barmaid and another sitting nearby. As far as they were concerned, this lush couldn't do anything positive for this kid and might even do him harm.

"What do you mean, miss?" Despite his confusion, he had more hope of her helping get him out of potential trouble since they had no ideas.

"Well, you're familiar enough with Crossroads, right?" Scythe knelt to be closer to the boy's level.

"Y-yeah! I've been here since I was five!" was the response.

"Perfect. What's your name, sweetie?"

"Ferris, miss."

"Well, Ferris – let me make you a little deal. I'm new around here and I want to explore a little. So how about you show me around your favorite parts of Crossroads? I can be your excuse."

Ferris' eyes lit up, but then briefly dimmed. "I'm not sure Dad would–"

Ferris' concern was quickly dashed as Scythe gently took his hands and dropped a few coins into them. "I think that's enough for you and your Dad, wouldn't you say?"

Ferris nodded so furiously, he briefly resembled a bobblehead. While he got back onto his feet, Scythe's eyes fell upon the secretive Halfling, still having no clue about their identity but concerned about their potential injuries and situation given how many layers they were wearing in this weather.

"You can come along if you want to, sweetie," Scythe said.

"Fine," they huffed, basically only doing it to keep an eye on them both.

"And what's your name?"

“None of your business,” they replied.

Scythe smiled, still allowing them to come along. “Already angsty at your age, huh? Wish I could say you’re the first I’ve seen.”

The Halfling had an open window to correct Scythe but chose not to. “Whatever.”

Scythe, Ferris and the huffy Halfling traveled about Crossroads with Ferris pointing out various things he and his friends got into. He pointed out Tortoise Village, a little rural area in the distance where many of his friends lived. A river separated where they stood and the village – Ferris said it was called the Zo River, a name that Scythe felt that annoying itch in the back of her mind about but she ignored it to not worry Ferris. She and the Halfling watched as he pointed out where in the area they’d play when they weren’t caught up in chore and how they were told to not go too far towards the meadow to the south.

“A couple of them want to be Crossguards when they grow up,” said Ferris. “Just like their parents.”

“Well, have you thought about what you want to do when *you* grow up?” Scythe asked while the Halfling grunted, annoyed at what they were hearing.

“Not yet. I’m thinking about being an engineer actually,” said Ferris.

While Scythe openly smiled, the Halfling’s expression softened.

They then cut across through the Business District – and despite her earlier words about saving money, Scythe would end up treating the two to various things as they passed through. Or at least she offered. While Ferris thankfully accepted some of these things offered, the halfling didn’t verbally respond most of the time. They either had no interest in the wares or simply did not trust Scythe and her generosity – the latter assumed by their unshifting expression. But despite themselves, one thing held their attention much firmer to the point they stopped in place.

There was a strange horticulturist selling her wares among the more popular stands and Scythe caught the Halfling staring at a particular flower – one grown to have its petals resemble the luxurious tails of the God Eater herself and was simply called “The Madam”. It had a gentle but pleasant scent with hints of something similar to spice.

“You want it?” asked Scythe, expecting another refusal or silence.

The Halfling’s face twitched as if they would refuse this question as well, but they stopped themselves. “Isn’t that a bit too expensive?” he asked while the woman at the stand tried not to appear offended at the remark.

“Let me worry about my own coin purse, kid,” replied Scythe.

Flower in hand, the trio continued on to reach Phoenix Coast, one of the favorite hangouts of Ferris and his friends because they discovered what arcades were within its bounds and it became one of their “usual things” ...if they had the money to spend. Scythe struggled to ignore how close they were to Ume Bay, but it gave way to noticing just the extent of how modern Phoenix Coast was. It reminded her of parts of Congredior, but there were more natural sights in view here than it was back home. It certainly wouldn’t be a part of her normal wandering around Crossroads since she was trying to *escape* modernity for a bit, but as Ferris pointed out his favorite places and his friends’ preferred games in the arcades, Scythe realized how many things she hadn’t gone back to try after her first month of living in “The Gateway City” just due to the culture shock – the loud space full of gaming machines especially. She glimpsed the Halfling looking at everything curiously, but quickly gave it the same narrowed eye they had been giving Scythe.

This place has a better balance of the old and new than I do... thought Scythe with a sigh.

They would then stop in front of an azure gate, this one depicting a dragon atop its arch. They could see an alternate view of the large mountain that was omnipresent wherever one was in Crossroads – such was its height.

“And that’s Dragon’s Post! I live over there!” said Ferris.

“Well, that explains why you were in such a hurry,” said Scythe. “You were pretty far from home.”

Ferris nervously laughed in response. “Thank you – both of you. But I should head home now.”

“Thank you for the tour,” Scythe said with a wink.

“Don’t rush so fast again,” said the Halfling as they saw Ferris start to dash. “Are you looking for another scrape?”

Ferris acknowledged this and took a slower run back home, hoping Scythe’s excuse would work. This left Scythe and the Halfling standing there alone. As the Halfling tried to silently leave without saying goodbye, Scythe’s laugh was the only thing that stopped them.

“What!?” they snapped.

“You really are way too upset with the world,” said Scythe. “What messes you up so much?”

“You wouldn’t fucking understand,” spat the Halfling.

“Try me,” was Scythe’s reply.

The Halfling didn’t have to and could have just left, but they were too pissed off to not prove their point.

“Have you ever lost a parent to unfair bullshit?” they asked.

“Lost my whole immediate family,” replied Scythe. “Didn’t even know a distant cousin was alive until I got here.”

The Halfling raised an eyebrow to that. “...you ever been betrayed?”

“Multiple times.”

“For the *greater good*?”

Scythe's smile briefly faded. "That's what most of them told themselves at least. Sometimes I never got to track the others down to ask why."

"Didn't know you smile that much when you've been betrayed," sassed the halfling. "Must be a different version I haven't heard about."

"Yeah well, I don't make being betrayed my whole personality, kid."

The Halfling grumbled at that remark – whether Scythe intended to clip them with the remark was irrelevant – but kept their cool as well as the facade that they're still some smart-mouthed kid.

"...What about being cursed?"

"...that too."

"Liar! What was that pause for?"

"Because I don't admit that to everyone and I'm not looking for pity when I do."

"Well, you won't fucking get any here."

"Your mouth is really outgrowing the rest of you, isn't it? I'm surprised you're able to even walk with all the weight."

A pause between them felt like a brick wall.

"Still waiting for you to name something I haven't experienced yet," Scythe teased.

The Halfling huffed. "Fine, you win! Leave me the fuck alone!"

Before they could fully escape the situation, Scythe called out to him. "Sweetie, why don't you just pray to your patron goddess here to get rid of your curse?"

"I'm not really from around here," they hissed as they looked back. "And no one has given me a fucking reason to trust anything like that. Or are you going to do that too?"

Scythe flicked her hair back in response to a breeze blowing it out of place. "...I don't know. Honestly, I get it. The divine have messed me over a couple of times as is. But at least The God Eater sounds reasonable by comparison. Might be worth a shot."

“You’re just saying that because you’re hoping she’ll get rid of *your* curse,” replied the Halfling, still looking away.

Scythe doesn’t confirm or deny it, but the mirth had suddenly dropped out of her voice. “At least this goddess offers others what they actually want. I’m aware of a couple that don’t even try. Some just offer you two terrible choices and make you choose.”

“...” The Halfling was curious but wouldn’t admit such upon pain of death.

“Sweetie, sometimes you just have to use what’s within reach to make the best of things. You’ll figure that out when you’re older.”

The Halfling, temper shorter than they were, had finally had enough of the kid facade and had turned to declare that to the drinking redhead’s face, but Scythe was gone. They didn’t even hear her depart. They got upset again – strange coming from them given how they had tried to suddenly leave just as fast. They *almost* trusted her and they immediately tried to mark that as a mistake. After all, to trust is to allow betrayal a single inch like a weed. And they’d sooner turn that weed into something more useful.

Scythe had slipped her way back to her room back at the Kit’Inn, crashing onto her bed. But the second she debated closing her eyes and not even changing out of her clothes, her communicator had started making noise.

Drea...

Scythe had been decidedly ignoring any call from home since she had been getting them before she even got her first drink – Drea had been most of them. But her conscience couldn’t really let her go to sleep without addressing them. She pulled out her communicator, a circular device only slightly bigger than a makeup compact, and did her best to remember how to access the speed dial.

“Scythe! Oh thank the cosmos!” It was Drea’s face on the screen when the call connected. “I thought you had truly lost yourself to the void!”

“I told you it was real,” Scythe replied with a roll of her eyes. “Did you have to call so often? Or does vacation mean something different for you, Drea?”

“No! I just...I was really worried!”

“And?”

“...wondering if you would have regretted your choice.”

“There we go.”

“Scythe, are you sure you can’t come back for me?” Nikki’s head poked into frame.

“Yep.” Scythe lazily stuck out her tongue as she rolled out of view to take off her dress and put it to wash. “Serves you right for not believing me. But it feels like you’re already here.”

“You saw a dragon!?”

“Yes, but I’m not talking about him. I meant this kid I was talking to. About as bratty as you. Bent out of shape and angry at everything.”

“Hey!”

“But like you, I think there’s still hope for them yet.”

Scythe briefly went over what she had done in her brief time there – leaving out anything involving Tenki or her feelings about Ume Bay – but otherwise kept the call short. From this point forward, Scythe was trying to leave her confused and stressed out current day self behind for the rest of her stay in Crossroads. This was *her* time.

A Bloody Reckoning

Scythe didn't set an alarm to wake up - she rarely did short of major events she had to involve herself in. Though any could argue a tournament was that very thing. She'd already been told it was a bad habit and she's sure someone would be chastising her or hoping she slept past her match if they knew. But with her hair messily in front of her face and sheets covering her form, she peeked her head up to glance out the window to notice the hustle and bustle. Holographic screens were scattered about to announce the start time of the tournament and displaying graphics. Scythe squinted as she barely noticed Kiriata's name and her own - though she did slightly wish X had left her surname out of it. There were no pictures attached to the names, but there were blank spaces as if they would be filled in.

She's facing someone named Varila and I'm... hmmm...Raviaki Silverspark. That some inventor...or lightning user? Ugh, it doesn't matter!

Scythe rolled aside to shower and put back on the dress she had put to wash and dry last night - she really wanted to wear it for her Cross Tournament debut. In the meantime, she chastised herself for briefly trying to game plan around something as minor a detail as the person's name. That was a habit burned into her by Peacekeeper work, bounties and essentially anything that she had to worry about any collateral damage, the personal and the otherwise innocent - all things from relatively late in her life. There was none of that here and it should have been a relief, yet the habit remained.

Scythe heavily desired to be surprised as much as possible - to have her mind completely lost to the battle at hand. She almost hoped to be the first match up with that thought in mind, but Scythe would settle for enough of a distraction between now and showtime.

Scythe floated her way downstairs, only taking a small cup of the (in her opinion) over-caffeinated coffee available in the lobby as she strolled outside. As she looked around back, she noticed a fair-skinned - almost pale-skinned - woman tending to a horse as black as night.

She appeared to be only slightly shorter than Scythe herself and she was slenderer. Her hair, white as a fresh winter's bounty, was tied into a ponytail while clad in what Scythe believed was a soldier's regalia – red and blue with gold accents in various places like her collar and shoulders – and a saber at her hip.

Well, hello distraction~

Scythe levitated over to avoid making too much noise. The horse had noticed her first, which tipped off the soldier, but by the time she had turned around and got her emerald eyes on Scythe, she was already right next to her – close enough to feel her breath.

“Hello lovely,” Scythe said with a devious smirk. “Couldn't help but notice how serious you are in taking care of your horse. I just hope you aren't above a bit of *horsing around*~”

The woman was already a bit flustered just *looking* at Scythe – a beautiful woman in a *very* revealing dress by her standards and the norms of her time – and it only got worse with Scythe's flirtations. She struggled against her own thoughts to form a coherent reply rather than embarrassed mumbling while her face grew vividly red.

Scythe herself fought the urge to laugh, but couldn't stop the delighted grin. She had never been to a realm that had the level of modesty or the particular norms this woman had come from, so this was the first time she had gotten this level of reaction. The only time Scythe had roused anything close was a couple of young men who thought themselves pick-up artists before Scythe made them very uncertain of that path. Scythe not only thought it would be too easy to flummox her further, but she also thought it wasn't even the best move. This was a decadent dessert that she should be savoring. Maybe she'd leave her red with one more remark near the end of their conversation – two if she was lucky.

“I am q-uite flattered, but I– Not that you aren't quite beautiful, but I'm just not–”

“Let's start with a name if you still remember that,” giggled Scythe.

“C-corrin. It’s Corrin.”

Scythe recognized the name and it wasn’t just from having half-glimpsed it on that list of matches. “Wait, I heard your name before. Chiifu said you’ve met my cousin Vivi? This tall, lots of muscle, hair probably not fully combed?”

Corrin’s thoughts cleared enough to think back. “As a matter of fact, yes! I joined a party to help successfully save her friend from this harasser who had taken her captive! She’s phenomenally strong! I’m not sure I’d have made it out safely without her.”

“Well, that strength of hers hasn’t changed at least.” Scythe felt a gentle smile grow across her face. “I’m Scythe. Guess you’re here to lead your own charge this time.”

“We *both* are,” Corrin replied, gesturing to the horse she had been caring for. “This is Citron.”

Scythe raised her eyebrows as she made eye contact with the young charger. Citron stared back, eyes half-lidded after what he had watched between her and Corrin.

“Are you really doing this?” Scythe seemed to be conversing with the horse, not knowing if Citron could actually speak. “Willingly?”

Scythe had flitted in and out of kingdoms with armed forces over her life, so naturally she’d seen some forces use animals in their campaigns. Her younger self didn’t care much about it until she noticed how relatively frequently horses would run off the battlefield if their riders were shot or blasted off or were spooked by the din of war. She didn’t assume anything of Corrin, but even in her worst days, she couldn’t help wondering if anyone had asked the animals if they wanted to enlist – if they knew what they were getting into, against her or otherwise.

Citron whinnied, seeming to give Scythe a dismissive look for such a remark.

“This isn’t the first foray into combat for Citron and I,” said Corrin. “We have been inseparable since. He was also just as much a part of that rescue party as I.”

“Well, sorry for doubting you then,” Scythe said to Citron, only running a hand through his silky mane when he acquiesced. “Didn’t expect you to be so experienced. What next? You’ll have me beat in combat stories too?”

Beneath it all, Scythe still was concerned. She wasn’t sure she’d be happy if she had a battle involving Citron. It was bad enough when she thought of him as a potentially unwilling animal, but now she had gotten to *know* him. In the end, that wasn’t a “now problem”. Everything that wasn’t a “now problem” could be shoved away. She never even got to read who Corrin's opponent even was.

“So you have seen combat?” asked Corrin, her curiosity piqued.

“Plenty, sweetie,” replied Scythe. “Not all I can look back upon fondly, but try telling that to some people. Especially the children. You're just seen as a hero.”

“Oh, bless their little hearts,” added Corrin with a growing smile. “They truly have so much wonder about the world.”

“And yet some people will quash that. Or worse, put the little ones in danger.”

That was something Corrin and Scythe could find firm agreement upon and continued speaking about some of the “spirited” children they had encountered in the past as well as further talk of the others involved in the kidnapping plot – including what she saw of Vivi’s (believed to be) teenage charge.

*Viola is really taking care of a kid? Does that mean she sorted her whole situation somehow?
...Lucky her.*

“Hey, just a thought. Why isn't Citron grazing over there?” Scythe asked, looking at the forest a small distance behind the inn.

“Actually, the Crossguards warned me against that,” replied Corrin, hand on her hip. “It’s apparently rampant with ghosts and they said if one went there, it’d be at their own risk. It’s called Sacred Forest, I believe.”

“You lost me at *ghosts*,” mumbled Scythe, stepping back and looking at Corrin instead of the forest. “I’m fine giving them their spac–”

At that moment, she suddenly felt a pain in her right arm – it felt like the teeth of some kind of animal. Scythe looked down and panic briefly filled her eyes. Her arm past the shoulder was gone with the redhead only seeing a red-stained stump. And Scythe could swear she felt rain falling on her exposed skin.

She was no longer behind the inn; all she could see was trees. Her head whipping around as she noticed another force, Scythe would turn to see a black and scaly figure standing over her, red staining his lips and sharp teeth.

“More...” growled the figure.
You...I remember you...

“Scythe? Scythe!” Corrin had noticed that Scythe was staring off into space and gently shook her by the shoulder.

“...I’m fine,” Scythe said, blinking rapidly and staring at her intact right hand. “Might have just been some spirit trickery. Or maybe I’m just hungry.”

Corrin wondered if this was another thing they shared – she knew she suffered from a bit of Soldier’s Heart herself and it wasn’t impossible that Scythe did as well. But Scythe would disagree if she knew what Corrin was thinking in that pretty little head of hers. Scythe refused to believe she was traumatized – at least not by *that* figure. Not by a fight she would be quick to remind anyone aware of her thoughts that she technically *won*. (Though the jury was still out about everything else beyond a certain date.)

Scythe started to become convinced someone was indeed messing with her – a shame since she normally liked games. If anything ever bothered her that much, it would have risen

from her subconscious long before now. The last time she had a nightmare that was *that* visceral, she was in the same land she fought that scaly bastard in the first place. A name she has not verbalized since leaving it, mentally or otherwise: Wisayumei.

This is the second time...thinking of that place. This forest is just as dense and dark as that one too. ...what is going on? I don't flashback. Of all the shit I've done and had to see, what's going to have me looking back on myself so hard that I lose track of where I am IS NOT going to be anything involved with that farce of a tournament with that purple-draped big-mouthed cowardly brat!

Scythe's mind briefly reeled more from thinking more about that aspect of her Wisayumei stay than the brief nightmare she had. *Ugh...How on brand for him – even thinking of him sucks the fun out of the air.*

Scythe tried to calm herself down. At this rate, she was *heavily* considering having a strong drink with her breakfast. She would figure out what was going on...eventually, but not at the expense of the fights she was waiting for. Though part of her grumbled about the irony: she wanted to leave her current day troubles behind for a couple of days, but in less than a few hours of sleep, all her past strife had arisen to fill the vacuum – even things she didn't believe were problems.

“You haven't eaten?”

“Yeah, I probably should. ...If you wanted to–”

“Oh, I've already eaten,” said Corrin, shaking her head. “Besides, I really should prepare for my round some more. Perhaps another time?”

Scythe doesn't verbally reply – instead waving and skipping off. It was while doing that that Corrin – after nearly getting flustered again regarding how scant Scythe's dress truly was as she moved about – glimpsed her pink tail just before she slipped out of sight.

“So...she’s a beastkin?” asked Corrin, partially to herself and partially to Citron, but Citron huffed a bit like he was just fine Scythe was finally gone.

Scythe was quiet during breakfast; Saki noticed, choosing not to disturb her thoughts, but this wasn’t the look of someone who suddenly felt the tension of her upcoming match – not with the stories she told the previous night. No, Scythe looked practically *haunted* compared to her time with Chiifu – though her mood lightened as she ate. Before Scythe left, she looked back at Saki as if to ask her something, but darted out rather than follow through.

Scythe would wander around instead, finding a quiet spot to thank and occasionally practice motions with her dagger like it would cut her own demons in two and banish the remains from her mind. Scythe wasn’t going to let this ruin her vacation. She only approached the Colosseum when she noticed the remaining populace head towards it.

It was just Scythe’s luck; she was up first by random draw rather than where her name had appeared on the bracket. But she knew who she had to cross next if she won: either Corrin and Citron or Simon Keyes, someone the locals were calling the “Quiet Prince” but otherwise she knew nothing else of. Scythe knew of the saying that the devil one knew was better than the devil one didn’t, but she still had her misgivings about having to fight a mundane animal.

Scythe was told to wait behind a certain gate for Miss X to introduce her. On her way there, she passed a glaring woman, adjusting her coat and unintentionally flashing a handgun strapped to her belt. Scythe didn’t utter a word to her and continued on, just happy she wouldn’t have to wait long to get in the ring and be forced to merely hope watching her fellow competitors would have been as captivating.

“Entering from the Vermillion corner,” announced Miss X with an extra dose of enthusiasm, “is a well-traveled stranger that can’t wait for a great fight just like anyone else here! She isn’t just a pretty face – or pretty anything else for that matter! Give it up for the Crimson Charmer of Chaos, Scyyyyyythe Bloodwrek!”

The heavy gates rose, creaking with the hidden mechanisms within the walls. Scythe strutted out with an exaggerated sway, drawing wolf whistles buried within the general cheers. But what was left less buried was comments that had floated down to her ear. What amused Scythe the most were those along the lines of “she isn’t fighting in just that, is she?” and other theories of the ilk. She had fought in much less before (as she had told Chiifu last night) and couldn't help being a bit mischievous.

Turning towards where she heard the comments the strongest, Scythe flashed a smile and gently held the skirt of her dress with the thumb and forefinger of her left hand. Then she raised her hand higher and higher, pulling the fabric up with it before suddenly dropping it. Scythe hadn't revealed anything beyond more thigh, but still did the job of messing with that section – giving a strong hint that there were no shorts or something else to go with that dress to boot. Satisfied with the added seasoning she gave to that side of the arena, she started to dance about the temporarily empty floor for a few moments...before she ended up locking eyes with Tenki, floating above the arena along with Miss X. He smirked at her while Scythe could feel her conflicted heart make uncertain beats just barely out of sync with the dragon's fan.

“It looks like Scythe and my little brother are previously acquainted!~” teased Miss X to the excited mummerings of those who knew of The Enigmatic Gale's reputation amongst maidens home and abroad – a rep that Scythe guessed by the first words out of his mouth yesterday. Tenki himself didn't add to the fire nor put it out – after all, it meant he was being talked about more.

Scythe didn't move to correct Miss X about her making things sound more eventful than they were either; for one, it would slow things down further when she just wanted the match to start, and two, her thoughts were far too disorganized to sass the pseudo-digital diva.

Forget it...you have a fight ahead of you... Scythe thought, no longer looking at Tenki at all – as hard as that was – as she absentmindedly rubbed her tail. *It's all the fun you need. Push it out of your mind. Remember, you were willing to do **anything** for him. And **he** left you behind.*

Miss X, noticing the moment had faded, got back to her duties. “And her opponent, entering from the Onyx corner, may be proof that good things come in small packages! The Apex Alchemist, Raviaki Silverspark!”

To Scythe’s surprise, she saw the same grumpy “kid” she had talked with the previous night – though the only thing different about them was that they now were wearing some kind of apron. Raviaki – or Ravi for short – didn’t look thrilled about Miss X’s announcement by the way they were looking up at her, but their attention was immediately grabbed by noticing Scythe.

“You!” Raviaki pointed with an accusatory finger.

Scythe, instead of addressing Ravi, turned to Miss X. “Am I really fighting this kid? Is he really my opponent?”

“It’s *they*.” Ravi interrupted.

Scythe shrugged and asked again “...are *they* really my opponent? This doesn’t even look fair.”

“I don’t want to fucking hear that from someone who was spent so much time drinking!” shot back Ravi. “You’re not even taking this seriously!”

“Then I guess you’re winning in a couple minutes, right?” Scythe replied, finally recognizing last night’s outburst. “Winning with mean words?”

“Okay, here are the rules!” Miss X’s glee at the start of the round could barely be contained. “You win by incapacitating your opponent, getting them to surrender or taking their tag and holding it for thirty seconds!”

“Easy enough,” shrugged Scythe while Ravi was still unsettled.

“And now, Tenki will set the stage!”

Before Scythe or Ravi could question what they meant, Tenki produced a crystal ball. He closed his eyes and the mystic object glowed. The ground around Scythe and Ravi seemed to briefly ripple and distort as did the faces of the crowd. By the time things had stabilized, the two of them along with Miss X floating above them were in a deathly silent city under a cloudless sky – or at least a portion of one. One could see the edges of a barrier if they stared straight down the avenue. Aside from some buildings appearing cleanly perforated like cheese, it was like the city was made instantaneously bereft of people and nature started to retake it. Plants were growing out of the concrete in front of storefronts with open doors and ivy clung to a couple of buildings.

“Let the battle begin!” announced Miss X, shaking the combatants out of their shock.

Scythe didn't waste any time as she withdrew her dagger from its sheath and ran for Ravi. Her stab was slightly dented by the apron, revealed to be made of leather, and Ravi immediately ran away. Scythe gave chase, but the Halfling threw a vial behind them that exploded upon cracking upon and forcing Scythe to sidestep. Then they pulled out a small vial containing some yellow liquid with black swirls. Immediately after it being ingested, their running speed almost doubled, and they rounded a corner and were out of Scythe's visual range.

Scythe, with all factors accounted for, was getting more agitated than a bottle of soda falling out of a vehicle. While she wouldn't dare slander those who favored long-distance tactics and there were merits in a hunt, that just wasn't the fight she was hoping for when she took this on. With all the thoughts she was fighting to keep away from her and the caffeine still in her system, the last thing she wanted was an opponent who was also keeping away. Raviaki Silverspark was ruining her vacation and that would *not* stand.

“YOU BETTER NOT STOP RUNNING!” Scythe shouted, briefly banishing the quiet.
“NOT EVEN FOR A SECOND – OR I'LL MAKE YOU REGRET IT!”

An Accursed Affair At An Abandoned Area

Scythe Bloodwrek's smile from her introduction to the arena was already gone. Ravi had proven talented at running away but had done nothing with that distance since initially evading her. She hadn't been engaged since and every time she thought she was on their tail, she would hear them running off again.

"Ravi's been avoiding contact with Scythe since the bell," announced Miss X. "Is it out of fear for their stronger and taller opponent or is it a plan in the works?"

Scythe, who had been running after them this whole time, stopped in place...and started booing. She couldn't hear it, but the more bloodthirsty members of the Cross Tournament were joining in back in the Colosseum. This was hardly what they had come to expect from the fights promised either. The payoff would have to be immense to make up for this.

"This ain't hide and seek, kid!" Scythe jeered. "You do understand this is a battle, right? Maybe you should have left this to the *grown-ups!*"

Then Scythe heard something. Glass breaking. Scythe doubted they would let wild animals into this battlefield, so she took a guess and moved to flush them out. A black die manifested in her hand before she would fling it into an open third-floor window.

The explosion wouldn't damage the building, but it had blown out every window connected to that room. And Ravi had only *just* avoided it.

They hadn't seen what was thrown towards their position, but instinctually moved when they heard a sound. It was only a **3** on that die, so Ravi, though rattled, kept moving, clutching a bit of oddly colored ivy they had hoped to make into a potion on the fly. But there was no time for that – Scythe was on their trail, so they put it away in one of their pockets. But they had pre-made quite a few concoctions for this very battle; this is what they were doing

while Scythe had been drinking. Indeed, they had only taken a break at the Fox Den that night and went right back to working on preparations after Scythe left their presence. Though in the end, one of their plans ended up being quite last minute after glimpsing Scythe practicing with her weapon. Out of their bag of holding, Ravi retrieved a crossbow out that had only had a few practice shots before this point – having acquired it in Crossroads less than an hour before. They notched a crossbow bolt with the tip made of glass and containing some white and red substance before they ran to the stairs.

Meanwhile, Scythe has gotten into the building, checking for clues. She hadn't fully cleared what appeared to be the lobby of some hotel before she noticed a glint out of the corner of her eye. She flung another black die in that direction just as Ravi pulled the trigger. By sheer luck, the arrowhead collided with the die, spilling the contents of the arrowhead and making the die bounce in another direction and back onto the street.

Red and white fumes burst out from the impact. Scythe wasn't that close to it, but the smell still irritated her nose at that distance as well as blocked her vision. She quickly fled the building, but as she did so, she finally felt the Explosion Die trigger. A **9**.

BOOM! The explosion rattled the nearby area with a mighty impact. There was now a large crater in the asphalt and a nearby building, already unstable from the holes in it, collapsed from the shockwave. A couple of traffic lights fell from their perches and crashed like cymbals. Scythe felt a smile grow on her face and a euphoria grow that she tried to repress; after all, when was the last time she could say a **9** result came up and she didn't immediately have to worry about stopping it, moving it or cleaning up after it? And the damage was *amazing!* But her own thoughts brought her back to reality before she would end up Triggered – minus the extra irritating elements, Scythe had noticed that spice-adjacent base scent before.

*They literally used the flower I bought them and turned it into another weapon for the fight!
I should be kicking myself right now...but maybe that means this won't be as boring as I thought...*

Meanwhile, Ravi was *terrified* as they waited in a hiding place as the dust settled. They had chastised Scythe for not taking the battle seriously and imbibing the night away only for her to pull out an explosion like that out of nowhere – not immediately knowing their own attack helped tipped that particular result. It was due to luck that they didn't immediately lose the match. Hell, it was thanks to luck that they weren't seriously injured or worse. After all, they didn't hear that death was against the rules.

Back in the Cross Colosseum, the explosion woke up the crowd and fellow competitors alike watching on the holographic screens, finally giving them something to cheer for and let further anticipation build. Though Azta, who had met Scythe the previous night, only had more reason to feel unsettled by whatever was within her.

“And what a gigantic explosion!” announced Miss X. “Good thing Tenki took their battle on the road! But neither competitor has taken a direct hit yet!”

When Ravi considered it safe, they once again ran, but this time, Scythe spotted them and the chase resumed. Ravi spun on their heels and fired another crossbow bolt – again filled with that Madam concoction. It cracked at Scythe's feet and this time, she couldn't escape the fumes, stinging her eyes as well as her nose. But the only reason Scythe could catch back up afterwards was because Ravi had tried to take another shot – this time with a standard crossbow bolt. The shot just barely missed Scythe's ear as she lunged blindly through the fog, going towards the sound of Ravi's footsteps. She wouldn't snare the Halfling but would luckily manage to grab their hand – or so she thought. Ravi would abandon their glove to escape the still blinded Scythe.

A blue die would leave Scythe's fingers and drop at her feet. It wasn't a strong result – a mere **4** – but it did the job of giving Scythe water to clear her eyes as well as further harass Ravi with whip-like constructs before they got too far.

This would help Scythe stay in the pursuit, eventually ending up near what appeared to be a small park. Scythe held her dagger and the emerald gem in its hilt glowed. Soon, four sword constructs slammed into the ground in front of Ravi, almost boxing them in. They

quickly turned to get around them, but this brief slowdown gave Scythe a precious opening. She managed to slice Ravi's cheek, leaving a deep gash, before Ravi got away. Strangely, instead of running out of sight once more, Ravi stopped at the other side of the park.

“And Scythe scored first blood – literally!” announced Miss X. “Silverspark's speed was finally not enough after getting boxed in!”

Their eye wide with shock, Ravi quickly loaded their crossbow, but it wouldn't be aimed at Scythe herself, but her now bloody Trauma Dagger. The shot would knock her weapon out of her hand and encase it in crystal before Scythe could wipe it off.

“And Raviaki strikes back with a vengeance!” Miss X's excitement was in slight contrast with the unheard crowd. “The weapon that damaged them may just be out of play for the rest of the match! How will Scythe respond!? What else is she going to have to pull out of her bag of tricks!?”

What are they up to? Scythe huffed a bit, a bit annoyed at the loss of her Trauma Dagger. Could have aimed for the body and probably hit this time, but they were more threatened by my dagger than the explosion? Was it because they were blocked in by it – fearing the magical effects? Me actually making them bleed? I can't tell what they are thinking.

Raviaki pulled out another vial, but instead of its contents making Ravi go faster, this helped heal the wound on their face. Scythe merely shrugged, expecting more nonsense to come as she glanced around her surroundings.

Okay, that'll work.

Ravi then quickly loaded up another crossbow bolt – the contents of the glass tip was purple. Finally taking advantage of how relatively close they are, they fired off their shot. The shot got snared on Scythe's hair with the glass tip cracking and dripping its content on her

neck. Scythe quickly pulled it free, hoping whatever potion that was didn't get to her from just a few drops. Scythe then picked up a broom that was left leaning against a garbage can, spinning it like a bo staff. Ravi was forced to block with their crossbow from the assault, but it wasn't a perfect defense as they took a couple of hits regardless as they continued to back up and got their legs swept out from under them.

Grounded and unable to turn around, Ravi swallowed some kind of tablet. After a couple of seconds, Raviaki breathed fire and forced distance between them and Scythe while also roasting her broom and ruining its use as a weapon. Throwing it aside, Scythe was also not able to turn her back on the Alchemist, even if she debated using that fire to help free her dagger.

She flung a red die at Ravi's feet. It was the first time Ravi had been able to see Scythe's other attack before disaster struck, but it had just as quickly vanished in a puff of smoke, the number **0** briefly glowing.

Scythe growled in pain as a flash plume of fire engulfed Scythe from head to toe, not long enough to leave lasting burns but enough of a temperature to hurt and her to take damage. Scythe's tactic had backfired – something she was surprised hadn't happened sooner in the fight. And there would likely be more of this to come if she didn't get herself a reliable weapon or finished the match quickly.

Ravi unleashed another flamethrower while Scythe flung another red die. The result was a **3**, not quite enough to fully counter the attack, but it was just enough to block Ravi's view between her flames and their own. Scythe maneuvered around to tackle them to the ground, knocking the crossbow from their grip. Scythe's right knee pinned down Ravi's left arm and her left hand was keeping their jaw shut in case they had another flame attack in reserve. Scythe reached for the fabric just visible around Ravi's neck – believed to be their well-hidden tag. Ravi's free right hand grabbed her by the wrist to stop this, but Scythe was stronger than them and they knew it – their struggle was only slowing Scythe down.

But just when Scythe was a fingertip away from Raviaki's tag, a searing pain struck both her and Raviaki. She tried to tough through the pain to claim Ravi's tag, but this was a kind of pain she hadn't experienced before – starting from where Ravi held her wrist and

spreading from there. When her fingertip managed to touch the fabric that held their tag, her nerves were almost screaming. Scythe looked in disbelief as parts of her hand turned dark red. While it was normally difficult to physically damage Scythe or any Chaos Demon, this clearly wasn't normal damage. This was destruction from within.

Raviaki was much the same, tolerating the pain without clear cries of suffering, but alongside the agony, there was an anger in their eye – not directed at Scythe, but at their own hand as if *it* was the one who wouldn't let go even as it appeared to decay before their very eyes. Unbeknownst to Scythe and the audience, this was *exactly* the case.

Fuck you, Irra! Of course you'd get in the way – like things weren't bad enough!

Scythe cursed and hissed as she was forced to pull herself free, kicking Ravi's arm to do so. Her wrist was worse than her hand or forearm; it had turned purple in contrast to the dark red and she barely had feeling in it in contrast to the agony of her hand. It was like the skin was completely peeling off the affected areas. Ravi appeared to be just the same except their hand was dark red all the way through with any other potential damage hidden. They tried to pick up their crossbow and failed to. Both Scythe and Ravi's right hands were compromised.

“Now what just happened there!?” Miss X announced from afar before briefly popping in for close-up of the damage to the shock of the audience. “After dueling with flames, both competitors look like they lost a bit of flesh in that exchange! But in the end, Scythe failed to retrieve the tag, so the battle continues!”

With the situation worsening, Ravi went back to their primary tactic: running away. But Scythe was in less of a mood to play with her food, especially when the food seemed to be consuming her right back. At the very least, she was getting her desire – this was finally a fight that could hold her attention.

A purple die dropped from her fingers. 4. Good enough a range...if she can calculate her move right. Figuring out spatial coordinates was hard enough, even without trying to

snare a target that fast. Unfortunately for Ravi, Scythe knew she had to lead the target. In a purple flash of light, the Halfling was now right back in front of their Chaos Demon opponent, having reoriented them to run right into her abdomen.

“This serious enough for you?~” Scythe asked as she hooked her damaged hand into their leather apron to stop them from retreating.

“I’m not fucking losing to *you!*” shot back Raviaki.

While it sounded like a bluff from the Halfling, their struggles to get free suddenly got stronger. They landed a sudden heavy punch to Scythe’s gut, buckling her over. Scythe quickly raised her hand to block them reaching for her tag, but this time, *she* had to try harder to hold *them* off.

Probably took something to increase their strength. Damn potions. Can’t tell if they are stronger than me or just about even. They’re pretty fascinating though...an alchemist fighting this hard with their own products instead of selling it to some random fool in armor...

Scythe normally struggled without a weapon, but that didn’t mean she wouldn’t do what she had to. Besides, her opponent was equally hobbled. A quick kick to Ravi’s necrosed hand was painful enough to give Scythe a bit of space – which she used to knee the Halfling in the face. It looked a bit clumsy, but it did the job.

The two continued to struggle with Ravi not wanting to waste their current strength and Scythe not wanting to give up any ground. But just when Scythe spied an opening, she felt herself stumble as a headache brewed. Ravi wasted no time slugging her, knocking the redhead on her backside. But their attempt to seize her tag only earned them a heeled boot to the gut. As Scythe tried to get back up to attempt another tackle, she found herself struggling.

“Has Raviaki’s newfound strength finally got the better of Scythe!? Or has some poison affected her? Either way, she seems to be unable to fully stand!”

Ravi, either not believing enough poison actually got to Scythe or simply not taking any chances, went back on the offensive. They produced a hammer, one of their alchemy tools, and began waling on Scythe with their enhanced strength. Scythe haphazardly threw up her arms the best she could to block the blows. Sometimes they'd hit against her bracelets and protect her while the rest of the time, it would only be the start of bruising on her good arm or horrendous pain on her hand and wrist.

From the view provided by Miss X, something was considered wrong by quite a few of the audience. Despite successful blocks, Scythe appeared to get weaker with each averted strike, getting her arms up just barely in time with a growing margin for error. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes didn't seem focused. Ravi didn't pay attention to this; this was for survival.

Finally, the hammer caught Scythe on the top of the head. Almost immediately, Scythe responded with a massive headbutt, sending Ravi backwards before Scythe ended up collapsing on the ground. It was in that instant that Ravi realized what had given them their advantage: Scythe was running a fever that was going ever higher. That wasn't an effect of the poison they used earlier – that was for certain. And the joy of their potential victory was usurped by concern, especially when Scythe continuing to try to stand meant Miss X would not call the match.

“Fuck you, Irra,” they hissed, knowing that somehow Scythe had gotten infected with Irra's plague – a fever like that was always the first sign. Though they were still trying to figure out *when* it happened.

“You...look more miserable...than usual.” Scythe barely managed to push herself up to a kneeling position, wobbling but kept upright by her good hand and her tail. Even focusing on the bare minimum needed to levitate felt like too much of a trial. Strands of her hair stuck to her forehead – perspiration making her look disheveled. “Lemme guess...your curse?”

“Unfortunately...Irra's plague.”

“This why you took out my dagger?” she asked, remembering it stained with their blood.

“Yeah.”

“So unless this feeling is from your breath, this is payback for...ugh...smashing your nose?”

The more Ravi thought about that – mucus from their nose from the earlier knee strike – possibly being how it happened, the more they cursed to themselves.

“So how bad...nnggh...how bad is this gonna get?” Scythe continued.

In a bit of tact, knowing Miss X (and Crossroads) was watching from afar, Ravi lowered their voice. No need for *everyone* to know the symptoms. “...Much worse with time. Sores that forever remain open and oozing, that fever of yours will constantly try to come back. Later, you’ll start hearing things too. Eventually, the plague will come for your eyes and brain too – nothing but suffering for the rest of your days if it gets that far. All while *it’s* in there laughing.”

“On one hand, thanks for being blunt like I asked...,” replied Scythe. “But I hope your bedside manner isn’t alway this bad, doc~”

Scythe didn’t get sick often – usually because she came from another dimension and not everything affected her the same way. But when she did get sick, it was nightmarish, especially to a Chaos Demon used to being able to repel her problems herself – the usually *external* problems. She couldn’t physically fight a *plague* and she could already imagine herself as the worst result Ravi spelled out. Blind and leaking pus from where her eyes were like tears while wracked with fever. The bare skin she’d normally be happy to display would be replaced with her being bandaged and covered all over like the Alchemist in front of her. The fear of spreading it would cause her to isolate herself, removing the chance of meeting the people that brought her the most joy.

She *could* live through it like Ravi somehow had, but the Halfling didn’t yet know the temptation of the Dice if her inner strength ever dipped. Even if she would end up hearing the

virulent words of the Plague Goddess in her mind, the Dice would always be louder and without words. When she was at her most miserable, they would offer joy. Selfish, destructive joy that she'd be far too tempted to drown herself in permanently. She already had a feeling what she'd pick if she got that far along. She wouldn't allow Irra or any so-called divine force to make her more of a harbinger of potential agony than her life had made her already.

"It's still early for you. You have time to be cured from normal means...unlike me."

A dry laugh left her lips. "Well, Irra really ruined the fun, didn't they? But before that, I never thought I'd have this much trouble from some dirty fighting pharmacist~ How long have you been at that?"

"...most of my life," admitted Ravi.

"What – since you were a kid or something?"

"More or less – what of it!?"

"It shows." Scythe's smile appears a bit loopy as she struggles to focus. "Good on you. I'm almost jealous."

This felt completely bizarre to Ravi. Even at this extreme event – as opponents and Irra potentially marking her for a lifetime of misery – Scythe genuinely seemed to compliment their efforts instead of cursing them as the host of such pain now hoisted upon them. Of all the places to know this. On one hand, *maybe* the slight feeling of trust from the previous night *wasn't* a mistake. On the other, how fucking dare these feelings of vulnerability make themselves known now of all times.

Those conflicted thoughts got Ravi back into the zone. For Scythe's own good, this fight had to end soon before the plague could fully take root. Scythe was thinking much the same in the moments her thoughts were clear enough, but she also didn't feel like rewarding Ravi for their earlier running nor Irra's pestilence invoking another dark future for her. She had one more move in her – maybe two tops.

Raviaki raised their hammer high, but that's when Scythe suddenly lunged with her still unruined hand reaching for their tag. Just as rapidly, Ravi dropped the hammer to grab

Scythe's yet untainted wrist to the Halfling's enraged dismay. Irra, patient as time immemorial, found another opportunity to seize, but the potential reward was greater than further suffering this time. Unlike her "pathetic" host and jailer, Irra was aware Scythe had gotten infected the moment it happened and saw in her a chance to finally be beyond Raviaki's attempts to contain her. She would cripple the hands of both the Alchemist and the woman they faced and accelerate the disease currently in infancy within the latter. Unseen by the mortals, Irra had a rancid smile. But to its surprise, it could sense Scythe also sporting a grin.

"Didn't I tell your ass...not to stop running?~"

With Scythe leaning on Ravi, they couldn't see her necrosed hand. It hung at her side and it had just enough strength to close and open again to let two manifested dice roll off. The black one rolled a **5**. The red one rolled a **3**.

The fiery explosion broke Irra's enforced grip and the two bodies were sent flying away from each other and out of the park's bounds.

"And Raviaki's tag has been taken! The thirty second countdown has begun!"

Ravi quickly felt near their neck after their body finally came to rest. The very moment Irra was forced off Scythe's arm was when Scythe got her fingers curled around the fabric of the tag. The feeling of the fabric breaking around their neck was thoroughly masked by the heat of the flames and the force of the explosion.

Scythe was face down on the asphalt, attempting to get up yet again – but this time, purely with her power of levitation, she would barely clear enough room to turn her head to stare down to where Ravi had fallen. Taking that blast point blank did her no favors either, but Ravi and Miss X could tell she was pleased through the feverish haze. A rare success of planning a step ahead for Scythe Bloodwrek. All it took was being desperate enough to try and her anxieties being in bed with fever.

“If it makes you...feel any better,” slurred Scythe, “you can blame Irra for this. Not like *you* fucked up, Sparky...”

Ravi got to their feet, teeth set and their outer layers scorched. The Potion of Hill Giant Strength was still active, they had one more speed boost on them and Scythe had blasted them away so fast, they still had use of their good hand before Irra could ruin it. They could race back up and win this before Scythe or Irra could do anything about it. As they quickly drank their potion and charged, Scythe – only just barely off the ground – had to make one more roll with her good hand. She was feeling far too weak to pull off anything else.

Three dice left her hand. 6. 3. 9. Scythe grinned. This was one of her few constants: right along with “the innocence of children must be protected”, Scythe would sooner put all of herself on the line than passively accept an unwanted fate handed to her. If a win and a loss could both get her cursed again anyway, she’d rather just win...if she could manage this move at all.

The problem was that 9 results – when not in the form of a shield or teleportation – were insanely difficult to fully control the force of when Scythe had her full faculties, so this, while a needed force, was a nightmare. She had to use the wind and water to guide the fierce lightning towards Ravi. Even if she slightly missed with the bolt, the wind and water would do the job she needed, pushing Ravi far enough back. If she couldn’t knock them out, she’d at least run out the clock.

“Chaos Combination...Thunderstorm...Break!”

In the end, after her makeshift storm had settled, she didn’t hear *how* she won nor could she confirm connecting with the stubborn Alchemist, but she just barely heard Miss X announce her as the winner. Only after that did she allow fever and sleep to take her, falling unconscious before they returned to Crossroads.

Scythe's consciousness broke the surface once again. She didn't expect to be still in the arena, but she had no idea where she was – only the vague sense she was still in Crossroads. She didn't feel as warm as earlier, but her head was still ringing. She still felt too tired to raise her head, but she could turn it; this wasn't her room back at the Kit Inn. It was far too decorated with numerous chairs and couches.

“Oh, you're awake again. You and Chiifu share that dramatic timing as well.”

“Saki?” Scythe propped herself up enough to look behind her and see the oni set up with an empty potion bottle in her hands. “Where am I?”

“Upstairs. Normally, this lounge is technically for the regulars, but with how many drinks you bought for yourself and Chiifu last night, you've technically earned the right.” Saki gave a barely noticeable smile. “That and there are certain brews I don't allow to leave the premises.”

“What is that?”

“You don't even remember waking up to drink it? That fever had you as bad as that Halfling made it sound.”

Scythe's mind was incredibly foggy. She didn't even remember her first time waking up in the lounge, demanding to know where her dagger was (despite it being on the side table), complaining about the brightness, and cursing about Irra before being convinced to take a potion Saki referred to as “The Good Stuff” before passing out once again. Of course, Saki was happy to remind her of what occurred – though she didn't know who Irra was. Scythe groaned about her unconscious actions while thanking Saki for the care.

“To be honest, whatever illness you caught has surprised me,” said Saki. “There's not many things that this can't handle on its own, but your opponent did say it wasn't a *normal* illness so I added a little extra something just in case it tries to come back. May have to take

the Potion of Fortitude they left you. I would have had you drink it earlier, but you passed out again.”

Scythe’s eyes glanced over the viscous-looking fuchsia liquid in the small flask. Scythe had never considered, as potent Ravi’s potion making had proven to be, how such things even *taste*. But the fact they had left anything for her at all only proved what she initially thought about the Alchemist.

“You can stay up here until you’re well enough to join the party later,” added Saki.

“Party?”

“There always seems to be one after each round to celebrate the winners. I doubt there will be anything different this time. Some are already drinking hard right now.”

Scythe grimaced as she picked up the potion Ravi had left behind and drank it as quickly as she could – or rather as fast as the fluid itself would let her. “You mentioned Sparky gave you all this advice. Where are they then?”

“Sent them out,” replied Saki as she gathered up all the empty bottles. “They kept trying to figure out what my brews are made of and how I did it. For all their bad attitude, it looked like they were literally praying for you to pull through.”

Praying...for me? When their own life is still hell and all that talk about not trusting the divine? Scythe couldn’t help smiling a bit. I’ll definitely have to thank them once I get through this...

While Scythe was lost in her thoughts, Saki had started to leave, but just when she was at the door, Scythe still had one more question that flowed back into her mind from breakfast time.

“Saki, do you have any idea why the God Eater picks people for this tournament?”

Chiifu had let it slip that Saki once competed in a Cross Tournament quite a long time ago, but Scythe hadn't reacted at the time. Between that and so many people coming in and out of her bar, she hoped for some kind of fulfilling answer from the oni.

Saki thought for a bit. "I don't think there were that many things in common between them. Some weren't even good at fighting. They just all wanted something enough to be willing to fight for it."

Scythe simmered on that thought and the doubts it created as Saki left. It was all she could do while struggling to fall asleep again. Was a desperate want for a vacation *really* enough to sway the God Eater? Scythe was fine believing that, but after facing Raviaki, she could no longer coast on that – especially when she was a step closer to claiming that wish and everything she had experienced today.

*Their childhood dream was what they ended up becoming. What did I even want when I was that age? To have just as good a magical talent as the other kids in the village? I never got a chance to even figure that out. ...Have I ever in the years since? Feeling like the God Eater knows more about the puzzle in my head better than I do. Damn it, I try to get away from my troublesome thoughts with what feels like a good idea and I end up with...more of the same....
Damn it, I've done all this before...*

Every thought Scythe had tried to push away or cut down for the last day and a half had just boomeranged back into her tired form in a lumpy, jagged mass. She still wasn't sure why she was seeing so many reminders of the last tournament (and her life preceding it) or why the reminders couldn't be of the few people she would be actually happy to see again, but the broad strokes overlaid far too well with the present – minus nearly dying from a plague. Scythe wanted to escape how she felt at the time, leapt at the first opportunity that was given to her, and through the beings she ran into, she only felt things get more and more

complicated. There was even another dragon last time that bothered her heart every time she saw him – though Tenki bothered her a lot more than that one ever could. And remembering how that whole escapade ended made Scythe *very* concerned about any kind of grander echo and being separated from her new home forever. One didn't need a firm desire to know what they *didn't* want after all.

More than ever, Scythe felt a slight change of approach to her time in Crossroads was becoming necessary – even if she didn't believe the God Eater would force her to pull the same kind of stunts. The events of today had made their statement: the more she delayed dealing with some of her past feelings, the more it would cause her problems. And that meant figuring out how much of a coincidence Crossroads's features truly were and who, if anyone, was toying with her were just two more variables of that equation to solve. It was strange having semi-long-term goals that her mind didn't immediately undermine, but a good kind of strange. All it took was being as sick as she had ever been in a century to give it a try.

Once I get over this, I need answers about this place. Enough to settle things in my mind. And if you think you'll see me waste that wish just to figure them out, Madam, you are sorely mistaken. For once, I have plans for that prize – with a couple topping that little list. Now that this has my full attention, I refuse to just let this end in disappointment~