

Blood Lotus

Vs. Hikaru Hoshi and Ryujin Hoshi

Round 1

By: Oki!

Part 1 - Reflection

“That conversation with the God-Eater six months ago. Safi. Admit you fucked up.”

“Yes, I did fuck up.” Those last four words spoken by her mentor send a singular bolt of shame into her soul, causing Banafsaj’s body to stutter. She wastes no time recovering, replying with absolute attentiveness, “Explain how Maduabuchi.”

“Of course. I’ll be concise, for you have a grand day ahead of you, and I would love to hear your plans for it!”

Through a maze of hollow concrete blocks smothered by ladders and accented by glassless windows, all haphazardly stacked on top of each other kilometers high and wide, with no regard for privacy nor safety, Maduabuchi and Banafsaj stroll, the apprentice leading her mentor. The Banafsaj takes note of the senseless urban planning. Such disorder adds an unusually human, and possibly, homey feeling to the bleak landscape. Although on second thought, ‘homey’ may not be the best descriptor. It would be difficult, but not impossible, to live in an area as cramped and dense as this.

But Banafsaj knows what she is here to do. Discuss and evolve. Not gaze into the distance with a space-cadet’s stare. She pipes up, eager to keep the conversation rolling, “I am dying, just dying to discuss my plans with you for today!” Banafsaj hops down onto a concrete cube below as Maduabuchi takes the nearby ladders. Waiting for her mentor to descend down the rungs, her foot bounces up and down. “But then again,” she says, “There are errors with me to address, so many errors, so many errors... Where is best for us to start?”

“We will focus on the principal flaw so you may understand the foundation of your weakness. Your aggression killed your advantage, and killed a potential relationship. So,” she pauses, “Let us start from the beginning. You initiate the conversation in the dominant position. Already, you have humiliated the God-Eater by being part of the only group to successfully defeat the deity in an invasion. The operation was a success. You won, and she lost. You proved the Atheist fundamental of mortal superiority,” Maduabuchi clamors over concrete ladder rungs, speaking as she ascends, “You brought her ignorance to light, and she was the one requesting a private audience with you, only you, in the Fox Dens’ VIP room, most secretive location in the Crossroads. You had the advantage.”

Banafsaj interjects, “Then where is the flaw in my psyche?”

“Hold on,” Maduabuchi reacts with a jovial tone, absent of any disappointment or frustration, “I am getting to that. Forfeit your violence for this moment so it may see use where necessary. Okay?”

“Yes Maduabuchi.”

“Then I shall continue.” And Maduabuchi does just that. “Despite having fought a battle you had already won, still you sought further triumph over a field of corpses and ash. The need to plant your banner on every charred body. You saw the God-Eater’s ideals and her thoughts regarding you as false, needing immediate correction. You verbally assaulted her in a storm of arguments, but that was utterly useless. Do you want to know what she did when you left the room after that monologue?”

“Of course.”

“She laughed. She saw you as a fool, a fool who would verbally dismember any opposition standing in the way of reshaping the world in that fool’s image, an image of pure black and white, where greater goods and self-excellence crush any thoughts of hedonism and pleasure.” Maduabuchi snaps her fingers, calling Banafsaj’s attention toward Maduabuchi’s hand upon which she counts the following: “Twofold you must admit. First, that you indulged in the violence of fighting with the God-Eater’s ideals, forgoing self-control and the superiority of reason. Second, that you thought said violence would do more good than harm, which is not the case.”

Banafsaj is rendered unable to speak. Her logical faculties override her emotional ones, restraining any harmful retorts that may attempt to emerge in self-defense. Her emotional faculties override her logical ones, too ashamed and drowning in criticism to formulate a proper response. It is as the facets of her intellect stumble over one another that her eyes are drawn to the shifting environment.

The concrete jungle abruptly flattens out, creating a sheer cliff face of gray “housing” higher than two thousand meters that divides a somewhat literal concrete jungle from a flat field of roads, walkways, rails, pipes that twist around a scattering of holes and more noticeably, concrete monoliths that pierce the sky. Like giants that roam the plains, these structures are so large their height dwarfs even the piles of concrete blocks they are separated from. Banafsaj needs no time to observe how pipes and shafts crawl along and extend out from their bodies. She knows the purpose of these megastructures with only a glance. They are factories.

“Now let me ask you a more straightforward question,” Banafsaj slows down as Maduabuchi voices another query, “Is this the way of violence you have been taught?” She gazes at Maduabuchi’s milk chocolate complexion, pleased to see that her ivory irises are directed towards Madaubuchi, and not the skyline.

With a moment to reflect and look inside her mind, separating logic from impulse, Banafsaj develops her answer. “No, for the violence it causes is imperfect. This violence was tainted by impulse and an irrational desire rather than rational passion. In other words...”

Maduabuchi has no need to interrupt, allotting Banafsaj time to think.

“Unnecessary aggression is the core issue present,” Banafsaj answers.

Through the shadow cast by Maduabuchi’s hood, Banafsaj can tell that there is a grin spreading from ear to ear. A shadowed hand motions towards one of the many holes bored into the concrete soil, monitoring for its mentee, Banafsaj, to lead the way. She gladly accepts. Beginning their trek towards the pit, Banafsaj and Maduabuchi utilize one of the elevated bridges that snakes through this sector, covered in criss-cross beams that resemble the designs of archaic train tracks. Both attempt to stay balanced atop one of the two main rails as Maduabuchi continues their conversation, voice speaking word after word with a deliberate pace, “Growth is something you must come to realize on your own,” she instructs Banafsaj with a gentle and firm tone, “But not without the assistance of others. Thus, I give you one straightforward directive for the tournament. You are already under a great deal of stress preoccupied with training, Crossguard duty, the Cross Tournament, and the project.” The pair find themselves lowering in elevation as they enter a converging of multiple tracks in parallel, flanked by a series of benches and outcrops. “Make amends with the God-Eater,” Maduabuchi commands, “And befriend her.”

“With that vixen?” Banafsaj scoffs, needing a moment to process the idea before speaking, “Fine. I will do what you request out of trust, but expect complications with the limited time frame and her demeanor,” Banafsaj immediately locates the nearest staircase, and the two begin their descent into the superstructure’s maw.

“I know. Success is something I seek, not something I demand. If you fail, that is not the end of the world. Besides, developing such a relationship will be easier considering how you have made progress in improving relations with her in the months since your arrival.”

“Out of necessity. She’s now my boss and I have to suck it up so everyone is paid on time. Working as our own private division associated with the Crossguards earns me and my fellow soldiers credibility and resources here, the two things we are in desperate need of, and the two things only obedience will provide. Chiifu is not half-bad, but still undeniably one of the most frustrating and indulgent women I know. Getting me to stop disliking her will require a lot of effort, and at least a few miracles.”

“Well you are one of the most hard-working women I know, and she is a goddess, you got both covered!”

Maduabuchi snickers, patting Banafsaj on the back with a cold palm.

“I was exaggerating, if you haven’t noticed.”

“Yes, I noticed you are making excuses. So will you quit the whining and just try it?”

The silence of defeat rests upon Banafsaj’s tongue. She is forced to admit her loss.

“Fine.”

“And you will actually try, right?”

“You know me just as well as I know myself. Tell me, have I ever done anything halfway” and now her words are laced with sincerity and enthusiasm, each syllable full of her warmth

“Nope,” Maduabuchi responds, mirroring her tone.

“I can guarantee effort, not results.”

“Effort is all I need.”

“Good,” Banafsaj beams.

Soon, after descending down many flights of stairs, the pair begins their trek through the corridors.

The corridors.

A web of thousands upon thousands upon thousands of tunnels, all branching out radially from the hole’s basin as if they were the roots of an artificial tree void of life. Initially, the network is comprehensible. A series of seventy holes that tower over Banafsaj and Maduabuchi, the entrances, are spaced evenly throughout the basin’s circumference. Each leads into the same spacious complex of rooms preceding the actual web of tunnels. Perhaps, in a former time, this would be some sort of waiting and administrative room. But what leads out from these initial spaces, is another beast entirely.

Banafsaj and Maduabuchi are finishing up some small talk regarding political ongoings in Banafsaj’s home dimension when they finish passing through said rooms into the main network of tunnels. Their footsteps are only supported by thick, grated concrete walkways extending in a grid pattern. Left and right, up and down, each at least thirty or so meters above the tunnel’s bottom. At times, Banafsaj must take Maduabuchi’s hand, guiding her through particularly difficult sections of the walkway seeing as she is the less familiar of the two regarding these spaces.

“And exactly why is the colosseum’s combat format unfavorable for you Banafsaj?” Maduabuchi asks.

Maduabuchi and Banafsaj reach an unmarked intersection. The former motions for the latter to bank right as they head off into one of the subtunnels. Banafsaj continues the conversation.

“MDOps rely on asymmetrical warfare, teamwork, combined arms, and fire-maneuver tactics, all of which are impossible without the support of a squad and in an open fighting environment. That is, an environment without the element of surprise as an aid. Thus, the colosseum favors fighters the opposite of me. Self-sufficient close-quarters combatants with the speed and durability to engage on their terms, utility and strategy being optional for such brutes.”

“Your matchups seem to fit that very description,” Maduabuchi’s head lowers, “This concerns you, no?” she queries.

“Very,” Banafsaj responds, although her direct, sharp tone indicates nothing of the sort. It is utter confidence in the face of skewed odds. Unbending will and hyperconsciousness obliterating doubt.

“Have you been preparing?”

Banafsaj smirks, smugly. “Extensively,” she replies. That explains her attitude.

“How extensively, may I ask?”

“Three hours worth of practice daily for the past six months on top of basic training.”

“Typical,” Maduabuchi’s laugh booms throughout the increasingly tight corridors. She slaps Banafsaj on the back, to which the taller of the two reciprocates with an elbow to Maduabuchi’s arm as they take a right turn and descend down three stories’ worth of tunnels.

Banafsaj says, “I spent six months straight utilizing intel from the incursion to formulate strategies against every single contestant, around a hundred or so. I am also extremely fortunate the minor leagues organization still kept hosting tournaments leading up to the main Cross Tournament,” she sheepishly smiles through that sentence, “The two I took up were great practice. That, on top of the usual training both with my squad, plus sparring with whatever residents I could find. Ah-h-h! The brackets, the brackets! I forgot to tell you, they just came out last week!” Banafsaj turns right into an open square-shaped shaft, navigating across another set of walkways to the opposite side.

“Then spill.”

“There are seven other parties in my bracket. Hikaru Hoshi and Ryujin Hoshi I face today. Either Regai and the Gambler or Theo Thunderbluff and Pudelle Elsegood will be tomorrow for the semifinals, and for the final either Yuri and Boris, Jaz, Eliza and Ronin, and Seclica are all possible options.”

“Would you like to begin with the opposite end of your bracket?”

“Oh, of course! It really does not matter who goes first. But anyways, starting with Ronin and Eliza...” Banafsaj pauses to organize her thoughts before sending them out via dialogue, “They honestly seem like the easiest fight. Both have skill and some technological advantages along with combat-rationale, but they are just such straightforward fighters, any level of advanced tactics will deal with them easily.”

“Unfortunate that they have to be at the bracket’s opposite end then. If they are as weak as you claim, that pair will really struggle to make it out. Speaking of which,” Maduabuchi asked while stepping over some concrete embedded into the tunnel, “What is your strategy when dealing with them?”

“Asymmetrical warfare. That means mobility, long-range firearms, and area denial through smoke and fire.”

“I heard a little about Ronin too. A previous competitor, no?”

“Correct. Ronin was a previous competitor, an escaped lab experiment and rabbit-anima. Eliza, his latest recruit and a human, is the fighter this time, looking to know more about her dad or... something. Even with digging, her motives remain cloudy.”

“And how does that influence her psyche?”

Banafsaj exasperates her next few lines with empty monotone rather than frustration, “Eliza’s tenacity is half-present, and her motive is too weak to push her over the edge to win. If the first round does not deal with her, the second certainly. If she somehow survives all this, I will be sure to tear her apart in the finals.”

“Excellent.” Maduabuchi responds, pleased as opposed to disturbed by Banafsaj’s diction, “Next one?”

“Selica the Swarm is a mixed fight. An insectoid soldier composed entirely of a swarm rather than a single person, which is a phenomenon far from new. And as for her wish, she has no idea. Sorry for the overly blunt descriptors, it’s just...” Banafsaj shakes her head, “I am not excited about this fight. Then again, her combat discipline might be enough to push her to win, so who knows.”

“If you know little about her psychologically, what about in terms of her combat?”

“The intel is limited, but she seems to be a balanced fighter with potent control options. Fortunately, her insects are biological, meaning they will burn easily, removing a bunch of guesswork from the equation. Use of pyrokinetics and a balanced loadout will do. Frankly she might be easier to deal with than Ronin, assuming she makes it to the finals... Yuri and Jaz are sure to defeat them.”

“Well why?”

“They are the supersoldiers. Oh, oh!” Banafsaj’s obsidian eyes light up with excitement and her smile with glee. Finally, something interesting to discuss. “Yuri, Yuri! Now this is an exciting one! A fifteen-foot stall old-school biological Russian supersoldier just following orders from his egomaniacal commander and expert scientist, Boris. But he’s a family man, one with a heart and good inside. Despite the abundance of cliches, I find him oddly endearing. He is mostly fighting for Boris’ sake, but by the finals his motives are bound to change. I’ll be glad to see it, but then again the result is not a guarantee.”

“Didn’t you just comment on how you disliked Seclica for being basic?”

Banafsaj grunts as she dislodges some concrete rubble obstructing the way. “I have an intense attraction to people of strong moral character. Or at least, those that possess such potential.”

“Ah. I see, I see. How do you expect the fight to go then?”

“The combat is equally as exciting as the person. His physical capabilities are superhuman,” she grunts again, “all-around... Hey, give me one second.” Banafsaj stops speaking to shove a large cube of concrete out of the way, moving to the side so Maduabuchi may pass first. She does so, and Banafsaj continues her banter on the other side, “His frame is so large, heavy weapons will have an easy time targeting him. Just a few rounds from an anti-material rifle will be enough to break his flesh and chew through the internals. A fight all about heavy weapons and spacing. Melee is death. Fight at range or lose.”

“Why?” Maduabuchi inquires as the two pass another series of vertical shafts on their flanks, continuing straight and going neither left nor right.

“Fifteen tonne spear.”

“How the hell does he actually use that effectively? I may not be an expert in martial combat but that seems excessively heavy. If he can wield that, he would probably wield the strength to choke the life out of the God-Eater herself!”

“After a few hours of watching clips I still do not know. But, I do not plan to lose to a man like him, controlled by that swine unworthy of the title of human, Boris. His master and slaver,” the resolution is practically dripping from Banafsaj’s mouth. She clears it out of her tone before continuing, “Now should I do Jaz for you?”

“Please, go ahead. Do they have, like, Jazz music magic? And then use it to do soldier things?”

“No. Soldiers that utilize verbal and aural resonance to cast magic are rare in fringe multiverses, because the magical techniques are often associated with the bard archetype, not one suited to direct combat, despite this being a misconception built upon unhealthy magical stereotypes...” Banafsaj has to pause to see if she still has Maduabuchi’s attention after that rant. She does, in full surprisingly enough. “Anyways, Jaz is the worst matchup. Jaz, otherwise known as PS/H JA-42, is a Usonian battlesynth, basically a specialized combat android, gone rogue. No idea what its wish is, but that is not going to hinder Jaz’s ability to fight in the slightest due to its experience with combat. Stacked in all metrics, with *nearly* no weaknesses.”

“Then what weaknesses does this Jaz possess for you to exploit?”

“I had to plow through its file for hours until I found a single aspect of Jaz I can right open. Fire. Jaz is an android that builds up heat due to system stress, similar to me, but a lack of modern insulation and protection means heat-based attacks can induce overheating.” Again, it is as if sparks can be seen in Banafsaj’s eyes as she speaks, the product of excitement and constant computations of strategy and tactics. She says, “the best approach is simply to engage in melee, never alleviate pressure, and use fire-wreathed strikes to attempt to cause overheating. Pure martial skill differentiates defeat from victory. Risky, but possible. And possible is always better than nothing. As you say, there is worse. I should be thankful that the God-Eater was not sadistic enough to pair me with some bastard-deity like Azeron or Sana and Shiori. Wretched beings, unworth of their statuses.”

The tunnels are becoming tighter and tighter now, just barely able to fit the full height of Banafsaj. Passageways of raw concrete extend in all directions at this point, and Banafsaj swears some of the corridors loop back on themselves in impossible ways. Now the faintest traces of the murky gray water can be seen in trickles and puddles dotted throughout the tunnels, along with one, singular, black and white lotus. Both take notice, and Banafsaj responds accordingly.

“Our time is shortening, and you still have some more folk to discuss. Reigai and the Gambler, along with Theo and Pudelle.”

Banafsaj wades through the tunnels, guided by some invisible, instinctual force at the back of her mind. Every step she took was made with care, though this did not stop her from maintaining her focus on conversation in the slightest, “I will move swiftly to the best of my ability,” Banafsaj declared, looking back to make sure Maduabuchi was keeping pace, “Would you enjoy hearing about Reigai and the Gambler first? They are a convoluted bunch, but uniquely interesting nonetheless.”

“You know I have a soft spot for those types. The complicated ones that you need an hour to explain.”

“Alright then. Reigai and the Gambler are two souls inhabiting the same body, most often referred to as the “doll.” Reigai is said body’s primary inhabitant, with the Gambler taking a proverbial backseat. Both can speak to one another as they exist within the same mind, although Reigai may hand over control to the Gambler or the Gambler will take it for themselves if given the chance.”

“Y’know... that’s actually kind of simple?” commented Madaucbui, “They’re really just two beings, one body. Sorry, I’m going to derail us if I keep talking about this. What else about the pair?”

“Reigai and the Gambler share a straightforward introvert/extrovert complex. With Reigai trending towards non-confrontationalism and patience whereas the Gambler is an aggressive, outgoing, risk-taker. When it comes down to combat, both have the advantage of a tricky, varied offense consisting of abilities from magical stamina leeching to thermokinesis and even ability-stealing. They will pierce right through my defenses if I leave them open. That, plus strong motives coming from both Reigai and the Gambler to win make them a formidable opponent, but not necessarily an unbreakable one.”

“What weaknesses have you noticed then? Presumably exploitation of the Gambler’s hyperaggression via defensive play?”

“Precisely,” Banafsaj replied, “They lack both positional-mobility and defensive tools. Dexterity core along with either a blink, or strength core. Kiting from range or up-close pressure and counters should work.”

“Good to know!” Maduabuchi must be smiling underneath her hood. The years of training and self-strengthening Banafsaj had incurred are now coming into effect! “And as for the anima?” she asks.

“Theo and Pudelle?”

“Yup. There’s so many around here. Often I wonder why,” Maduabuchi ducks underneath a vertical slab of grates hanging from the ceiling, so low to the ground it leaves but a meter of space between it and the tunnel floor, “Do you have your own theories?” she wonders, causing Banafsaj to turn around again, “I’d like to know.”

“Oh! Quite a few creative domain theory literature have chapters on species, with anima being of frequent mention. My e-reader has text on it, so…”

“Good! About this Theo and Pudelle. Who are they?”

“Theodore Blunderbuff is a human who claims to be a wildebeest, essentially a buffalo-anima, with Pudelle Elsegood being a mouse-anima. Both are essentially freelance workers, ‘adventurers,’ who sell their combative services where needed, with Pudelle working as a scrapper and engineer in her spare time. Although they are a boyfriend-girlfriend pair, only Theo will be fighting in the arena. As for their wish,” she grunts rather harshly, “They have made the irresponsible decision to not think about it at all.”

“What is stopping them from doing so?” Maduabuchi intones with her characteristic neutrality.

“Sloth, that is what,” Maduabuchi can only sigh as Banafsaj explains the combat scenario she faces, “Thunderbluff is a disadvantaged, but not impossible fight. The lad is a durable, balanced, melee fighter who can apply constant pressure paired with solid utility thanks to utilization of primordial-elemental-type magic thanks to his Wildebeest Arts. Worst of all, even without a wish Theodore still has exceptional tenacity.”

“Which makes him the exact person you want to avoid fighting,” Maduabuchi adds.

Banafsaj responds rapidly, pleased by her master’s attentiveness, “Exactly. Fortunately, he still has weaknesses. Footage from minor league tournaments indicates extremely linear strategy, and the profile reveals a phobia of fire. A mixture of tricky ranged and melee combat with an emphasis on evasion and field control via pyrokinetics will do.”

“Well, best of luck against him!”

“Thank you Maduabuchi.”

“No problem.”

“And today’s matchup, Hikaru Hoshi and Ryujin Hoshi. The Hoshi brothers. Explain away Banafsaj.”

“Hikaru Hoshi and his adopted older brother, Ryujin Hoshi, along with their AI companion PARSEC (Personal Artificial Recording System Elevated Camera),” both Banafsaj and Maduabuchi snort at the contrived abbreviation, “Are a crime-fighting trio who have come to the Crossroads via traditional invitation to restore Hikaru’s public image and

return him to his former idol life. Hikaru is the group's leader. A sixteen-year old Novalian boy who works as both a livestreamer and crimefighter. (christ, that must be a difficult workload with school), He has an undeniably bold and tenacious aura bolstered by a healthy dose of charisma and a side of ego. You see, Hikaru left the idol business at twelve (good choice), after being framed for a murder, and has been working to regain public favor via his current job."

"Do you think his naivete betrays his ability to fight?"

"To an extent Maduabuchi. Hikaru is a unique being, a Novalian, basically a humanoid who can transform into the embodiment of lightning and the stars, with a mastery of Viralium Artes, combat techniques whose ability to utilize them depends on the user's fame. He is powerful, and displays basic rationale and strategy in combat, but Hikaru's emotions still bind his reasoning, both inside and outside of the battlefield, specifically overconfidence. His combat style is a traditional fast-paced rushdown. Low durability, moderate damage, and overwhelming speed."

As the pair continue their conversation, the water level begins to rise.

"And the brother?"

"Less to say about the fellow. A Dragonaut Kaiju-Dragon, former king of an underground city of test subjects, and rescued by Hikaru during a kidnapping incident, he now lives with the family working as a wrestler. The responsible big-brother type with a jovial and honorable side to him. Combat-wise he is a balanced grappler and tank. Makes use of slow but powerful charged attacks along with various grappling techniques, plus minor Viralium Artes in the form of grappling techniques or fire-based techniques for control and damage. With Hikaru, Ryujin is dangerous as a meatshield whose presence is more dangerous thanks to his brother, and who makes his brother more dangerous with his presence. The strategy requires isolation of Hikaru. That takes away Ryujin's mobile pressure, leaving him extremely open for ranged attacks via rifle."

"What do you think of them as a whole Banafsaj? Their wish, do you agree with it?" And now the occasional puddles are transforming into streams, which are transforming into shallow water that only tickles the soles of feet who tread upon it.

"Combat-wise, the pair are extremely dangerous due to their immense pressure, melee focus, and balance of abilities. I have a plan, but it involves heavy defensive play which is extremely risky considering my fragility. As for the wish? Stupid. Naive, like the boy."

“Why?” Now the water has reached the ankles of Banafsaj and Maduabuchi, both take notice, and Maduabuchi responds accordingly. “Time is nearly up, but you make a good point, so explain yourself, quickly.” She draws a sword, and holds it out towards Banafsaj, motioning for her to take the blade.

“He cares for himself, not his work. The wish is selfish and non-beneficial to the whole of society. Hikaru must think of the whole, not the self.”

“An astute observation.”

Banafsaj picks up the sword as the murky waters begin to clear, revealing Banafsaj’s reflection beneath the waters. She says one last thing before submerging to overcome her former self, taking note of her surroundings, “I know what it means to suffer unjustly. Victory here, and ultimately victory in the Ascendancy War is necessary to deal with this fundamental problem. I have made every extra effort to win. None of it will go to waste.”

But Maduabuchi interrupts her.

“Wait, Banafsaj?”

“Yes?”

“Didn’t the God-Eater tell you people will remember what you did?”

“Oh... yes, yes she did.”

“Your opponents may be more motivated than you think.”

The two share a moment of silence and mutual understanding before parting.

Part 2 - The Warrior

Banafsaj knows that the volume of the Kit’Inn never goes above that of an office or the inside of a car going 80 kph, save for a few exceptions. If any noise is ever to breach this limit, there is a problem that needs fixing. It is precisely because of this reason that when the asymmetric clatter and rattle of metallic objects, indicating a lack of uniformity in shape among them, rings throughout the northwestern first-floor halls of the Kit’Inn somewhere before 0500, Banafsaj is the first to intervene.

Approaching the source of the fallen objects, Banafsaj hears the culprit before she sees it. Or him. She knows who it is, because the softly-spoken, yet deep-toned anxiety-ridden self-criticisms and statements of panic could only come from one person in this region of the building. Theodore Thunderbluff.

“Oh no, oh no...” the lad mutters to himself. Banafsaj turns the corner to intervene, being sure to mark the act of making a polite, energetic impression as her top priority.

“Heyyy!” she waves rapidly with one of her two ivory-gloved hands, “Thunderbluff! Excellent to see you!”

Theo replies promptly, “Yes? Safi– Banafsaj Safi? Pleased to– to meet you!” Banafsaj turns her focus to take notice of Theo’s situation. On the floor he kneels. Three hastily-taped heavy-duty cardboard boxes lie situated on a cart behind a pile of scrap he sorts through. With three empty boxes on rest by his flank and a single partially-filled box lay front of him.

Banafsaj strides up to her fellow competitor, extending her right hand outward as she reciprocates the welcome, “Oh the pleasure is all mine! Seriously.” Theo pauses his cleaning to turn to Banafsaj and return the favor. Both grips are firm as they shake, but Theo’s hand moves up and down at irregular intervals. “I am so excited to be competing with you Thunderbluff!” she remarks.

“Ah-h-h-h... Thank you, madam Safi. An honor to be in the presence of a fellow soldier.”

“Why, you are very welcome sir! Now, what do you need help with?”

“Puttin’ all this scrap back in the boxes.” Theo turns back to cleaning. Even the largest objects are like feathers to him, thanks to a clearly muscular physique, his hands marked with the callouses and scars of hard work and sacrifice.

“No sorting necessary?”

“Yup... Just, put it in, will ya?”

“Of course!”

“Yeah,” Theo cracks a smile during his replies, but his eyes make only half-contact with Banafsaj as they alternate between glancing at her and the mess. “Thanks,” he says, sheepishly.

“Well, you are very welcome!”

It takes less than a minute of sorting before, as per usual, Banafsaj finds another topic to chat over.

“So... who needs all this scrap? Your girlfriend?”

“Yeah, actually. She’s a—”

“Tinkerer? Engineer? Scrapper?” Theo nods once at that last word, and Banafsaj continues the conversation, “A fair line of work! My praise to her for partaking in a field of work often unrecognized but fundamental. Below the administrators, the foundations built by us working men. And your profession—” Banafsaj quickly recalls, “Ah, I remember! A fellow soldier you say? You, that is, as in you are a soldier, not Pudelle— I didn’t mean Pudelle. Your duties, your stories, your commitment. I would like to hear about that!”

“Uh-huh! But my experience is limited.”

“So? We can still share a story or two!” Banafsaj finishes packing a series of sixteen power cells, stacked upright, in four tidy rows of four. She awaits a response from Theo. “I will take that silence as a response. Well then, tell me,” she inquires, “What is your reason for joining?”

“Madame Safi,” Theo addresses the soldier, his back suddenly straightening as if he were called to attention, “The purpose of joining the military of the King of Symphony was to put my adept combative skills to work in an orderly environment, rather than doing freelance work. In addition, this is also a profession that runs in my family. My father was an honored soldier who served under the king of Symphony, fighting to protect our lands as our forefathers have, and was the man who fought alongside our king himself to slay the Deliverer of Hounds.”

“Oh my goodness!” Banafsaj exclaims, motes of light twinkling in her black sclera, “I would love to meet a man like him. If he is your father, then he must have fully expressed the mantra of strength that has carried you this far, strength that carries the self toward excellence... Unless of course—”

Theo bows his head in reverence, not grief, “Almost certain...”

“If that is true, there is no use in mourning. Then tell me more about him! What about his Rank?”

“Oh... okay then,” Theo intones with a rather lamentitive voice. Suddenly, his facial expression twitches back into one of focus, undercut by the unusual narrowing of his eyebrows, “Yes Safi. He was originally a rank-and-file grunt.” A

large burnt-out power core, the size of a meter-tall tree stump, is loaded into another empty box with ease thanks to the fellow soldier's strength. "Of course," he chattered, "That was my father's rank before his promotion—"

"Grunt? That is a pretty shitty army if the lowest rank is called 'grunt.' Would be a shame to have to write to your parents explaining how you are the exquisite military of Symphony's newest 'grunt.'" Banafsaj scoffs, giving Theo no time to explain further. She shifts her focus from the shrinking assortment of fallen scrap in front of her to Theo. Only basic intuition is required to realize this shy soul in front of her is trying too hard to hold a stoic expression. He compensates for something he wants hidden so Banafsaj presses her curiosities further, wondering, "What was he promoted to?"

"Whatever having these gauntlets makes you..." Theo pulls up his sleeves, unveiling a pair of large magic-alloy bands wrapped around the lower halves of his forearms, likely some type of steel for a base. Within each is an indent where Banafsaj saw and sensed a pulsating, orange-hued primordial-type magic. "I inherited these," he slowly explains, "Being his son and all... I believe he received these upon becoming a general after that battle?"

Banafsaj continues to slip the last pieces of scrap into the final box, neatly organized, despite her focus being on Theo. She keeps up the pressure, asking with a sharper, quicker tone, "So he ascended about thirty or so ranks and became head of the army because of one battle Theodore?"

"Uh..."

"What about organization?" She cuts further, asking, "Under what battalions, squads, or otherwise did he serve under? Every soldier must be intimately familiar with such details!"

"..."

The truth is close. The combatant is defenseless. She cuts further, questioning Theo, "And where did he buy his grid squares? All soldiers must know where they can purchase grid squares!"

Theo irks out a few words, "At the... general store?"

Wrong answer. The boy clearly has not been gaslit by his peers yet. "General store? That's a civilian thing," Banafsaj snaps. Now Theo has blundered, leaving himself vulnerable to further verbal attack. Spotting a generous opening, she closes her line of questioning and moves in for the finishing blow. "Your father was not part of the military. Are you lying Thunderbluff?" Banafsaj demands to know. "Answer me."

"I..." there are no more defenses to work with, but if he admits defeat, how will this Banafsaj perceive him in the

semifinals? A potential relationship, lost in an instant. Then again, he does not exactly have any other options.

Surrendering, whatever costs it may entail, is the best option at this point. Theo closes his eyes, and speaks. “Yes,” he manages to say without stuttering nor pausing, “I lied.”

Banafsaj laughs, in an unusual, jovial manner, glad she has won this battle. There is no longer a need for further oral violence, even if it would be fun. A chance for ultimate self-expression. A chance to win! But she... she has higher priorities. Banafsaj exclaims to Theo, “You are a terrible liar!” and irks out another laugh as Theo backs up, face displaying a mixture of fear and confusion. Banafsaj remarks, ‘That boy-scout facade of yours is see-through from a kilometer away. Please, if you think I am angry, I’m really not! No, really! Just having a jest with you, aye?’

“Really?” Theo’s eyes are only partially focused on Banafsaj. He is intent on avoiding her gaze in full.

Banafsaj beams, radiating an aura of warmth rather than scorching heat. “Truth is essential to excellent living but everyone needs to lie out of necessity in rare circumstances,” she explains to Theo, as her words cascade into a ramble, “A person like you holds a logical reason for lying about these things. So spill! Exactly what is forcing you to lie about your identity? Or who? Is this related to your girlfriend again? Let me guess, lying about your status as a soldier to earn favor in the eyes of a presumably hoity-toity aristocratic family? That’s my guess, the most common excuse out there for these types of things!”

“Actually, yeah...” Theo confessed, blushing and timidly grinning, “That would describe my exact situation.” The bashful soul shies away from Banafsaj, taking hold of the final box, now full with scrap. He needs a few more adjustments to make room for it on the trolley. As Banafsaj continues the conversation, Theo listens in full.

“Exactly? Every minutiae of my question matches your response?”

“Mostly.”

“Well feel free to clarify. You can trust me with your secrets!” As she makes her request, Banafsaj nears Theo. Sure, his training had hardened both his body and mind to the strife of the battlefield, allowing for action imbued only by passion and never burdened by stress. But this was different. This was no combat. This was a conversation, and yet, Banafsaj treated it like the former. Strength is something he can deeply admire in an individual, but her strength is different. It is volatile, the violent strength of his rivals from past eras. And a strength that possibly surpasses even his. Will she turn out the same as them? If not, then this Banafsaj could make a formidable ally. If so, well then... he may have an issue on his hands.

“Okay then,” Theo agrees. He gets up from a squatting position, retrieves the cart, and begins to move through the Kit’Inn’s halls, with Banafsaj in tow. Keeping his promise, Theo immediately explains his situation, “After getting serious with my girlfriend, Puddle, I really needed the approval of her parents for obvious reasons. Raloran Ellsgood, a Navy Admiral and Pressatara Ellsgood, his wife and owner of a successful clothing and textiles business. I earned Raloran’s approval but only because he assumed I was a military-born son, so I gotta keep that mask on my face around both of them. Sorry if I overexplained...”

Banafsaj reassured Theo “No, no, you’re good!” Her words invigorate Theo to finish.

“Thanks, Safi. But yeah... that’s what’s going on with me. I ain’t ever told anyone about this situation of mine. ‘Cept my girlfriend, of course,” his head pivots to check on Banafsaj. Positioned beside him she is, eyes intensely focused upon him. He should stop staring, and ask the question, “What do you think I should do?”

“Tell them the truth. You have no malicious reason to lie, but it is still the worst choice.”

“But—”

“Pudelle’s father already thinks well of you,” Banafsaj cuts in. “That is because of your character, not stupid blood-ties and legacy, all that nonsense.” She begins to move in front of Theo as she prattles on, but not far enough as to lose his eye contact. “If her parents lack the common sense to accept the axiom that the worth of their daughter’s suitor does not come from titles upheld but character attained through works and works alone, then it’s for the best that they stay out of your lives. You don’t need someone that conservative in your periphery. They will only weigh you and your posterity down.”

“Pudelle’s parents are her lifeline though!” Theo chides, expediting his pace to meet Banafsaj. “Those are the people that raised her, that cared for her, that are closest to her! To lose... to lose a relationship like that... it would be—”

“Devastating? Yes, it would be. She needs to learn the art of moving on and cutting ties.”

“That’s extreme.”

“Yes. Extremely necessary,” Banafsaj smirks.

Sighing, Theo stops resisting and starts negotiating. Diplomacy is the more effective tool here against a woman as argumentative as this. “Y’know, you might have a point,” he reasons, “But even if I tell them, Puddle’s parents wouldn’t accept it out of the blue. They’re gonna need a reason.”

“Actually, I have one.”

“What?”

“He’s looking me right in the face.”

Theo has to stop the cart to think about that statement. “Me?” The warrior doubts, eyebrows narrowing while placing a finger upon his chest, pointing to himself.

“Theo, you’re a human who can use Wildebeest Arts, right? A series of techniques that only Wildebeests are able to utilize, or more specifically, should be able to utilize? Right?”

“I’m not a human,” he retorts, “I’m a Wildebeest!”

Banafsaj replies with absolute deadpan, “Really? You seem pretty fleshy and barely hairy to me.”

“But—” once again, the so-called Wildebeest’s speech is interrupted by Banafsaj, this time due to her poking his cheek and muttering at a barely audible volume, “Not furry enough.”

“I—”

“And I don’t want to hear it. Anyways, back to my point. I did a bit of reading up on you. And you want to know what I found out? That through discipline and persistence, through honest work, you proved a human could be taught and utilize the art of the Wildeboost. At age ten. You proved how character was the variable in success, and not genetics, nor titles. Something I am intimately familiar with, and something any decent person should come to admire in others. If you come out and tell the truth and tell them your story of hardship and deeds, they are sure to accept you as their daughter’s suitor.”

“I…” he stutters, “I’m sorry! I don’t know what to say. Sorry…”

“Then speak from the heart!” She steps back, giving Theo a massive thumbs up and wink, causing a little flare of pink in his cheeks, “You got this bud,” Banafsaj exclaims with a gleaming white-toothed smile.

“Okay,” he calms himself, before speaking. “On one hand, I’m really, really flattered by everything you said madam Safi. It really does mean a lot, because no one goes to compliment me for that, so thanks. On the other, just telling Pudelle’s parents all cold-turkey is going to have some consequences. I know you’re all about cutting ties, breaking tradition and all that jazz but not everyone has the luxury of being like that. Also I’m still a Wildebeest, even if I don’t look the part, so what you just said still might not really apply…”

“Friggin…” Banafsaj snarkily replies under her breath. The pair move through one of the exits and into a little courtyard, sparsely populated by plantlife and statues. She pipes up again, eager to convince Theo before they leave, “But

do you get my point?”

“I do.”

“Then what are you going to do about it? Lie forever? Or tell the truth?”

“I...” Theo pauses for thought, and this time, Banafsaj does not interrupt. Eventually Theo reaches his decision: He will avoid the question entirely.. “I’ll see you later,” he falters, heading towards the courtyard’s entrance and into the rest of the city.

Banafsaj clasps her hands over her mouth to amplify her voice. “Hey!” she barks, “I didn’t get to talk to you about your wish! Do you even have one?”

“I’m working on it!” Theo yells back.

“Seriously?” Banfsaj tries to get in another word, but by the time she thinks of a response Theo is already gone.

What kind of man is he? The kind of man who comes from nothing, growing to strength and breaking the norms once thought immovable only through hard work. Yet, when presented with ultimate power in the form of a wish, he still remains undecided on it? The same man who slew a deity in years past, a true icon of mortal superiority, finds the battle of bringing the truth of his status up with the in-laws harder? Unbelievable. Inexcusable. Why does he refuse to listen? Why does she still struggle to rectify these issues without doing harm?

The pain of defeat is momentary, but the memory is everlasting. Nevertheless, she has other tasks that demand her attention, and the first item on her agenda is greeting Chiifu at the Fox Den. Just like she had six months ago and many times between then and now, she wants a private audience with her favorite tourist. Part-time boss, part-time deity, and full-time annoyance.

Part 3 - Favor

The streets that connect the Fox Den and Kit'Inn are filled with the cool air of a morning's dawn. It is Summer, and while the sun rises in the west, its rays begin to find their way through the urban jungle that is the Crossroads. They leave Banafsaj's path illuminated in splotches and strips of light. Every time she alternates between light and shadow, her internal temperature shifts just the slightest, for even the sun's light still manages to warm the infinitely complex inner workings of Banafsaj's enhancements.

But Banafsaj has better things to do than appreciate scenery. She knows the Hoshi Brothers' ability to apply pressure by working in a team is their greatest strength. Thus, the question of victory comes down to the execution of her plan, which is influenced by loadout. Was only one unraveled mine necessary? Should she have swapped out her seeker-shrapnel grenade for the extra mine? After all, if Hikaru is going to be supported by a crowd of tens of thousands, he may be so powerful that only two mines will have the necessary potency to secure a temporary incapacitation to deal with Ryujin. But of course, that removes the potency of her late game with two out of two utilities used. Even if the concerns are memorized, mental recitation serves only to strengthen their urgency. Such drives her focus. Such is excellence and purity.

Now the Fox Den is not far ahead, its doors closed as the bartenders and barmaids arrive to set up for the day. As Banafsaj ascends the three steps leading up to a patio made of chocolate-colored wood, approaching the double front-doors flanked by Crossguards of formidable stature, both give a short bow and formal greeting in her presence. Banafsaj has earned their respect. Each parts the doors for her, the two stepping aside as the third honorary 'Crossguard' among them makes headway into the building. Natural yellow light fades into artificial blue while the vaguely eastern architecture of the Fox Den's exterior transitions into something more contemporary. 21st-century CE contemporary, that is. The design present is plain although striking. Walls colored both sapphire and charcoal line each of the bar's surfaces, while the floor is made of interlocking black wood planks. Present is actual wood, not artificial wood, which is indicated by the sound Banafsaj makes as she walks over them towards the main bar in the back. Barmaids wipe off the tables on her right, while more set up tables on her left. With minimal effort, Banafsaj locates Chiifu amongst the scuffle. She calls out, and Chiifu drops her things to follow. The two pull out a pair of stools from the front bar. Saki pours each a glass of water and moves away. Now that she is settled into her seat, Chiifu slumps onto the counter. Despite the

uncharacteristically dull sheen in her eyes and tone, she manages to maintain eye contact with Banafsaj while making small talk.

“Say Banafsaj... on a morning as pleasant as this, how is it you feel?” the Crossguards chief and temporary barmaid pouts, swirling her glass of water round and round. Looking at the revolving pattern is more pleasant than having to labor at such early hours. She should be playing pranks on competitors and half-assing her job as Chief, not cleaning tables and paying off debts. As she wallows in her sorrow Banafsaj’s bright voice manages to strike through the silence, eager to make conversation. Typical of her. A woman too bright and too violent for her own good.

“Excellent today, madam Chief!” Banafsaj beams, “I worked hard to free up these next days for only routine training and nothing else because of the tournament and all. Presumably, the same isn’t true for you.”

“So formal!” Chiifu drawls, exhausted, “Unfortunately... I still have quite the debt from—”

“Last night. Yeah, I know. Don’t cry about it to me,” she spits, “A woman such as yourself should be intimately familiar with the phrase ‘drinks on me,’ and the hell it brings upon those who utter it.”

“Oh my! How’d you know my debt’s what brought me here to work early? I thought you were off again toiling away at your, I should say *our*, secret project. Always avoiding fun like the plague, as per usual.”

“Intuition.”

“Ah, fair enough.” Chiifu continues to swirl the glass, lifting it up above her head to observe from the bottom. She wonders, “And on that topic... how has working as my oh-so-valued Crossguard been treating you so far?”

“Unexpectedly pleasant madam Chief! Gosh, I never imagined I would earn such gargantuan respect from the public and fellow Crossguards within the span of just a few months. It brings me a sense of satisfaction knowing our work is effective and beneficial to the whole.”

“I feel just the same. Then again, who’s to say I’m not pulling the strings? Hmmm?” Lazily, Chiifu scooches over to Banafsaj on the stool. “Working behind the scenes to feed my most special Crossguards the reputation they need to deal with Cross Tournament chaos,” she attempts to poke Banafsaj, but in attempting to do so Banafsaj retaliates grabbing at her wrist. Chiifu pays no mind though. “You’d have to thank me for all the hard work I put in,” she teases, “Just for thirty-or-so little mortals beneath me~”

Temporary frustration laced with slivers of worry come across Banafsaj’s face. “Hopefully not. That would be a shame,” she utters.

“Yes. If so, it would be very, very unprofessional of me. Unbecoming of my position. You should be fortunate I’m not so malicious. But enough about your job, what about today's main event, the Cross Tournament? Excited?” she chuckles, “I bet you are, considering how much work you’ve been putting in training.”

“Wait. Have you seriously noticed?” Banafsaj’s previous scorn is replaced with a red blush. Finally, she lets go of Chiifu’s hand. The kitsune immediately uses the chance to place a hand on Banafsaj’s shoulder.

“Of course! I take a particular liking to the individuals who return said particular liking to my festivities. Mutual feelings. As a result, I get to know your little tendencies and tics, your efforts and work! How you have a synthetic tarp with a custom flower pattern you clean daily for all your weapons during training. How you write a minute-by-minute agenda for every training session. How you spent a week straight for hours after work scrolling through documents and footage of past tournaments making contingency plans for every single competitor. How you write down the changes and errors in your technique in this holographic digital notebook. With a black-and-white color scheme, as with all of your items. I do notice.”

“Why me?”

“Well you kept talking about it when we first met, saying how I should have better things to do.”

“Oh yes. Because you find me entertaining.”

“Why yes! I do find you entertaining! Now, onto a different topic,” Chiifu pulls away, “I am technically your chief, yes? Thus, you have to take my orders.”

“Crossguards Special Division is legally a PMC affiliated with the Crossguards. So not technically, but professionally yes, you are my boss and Chief. Even then, putting it so blatantly straightforward is a gross oversimplification of your authoritative privileges. Aye,” Banafsaj exclaims, catching her breath, “I’m getting sidetracked again, aren’t I,” She asks no one in particular, “Go on then. What do you need?”

“Only a small favor.”

“You always say crap along those lines and then it’s something the exact opposite like ‘climb to Mt. Mei and tell Nalagrom and Baladeth to stop scaring the citizens,’ or ‘stop operations for today and defend the Fox Den from its annual storming by the Cross Tournament competitors for an extra wish.’”

“Hmm who knows?”

“You promise?”

“I—” her voice suddenly cracks, like a broken record. When it restores itself the tone is unusually altered. She sets down her glass to fully look Banafsaj in her eyes. “Seriously. Yes. This will only last for the day, and I know you won’t have trouble with it.”

“Your sincerity is new. Can you assure me this isn’t a trick?”

“This is something important. And like I said before I know you, you can handle this.”

“Taking over your barmaid duties so you can go and be irresponsible?” Banafsaj snickered, each word soaked in boiling frustration. She is still not convinced of this suddenly sincere Chiifu.

“No, it’s Miss X,” Chiifu appeals to Banafsaj, her voice suddenly rushed and absent of patience and a tricker’s tone, “Because she’s my daughter, I need someone to look after her while I work off my debt for the day. She gets lonely, and it would be terrible for her to feel like that on one of her favorite days of the year.”

“Oh,” Banafsaj pauses for a moment to come to her senses, focusing on the untouched glass of water in front of her. “Oh!” she says, “In that case of course I’ll accept!”

“Ah! Now really?” Chiifu’s voice returns to its usual teasing. She speaks fast enough to cover up a sigh of relief. “So enthusiastic! Usually you’re quite begrudging, and get grumpy afterwards.”

“Your daughter is much more tolerable than you.”

Her lips curve downward into an exaggerated frown, “Awww... am I really sooooo baaaaad?”

“Well—” Banafsaj pauses, “Actually you’re... mildly pleasant. Mildly.”

“Aww, such a sweet girl!” She blows Banafsaj a kiss that her employee accepts, although extremely begrudgingly. “Now go along, you have places to be,” Chiifu says, “I’ll see you around sometime later, Crossguard!”

“I will too!” Banafsaj begins to make way towards the door, “You’ve spent enough time yapping. Get back to work!”

Saki pipes up from across the room “You heard the girl! Get back to it!” Chiifu sighs, proceeding to roll off her seat to continue with the mundanities of her job.

Part 4 - The Idol and the Doll

Once Banafsaj is outside the Fox Den's confines, it only takes a moment for her to find Miss. X leaning upon one of the patio's supporting beams. She is fixated upon a cherry blossom tree. Its branches are bare due to being out of season, but in spite of this Miss X keeps staring at the skinny, brown-colored thing. The idol seems to really enjoy it. Banafsaj interrupts, calling over to her, "Miss X! Miss X!" Immediately, she swivels to take notice of Banafsaj. Miss X immediately refocuses and begins to converse with Banafsaj, yet the enchantment in her eyes persists for a few seconds.

"Oh my gosh! Banafsaj!" she squeals, and teleports right in front of her, "You're finally competing in the main tournament. I can't believe it! I mean, in the minor leagues matches I commented on and as a Crossguard you were kicking some serious butt! But like, no one from the minor leagues is ever automatically admitted into the Cross Tournament. The God-Eater sends out those invitations herself. Unless she..."

"You know it!"

"Why didn't you tell me sooner? Were you too shy, (no, being shy isn't you.) Was it because you wanted to keep up public appearances, or... or do you have a secret reason for being invited you can't tell anyone yet?" The idol closes the distance to Banafsaj with every theory, until she is practically breathing down the competitor's neck. Unable to help herself, Banafsaj giggles in response, finding herself warmed by Miss X's energy. "Tell me! Tell me!" Miss X cries.

"My reasons were the last two. First, the God-Eater likes to keep her brackets a secret until reveal day, It's irrational and disrespectful to disobey that simple request. As for the second," a smile of smugness comes across Banafsaj's face, "That's a secret too important to reveal so early into the tournament. As much as I hate lies, it spoils the drama!"

"Awww... is it really that bad?" Miss X doubts, "Well, you can always count on me to keep a secret!" She tries to shake Banafsaj by her suit's lapels. Upon contact, the hands simply phase through, rapidly moving back and forth in a little frustrated fury. "Seriously won't you tell?" Miss X asks.

"You are so lazy! Do the work yourself and figure it out!" Even if Banafsaj's retort is made in a jovial manner, the sharpness and force of her words cause Miss X's body and tone to reel back.

"Jeez, jeez! Mom's right, you really are a hardass! Anyways you know why I'm here, right?" Miss X lurches forward with one long step. "C'mon!" she says, motioning for Banafsaj to follow, which Banafsaj does absent of

hesitation. Both begin to wander the Crossroads's waking streets. "Since you gotta look after me while Mom works off her debt, what are we doing today? Nature walk, window shopping, something else? Do you like those or not like those?"

"Shopping. Not window shopping, actual shopping."

"Really? You'll let me buy something?"

"Within a modest budget," Banafsaj explains. From her pocket she flicks out a small wallet, half as thick as a deck of cards, made of ivory steel with an ebon-colored pattern on its front. The surface is so polished it gleams with a near-blinding sheen as she examines it. "But yes!" Banafsaj exclaims, "No worries! I have money, and it's a better use of our time than aimlessly wandering through the woods." Banafsaj uses the glove on her left hand to wipe a splotch of dust from the surface. In a single motion, she drops the container back into her pocket. "Being resourceful with my time is what I enjoy," Now usually I'd suggest something more productive and competitive like sparring but--

"I'm a hologram--"

"--So that's a non option. Hence my suggestion. Are you sure you are okay with it?"

"Totes! Better than window shopping," Miss X lets out a giggle, "So let's go already!" She speeds ahead of Banafsaj, who keeps pace without struggle.

"I know, I know!" Banafsaj bubbles, "Concern yourself with shopping, I will keep track of time."

Day consumes dawn. The light that shines upon the streets has expanded from fine trickles to engulf the Crossroads's Business District in a pale yellow glow that illuminates nearly every object under the sky, save for the occasional strips of shadow that remain. Maneuvering through the streets increases in difficulty. More vendors flock to their stands, customers flock to the vendors, and products flock to the customers. Within this network of four hundred thousand storefronts and shops arises a cacophony of chatter. It is only when Miss X begins to speak, not letting a minute of silence pass between them, that Banafsaj finds relief and focus amidst this chaos. Yes, focus is always possible in spite of the environment, but it is always easier when given a tangible task to work towards. Even conversation can be a task, for there is violence and conflict present in the clashing of words and the altercation of the psyche.

"Hey Banafsaj... Remember the party last night?"

"You mean that I remember not attending?" she concedes with confidence and snark.

"Yeah. I mean I remember. Mom got super drunk, and now she's stuck working off debt again."

Banafsaj snickers, "Expected."

“What I wanted to ask is that, cause you seemed like a super energetic social butterfly when I talked to you, like, more than I am! Like a girlboss, the sort of aristocratic socialite I see at fancy gatherings!” Miss X’s words go on, trailing off, but she refocuses, “Even with your hyper-uptight attitude. Wouldn’t you want to join the party to be around people? Improve your status? Have fun?”

“No.”

“What stopped you then? It was the alcohol, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. Drugs too, because shit’s legal in this place for some reason,” Banafsaj spits. “It is extremely, very, totally bad for me to be around too much of either. Second, I was working. You’re right, I’m social, but I have priorities too.” She scans the area for any good storefronts. None, so far. Keep moving forward and inward around this quadrant. This is where gift-adjacent items can be found.

Miss X groans out of contempt for Banafsaj, “You have to work on a Friday night? That sounds super miserable... Do you just want to stop and rest for the day? We don’t have to go out if you’re too tired!”

“To rephrase, I *wanted* to work. The CSD has a large project due by the final round that unfortunately, I will not see the product of. If I was tired, I would have sensibly chosen not to look after you and handed the responsibility off to one of my coworkers.”

“You need to learn how to have fun. Hang out with me another time, will you? And I bet the project’s a secret too isn’t it?”

“I assumed your mother told you, considering how the Chief’s capriciousness leads to her constantly handing out secrets like she’s an ice cream vendor in the middle of summer. Do you even like her?”

“Of course I do!” Unphased is the reply of Miss X. Her tone hasn’t changed one bit, in spite of the sensitivity the question carries. Banafsaj doesn’t stop inquiring.

“How?”

“I mean you are totally correct.” Miss X throws her hands up and pulls them back. “My mom is irresponsible, even as the God-Eater. You obviously know what she did last night! She’s done it hundreds of times. But.” She pauses for a moment, “But I still love her because my mom is a kind person to her core. She gave me life and a job I absolutely adore. She’s a good person, definitely not a good mom though! I definitely understand why you’re iffy with her.”

Banafsaj draws out a sigh, “Would you be so kind as to explain?”

“I was gonna get to that! I mean, you’re the God-Eater’s employee, and I’m her daughter. We want different things from her, and see her differently too! Different relationships, different standards and all.”

“Fair, fair. I just see her indulgences and hedonism as so impossibly...” Banafsaj pauses, stuck on her next word. “Frustrating! And I still cannot perceive how so few people agree with me on a flaw so universal.”

“We all do! Some of us just... handle it better than others. We respond differently to her.”

“Alright, alright. Now, where to?”

Part 5 - Confrontation

By midmorning, the Business District's crowd had swelled in mass so that maneuvering was not difficult anymore, but nearly impossible. Those with an absent mind and lack of strength would be swept up in the wave of people. Not a human wave, mind you. The species and culture that populated the Crossroads were so diverse, the average shop owner would encounter at least a hundred different types within an hour. It was the day of the Cross Tournament after all. Expecting such chaos was natural. People were in a rush to arrive at the Colosseum around the next few hours, vendors were in a rush to sell their marked-up products to the eager customers, and within the swarm, three brothers budged and dodged their way through the crowd. The largest among them was a bulky humanoid whose appearance was more dragon than human. While his orange-scaled body and green mane were quite visible, the rest of his body was covered in a modest beige trench coat along with black slacks. He looked at the human of his two brothers and asked, "So Hikaru! Think we'll be able to beat our first opponent?"

He responded, the younger human boy, "You bet Ryujin! Military-types are always all bark, no bite." This brother was much smaller than the Dragonaut. Despite his smaller stature, the boy's neon green-hair and jacket made him the most visible of the three. In front of the group he stood, leading both of his brothers through the Business District while making chatter.

"You sure about that?" Ryujin pointed out, maneuvering out of the way of a rat-anima carrying a basket of fruit upon their head, "She ain't military for no reason, Hikaru."

The third brother, not a human but a sizable drone a quarter meter in diameter in the shape of a white orb with a neon-green screen that displayed his face piped up. "I can affirm his suspicions. Banafsaj Safi is a fighter of exceptional strength." On the drone's side, the name "P.A.R.S.E.C" was inscribed.

"Oh really?" Hikaru retorted, swiveling around to look at Parsec, but taking his eyes off the path in the process and nearly hitting a pair of cherry-colored paper lanterns. "You got proof, or just tryin' to intimidate me?" he smirked, brushing his hair back while doing so.

"I should inform you that Banfasaj Safi is both a member of an elite military group associated with the Crossguards known as the Crossguards Special Division, and she has won two minor-league tournaments. Caution is advised around her. Combat-wise, that is. Apologies for the confusion miswording may have caused. Footage recovered from her minor-league tournament interviews indicates strong approachability, so long as she is not provoked."

“So. Now while I’d hate to disagree with your notion that she’s a better fighter than us, that would be lying, cause’ I got a few things she doesn’t. First is a need for my old life back. And the second is you guys! How is she gonna stop the Hoshi Bros. when they work side-by-side?”

A jovial laugh and mote of smoke bursts out of Ryujin, his fire-colored jaw bobbing up and down, “You know it otouto!”

Parsec responds too, “Affirmative!”

“She’s a despicable person anyways. A villain like any other. We gotta bring her to justice,” Hikaru seethes, a few harmless sparks of lime lightning bursting from his person “Banafie probably just wants to become uber-powerful or whatnot with the wish. World domination and all. Whatever it is, her wish won’t be anything good for anyone.” Hikaru continues on through the crowd, literally pulsating with anger.

Parsec beeps, “Hikaru. Are you sure that Banafsaj is one of the soldiers from the attack?”

Hikaru begins to respond, but when he hears his brother trying to do the same thing, the boy lets him do the explaining. “From what I can remember of the attack,” he goes on, “One of the soldiers we fought wore a distinct white mask with a black flower engraved on it. Not only does Banafsaj have the same mask on the profile pictures posted on the bracket board, but her abilities manifest in the form of lotus flowers too.”

“Don’t forget her description in the brackets said somethin’ about her being a ‘violet pyromancer.’ Same color of the fire when we fought her all those months ago,” Hikaru adds as he leads the group into a mildly less dense plaza inside the business district where he can just barely see from one edge to the other.

Suddenly, Parsec flies in front of Hikaru and prompts a question, “Curious. Hikaru, what would you do if she were in the same room with you?”

“Well I’d knock her lights out and…” Hikaru attempts to finish his sentence, but stops while speaking. Parsec flies out of the way to let him see. There is Banafsaj, by the side of a nondescript old man. Both are situated in front of a stall labeled “The Hourglass.” Most of the conversation comes from Banafsaj, with the old man occasionally nodding, speaking, or pointing. Eventually their conversation ends when Banafsaj retrieves a small charm from a basket too high for the old man to reach. She exchanges a few last words with the old man before he heads off. Banafsaj loiters around for a little bit, seeing as there are no customers there. As no one is in line, she begins to chat up the shopkeeper.

“She seems… super nice?”

“That soldier still has crimes she has to be brought to justice for!”

“You make a strong point brother, but,” he extends his gigantic orange claw toward Banafsaj and the marketplace, “look at her, and look around you.”

“I’m lookin’ and I see the woman who nearly murdered me and my family! Your point?”

“Is this really the best place and time to be picking fights, especially before our round with her? And are you sure she was doing this willingly? Soldiers don’t have the freedom of us vigilantes to act on their moral whims. They got orders to follow, allegiances to uphold, and a reputation to keep. Hikaru, I know what she did to our family shouldn’t be taken lightly but this aint our place to judge.”

“Aniki.” Hikaru faces his older brother. His eyes pulsate neon green, and every word he speaks is laced with equal amounts of conviction and electric violence. Taking a step forward, he looks Ryujin in the eyes. “You’re forgetting’ that I became a vigilante for a reason, to give people the justice I was denied when I was framed for the murder. If you think I plan on ever going back on that promise, think again.” Hikaru turns from his brothers, and strides towards Banafsaj, currently preoccupied with the shopkeep.

Ryujin hollers, “Hikaru! Seriously, otouto! stop!”

Ignoring the cries from his brother, Hikaru barks at Banafsaj, “Soldier-lady? The hell did you do to my brothers?” An attempted punch from Hikaru is easily caught by Banafsaj, aware of his presence thanks to the incessant shouting. Hikaru attempts to throw a few more, but Banafsaj maneuvers out of the way.

“And what the hell are you doing to me? Assaulting people you just met in the street in public?”

“We’ve already met. You heard what I said, and I know you ain’t forgotten! What the hell did you do to my brothers?” Hikaru struggles to break free of Banafsaj’s grip. Unfortunately, she has superior strength.

“How am I supposed to respect the questions of a justice-junkie, image-obsessed vigilante who has internalized the idea he can resolve every problem with his fists and a dash of rushed judgment?” She releases Hikaru’ shoving the boy a meter back. “Get a hold of yourself Hikaru!” Banafsaj shouts.

“I’ll bring you to justice, you hear villain?”

“And on with your delusions! I am no villain, I am a soldier who fights for a universal future!”

“That’s what they all say. Doesn’t mean your wish’s better than mine!”

“Then what is your wish boy?”

“I used to be a successful idol. An inspiration to the people but had to lose it all when a band member’s assassination resulted in me being framed for the murder,” Hikaru enunciates full-heartedly, “I lost everything, and half the public still sees me as their nemesis.” He breathes in, and out. “No one else shouldn’t have to suffer the same unfair fate! It’s why I fight for justice as a vigilante. It’s why I fight in this tournament to wish for my old life back. I vowed to ensure that under my eye, no one could ever get away, and I am not going to let that promise break with you Banafsaj!” The final words coming from him resound like thunder from a storm. Each is booming in volume, and forceful in tone. Banafsaj wastes no time rebutting though.

“What a selfish wish!” she denounces through barred teeth. “You have no idea what it means to have nothing! You may have been shunned but you still had the privilege of food, shelter, clothing, and employment. Your old life denies your success as a crime-fighter and wastes such power on nostalgia. You know nothing! You know…” Banafsaj takes a few seconds to pause, to look Hikaru in the eyes. Eyes of pain and violence where she can see herself in their reflection. Turning away, Banafsaj utters a few last words, “Forgiveness cannot always be earned. Move on Hikaru,” and almost leaves the scene.

But this does not stop Hikaru. He launches himself at Banafsaj, causing her to swivel around in self-defense, “Now listen here you– ” only for Hikaru to be interrupted and dragged away by the hand of Ryujin. He takes a moment to chastise the kid.

“Hikaru, fellow brother!” He sets the kicking and screaming Hikaru, and gets down on one knee to look his little brother in the eye. “Now, is that any way to treat our honorable combatant for today’s match, who, up until now, has been quite the polite young lady to the old man and vendor over there?”

“Come on! She almost–”

“Apologies, Banafsaj Safi.” Ryujin’s voice bellows over that of his brother’s. When he tries to look at Banafsaj, a burning sensation of unease washes over him, because he knows the woman in front of them almost killed them in a past time. Fortunately, the words come out fine. “My brother is a fine lad and an excellent fighter, but he is as blunt as a hammer at the worst of times. Do you need anything further?”

“No, but thank you!” she has to stop herself to remember something very important, “Oh, Ryujin! I completely forgot, I should be formally introducing myself! Banafsaj Safi, PARMA Multi-Dimensional Operative and Ascendancy War Combatant, currently stranded and now a member and co-founder of the Crossroads Special Division or CSD. It is a

pleasure to be fighting a Dragonaut as strong as you Ryujin!” She extends her right hand. Ryujin accepts, as both give a firm, proper shake. Hikaru rolls his eyes.

“Same with me, Safi... Ryujin Hoshi. The former Dragonaut King of Regum Caverns before its annihilation and reconstruction. Currently a part-time vigilante working alongside my brother, Hikaru Hoshi, and part-time professional wrestler Bravagon.”

Parsec's voice butts in. “Boss. May I introduce myself in addition to you?”

“Ah Parsec! I'm sorry. Go ahead bro!” Ryujin says.

“My thanks. I am P.A.R.S.E.C. Personal Artificial Recording System Elevating Camera. As a part of the Hoshi brothers, I work to film their vigilante work and Hikaru's streaming.”

Banafsaj waves and smiles at Parsec, “A pleasure to meet you!”

“I send the same regards,” Parsec replies as he rotates up and down, mimicking nodding.

Ryujin says, “Now Safi, is that all you need?”

“Oh, yeah! Sorry, sorry. Say, did you have somewhere you needed to be going?”

“Nowhere in particular Safi. My apologies from me and my brother for disturbing you. No worries though, he'll blow off the steam later today.”

“Apology accepted! Now then, we have places to be and things to do. See you Ryujin!”

“See you. I am in eager wait of our confrontation in the Colosseum”

“I too, am quite excited,” Parsec says.”

Ryujin agrees with the two, although quite disenthused, “Yeah, same here...”

Banafsaj leaves the trio and fades back into the swarm of customers outside of the little plaza. Due to the God-Eater's lack of urban planning skills, pathing back to Miss X is a difficult endeavor. One that involves asking for directions, constant backtracking, and painfully slow movement. Eventually Banafsaj finds the food distinct, and then Miss X alternating between looking around for Banafsaj and appreciating a series of cakes on display at some hole-in-the-wall bakery every few seconds. She calls out to Banafsaj first.

“Banafsaj! You were gone for a while and I was getting so worried you had gotten lost! I wanted to look for you but that would make finding me harder if you were already done. But you're back now though!” she beams. “Didya buy anything nice for yourself?”

“No, but...” Banafsaj retrieves a little flower pin from her pocket. A white rose made with light-pink linework. Its spotless figure shone and glistened under the sun. “I have this for you! A good luck charm, a blessed white rose! Symbol of purity and youth!”

“OHMYGOSH OHMYGOSH!!! This is so adorable! I’ll be keeping this and...” as Miss X’s hand comes over the pin, it disappears and re-emerges as attached to her outfit. “THANK YOU BANAFSAJI!!! Y’know, when mom told me you were babysitting I was initially skeptical. I mean I had seen you before, a bunch of times, and interviewed you once, but never really got to know you. But...”

“But what?”

“I ended up liking you!”

“Why?”

“Because you’re kind!” Miss X smiles, and asks Banafsaj, “Don’t forget that, will you?”

Banafsaj pauses, and then responds, beaming, “I will not.”

Part 6 - Preparations

Adroitly, Banafsaj's equipment is laid out on a large wooden bench covered in her black and white tarp. Each item is organized by weight, and then further broken down into their largest parts for a final inspection. She cleaned her assault rifle the day before, and the components right now show no signs of wear that would cause jamming. Nearby are five full clips of ammunition, and an extra containing of antimagic bullets. The 2D magical focus might have two of its six thousand stands broken, but it is scheduled for a fix at the end of the week. Such is a minor hindrance to her strategy. Her knife still spins when Banafsaj gives it a twirl in her palm like it used to five years ago, the day she entered the warzone. Her other melee tools, a rapier and heater shield, were recently taken out of the armory. Ekkehard inspected those for her, and she has done an excellent job. Both flash a burning white with a minimal, standard delay when activated and deactivated. Her two explosives for the day are too intricate to take apart, but are brand new and thus, almost guaranteed to be totally functional. Everything is ready. Banafsaj begins to pack, and analyzes her surroundings.

The Cross Colosseum's starting area is a truly unique location. Underneath a gigantic circular field of sand upon which combatants duel for honor, glory, wealth, and power, is a room dedicated to the legacy they leave behind and all it holds. From end to end, the cylindrical chamber spans just under eighty meters in diameter, composed of thousands of parallel boards of dark oak with golden gildings and ruby-red details. Its size is only facilitated thanks to a generous dose of magic, likely thanks to the God-Eater herself. Both the Hoshi Brothers and Banafsaj are at opposite ends of the room, each given a small area for practice with a rudimentary training equipment.

She looks over at the pair, sparring in preparation of their round. Hikaru assaults his brother with a flurry of strikes from wristblades made of neon lime lightning, each blow infused with power that Ryujin can use against them with sparring pads infused with magical barriers. His strikes are straightforward. They only come in the form of forward thrusts or arcing slashes. Even if the form is rudimentary, their variance and shear rate of attack are important to consider coming into the fight. Every minute or so, they stop as Ryujin sets down the pads, and the two talk for another minute before returning to sparring. Each cycle, Hikaru becomes more disgruntled, occasionally pointing to Banafsaj or staring at the woman, with a particular focus on her arsenal on the tarp. Simple analysis indicates Hikaru's temper shortens. It is only a matter of time before the brothers desync during combat and they are left open to be picked apart. She returns her focus to the arsenal, and begins to pack. The tournament will begin in twenty minutes. Five to pack, ten to meditate, and five to await engagement.

The room's perimeter is encompassed by at least one hundred symbols and statues that honor past combatants and iconic moments forged in steel and brought to life with exceptional craftsmanship. Standing in the chamber's center is one statue that towers above the rest. Madame God-Eater herself. Banafsaj always notices it during her preparations. There the image of her former enemy, and current employer stands, and it is... mundane.

Yes, she can appreciate the decades of metallurgy techniques and artistic innovations that have led to the composition of such a monument. She notices how the gleam indicates it has been polished within the past week. Banafsaj knows the hefty tax the madame would have to impose on the Crossroads just to hire the necessary people to begin and plan this project, let alone finish it. Despite this, she cannot help herself but to chuckle under its ire. An image of power created for a woman of weakness.

Everything is packed now. Four minutes have elapsed. It is time to prepare the mind for violence.

The area outside the training grounds is uncomplicated by the presence of many objects. After taking a few breaths, she settles down into a cross-legged position, resting against the floor. Banafsaj eyes dial in on the opposition. There is nothing but her, them, and the greater goal of the Ascendancy War above both.

Banafsaj empties herself of every emotion. Joy, sadness, envy, ego, fury, and all the rest have their value calculated, and are set aside regardless until the only thing that remains in her mind are the opposition and her twofold goals. The selfish goal of self-excellent, and the selfless goal of ensuring the best future for the most through the Ascendancy War. Both can only be accomplished through violence. Conflict breeds excellence. Conflict breeds results. From confidence all that is important in this world is derived.

All emotions return. The human psyche descends into a cold madness without them, but each must have the careful eye of a rational mind to moderate them, lest these emotions turn against their wielder. The two that may reign are the marriage of criticism and passion. Both drive one another and the vessel they are in unto their goal with an unending mortal fury no deity has nor may ever suppress. And there she is, in front of her rivals, above the dirty waters of her past, rising to meet the future above with every victory, a Lotus that blossomed from blood and sustains itself by such nourishing liquid. She must not be stopped. She must seize victory by the throat. She is the blood lotus, the violent flower she has been named after, and the icon of perfect, excellent violence.

Banafsaj rises from her position and places every piece of equipment onto her person. Of course, she needs to test something before returning to the platform. Five minutes remain. That is more than enough time. The magically infused

sparring pad is mounted upon the training dummy, and Banafsaj makes one, two, three paces backward. Placing the synthetic-fabric palm of her right hand against the rapier's handle, she looks it in the eye. A straight, direct shot with no complications to concern herself with. Banafsaj draws, thrusts, and rams the point of the needle into the center of the barrier. With each second the rapier spends inside of it, the barrier pulsates and warps under the stress of the rapier's white-hot energy. After roughly two and a half seconds, her target bursts. She withdraws her burning rapier, shuts the mechanism down, and stows it.

With each step up to the center of the dome, where two parallel platforms in front of the God-Eater's statue await their competitors, Banafsaj's armor pulsates but never clanks. Thanks to expert design and the usage of extremely fine chainmail that dampens noise, Banafsaj's gait is only accompanied by the sound of her boots coming down upon the hollow floor in an orchestrated, rhythmic fashion. Her protection comes from the large, smooth plates of black alloy that line her vitals, accented by glowing violet runes for various benefits. Banafsaj faces the now geared-up Hoshi Bros. Hikaru is in the same outfit as before, just with a pair of green goggles to cover the eyes. Ryujin's trench coat is now off, revealing a black tank top with a white spike pattern lining the sides and some simple navy slacks. Both get a good look at each other, before Hikaru speaks up.

"You won't be stopping us from earning back what I lost Banafie!" Hikaru flashes a smug grin, and Ryujin follows up with a jovial smile. Banafsaj responds in kind.

Banafsaj speaks, "No." Her face displays no expression, now covered with her own personal mask. A flat, pure white disk, embedded with the top-down night-colored silhouette of a Lotus with razor-sharp petals connected to the rest of her head via white wrappings. "I will," she declares.

Time is up. The platforms lurch upwards, sending their respective parties towards the arena's open field.

Violence begins now.

Part 7 - First Round

“LADIES, GENTLEMEN, AND EVERYONE IN BETWEEN, IT IS A BEAUTIFUL DAY OUTSIDE! THE SUN IS MIDWAY THROUGH THE SKY, THE AIR FRESH AND CRISP, AND THE HEAT OF SUMMER IS AT ITS PEAK! THESE DAYS ARE MY FAVORITE, BEST ENJOYED WITH A BIT OF RELAXATION AND A WHOLE LOTTA VIOLENCE!”

The crowd’s howls and thunders of absolute ecstasy and excitement at the coming duel become exponentially audible to Banafsaj, Hikaru, and Ryujin. Their platforms are only mere moments away from the Cross Colloseum’s Surface now.

“AND I’D LOVE TO GIVE THE WARMEST POSSIBLE WELCOME TO THE CONTESTANTS FOR OUR QUARTER FINALS FOR THIS YEAR!” Within five seconds, the rivals find themselves emerging from the belly of the colosseum to meet their audience, announcer, and battlefield. Swiveling around on her right foot, Banafsaj evaluates her surroundings. The Colosseum itself is intimately familiar in its architecture. Obviously it most resembles modern arenas used for sporting events, concerts, and other spectacles, being one gigantic ring of staggered bleachers. Two floors of at least one hundred rows house the crowd, broken down into twelve sections each with the use of colossal red pillars. The God-Eater has taken the generous measures to install a roof over each section, modeled after ancient Japanese kawara-style tiling. This building is sixty meters tall. Small compared to where she comes from, but it is truly enormous relative to the rest of the Crossroad’s quaint architecture. As she turns, Banafsaj finds Hikaru and Ryujin waving to the crowd. As Hikaru pulls out his chest, he flashes electric green, inciting further cheers. No truesight is required to know that both brothers are rapidly powering up thanks to their Viralium Artes. Such techniques’ potency are based on fame. While she would aim to end this fight quickly, that is not a guaranteed option due to the structure and durability Ryujin provides to the team. Miss X floats above on a custom platform, just waiting for Hikaru to finish his stunt before she gives the introductions. Hikaru and Ryujin first, then Banafsaj, as if to paint the first a hero and the second their rival or villain. A common pattern with Miss X’s announcements. Any second now...

Miss X hollers to the Crowd, and teleports down to Hikaru and Ryujin to point the audience’s attention at them. “HAILING FROM A FUTURE EARTH WHERE POWER AND FAME ARE INTERTWINED THANKS TO VIRALIUM, LET’S GIVE IT UP FOR THE BROTHER-BROTHER DUO OF HIKARU AND RYUJIN HOSHI.” The crowd screams in response. “HIKARU IS A FORMER IDOL TURNED CRIME-FIGHTER AND STREAMER AFTER

A TRAGIC INCIDENT, HE UTILIZES HIS NOVALIAN FORM TO CHANNEL THE VERY POWER OF THE STARS IN COMBAT. FLASHY LIKE LIGHTNING, AS BRIGHT AS THE STARS, AND THE BOY SURE MOVES AND HURTS LIKE BOTH!” Another cheer. “AS FOR HIS BROTHER, RYUJIN, HE’S AN EXCITING GUY! FORMER KING OF THE REGNUM CAVERNS AND CURRENT KAIJU DRAGONAUT WRESTLER, A BEAST OF MUSCLE, SCALE AND FLAME!” Ryujin flexes his arms for the Crowd, before rearing up to launch a massive burst of searing flame into the air, only further amplifying the crowd’s energy. “LET’S GIVE IT UP FOR THE HOSHI BROTHERS!”

Now she is up. Banafsaj switches from looking at the Hoshi brothers to looking at the crowd, presenting herself in her most excellent form before the masses. Miss X teleports directly above her, and begins to recite her spiel. “AND FROM PARTS UNKNOWN, A PREVIOUS VICTOR OF TWO MINOR-LEAGUE TOURNAMENTS AND MEMBER OF OUR VERY OWN CROSSGUARD’S SPECIAL DIVISION, THE MISS BANAFSAJ SAFI!” Banafsaj keeps her introduction simple. She bows, hugging her left arm around the waist and the right one backwards. This will display a mixture of aggressive smugness and polite composure. Miss X blinks lower to level herself with Banafsaj. “A SOLDIER WISHING FOR AID IN A WAR TO ASCEND BEYOND THE DEITIES HER FELLOW MORTALS HAVE CONQUERED, SHE COMES ARMED TO THE TEETH WITH TOP-OF-THE-LINE EQUIPMENT, ESOTERIC MAGICAL TECHNIQUES THAT CAN NULLIFY ENEMY CAPABILITIES, AND TACTICAL PROWESS GARNERED FROM YEARS OF EXPERIENCE AND TRAINING ALIKE.” Keeping her eyes mostly on the crowd, Banafsaj quickly glances toward Ryujin and Hikaru to examine their responses, “LET’S GIVE A VIOLENT WELCOME TO BANAFSAJ SAFI!” The younger brother has a mixture of determination in his face, but an overly exaggerated expression is a mark of masked fear. Ryujin is substantially more calm. Confident and concentrating but on what? No matter, it could be any one of a million things. Banfsaj begins to turn away from the crowd. Without warning and with haste, Miss X teleports in front of her for a fraction of a second. She whispers, “My mother’s blessings be upon you. Good luck Safi!” before returning to her platform above the ring’s center. Ryujin and Hikaru mirror Banafsaj’s movements, finding their starting position on the arena’s opposite end. The youthful and bubbly voice of Miss X booms across the arena. Expediently, she clarifies the rules for the crowd, “THE CONDITIONS FOR WINNING ARE SIMPLE AND UNCHANGED. THE BANAFSAJ AND HIKARU ARE THEIR TEAM’S “FIGHTERS.” EACH CARRY THEIR RESPECTIVE TEAM’S TAG. WIN BY EITHER HOLDING THE TAG FOR MORE THAN THIRTY SECONDS, OR INCAPACITATING THE FIGHTER OF THE ENEMY TEAM.” Pausing for dramatic effect, Miss X stops her speech as

dilapidated structures of stone and broken earth rise up from the ground. “UNFORTUNATELY, MY LITTLE BROTHER TENKI IS BEING A LITTLE PIECE OF WORK TODAY. HE HASN’T SHOWED UP FOR THE PAST HOUR, AND IN DOING SO, HAD DENIED ME OF THE EXCITEMENT AN EXTRA DIMENSIONAL ARENA BRINGS WITH IT.” A few groans here and there crawl out of the crowd, but none ever reach the volume of their previous cheers. “I HAD TO GO THROUGH ALL THE TROUBLE OF NAGGING OUR STAFF TO PULL OUT THIS DUSTY HUNK OF JUNK. IT MIGHT NOT BE A LOT, BUT AT LEAST IT’S BETTER THAN THE FLAT GROUND WE HAD IN YEARS PAST...” Miss X rambles. “ENOUGH OF THAT THOUGH. NOW THEN CROWD, I WANNA HEAR IF YOU’RE READY FOR A SHOW!”

Banafsaj makes note of the terrain around her. The center is a clear dueling ground for melee combatants with minor obstructions coming in the form of hills, sand dunes, broken walls and an unusually high amount of pillars. Enveloping the outer ring is an area where the ruins are at their most dense concentration. Broken buildings, streets, pillars, and walls of a lost era crafted from simple sandstone and simple men are consumed by the ground here. Useful cover against Ryujin. A hunting ground for Hikaru. Fighting there or in the center yields major disadvantages. All she can count on is a strong defense and Hikaru’s arrogance from their talk earlier. Although inciting such emotional instability in him was not a tactic conceived beforehand nor during their conversation, it may be an exploitable aid now.

“ALRIGHT GUYS, I WANNA HEAR EVERY SINGLE ONE OF YOU LOVELY PEOPLE COUNTING DOWN WITH ME! ALRIGHT?” The crowd burst out again in agreement, their voice rising to volumes higher than it did during Banafsaj’s entrance. Miss X continues, her excitement endless in spite of her constant commentary. “HERE WE GO!”

“THREE!”

Banafsaj picks her focus and activates the gauntlet her shield is mounted on, evoking both to activate. Like a bomb going off, the shield, initially a series of stacked metal plates resting upon her gauntlet, fold outwards and becomes enraptured by violet strands of energy that stabilize into a pulsating, translucent field. The focus is more subtle. With a simple gesture, it goes from stationary in her palm to floating in her hand’s grasp, the many metal bands spinning and contorting to form hundreds of shapes at once. All this she does whilst staring down her adversaries.

“TWO!”

Hikaru dons his Novalian form, attaining a status granted by his heritage, that of the lightning and the stars themselves. A flurry of green lightning takes hold of his body, with Hikaru emerging from the cocoon of light now made of raw lightning given form. Ryujin only takes a breath in. Both brothers enter their respective combative stances, although not without sending a fist bump and whisper each other's way. Hikaru gets a little low to the ground, whereas Ryujin stands tall and firm. Hikaru keeps his hands close and inward facing, Ryujin keeps one arm stretched outward towards Banafsaj, the other near his chest.

“ONE!”

Gazing into each others' eyes, the combatants have a good look at one another one last time. Banafsaj seeks the crackling lightning rotating around the irises of Hikaru. Round and round they go. The streaks glow like little stars, always wanting to shine more and be more but perpetually constrained within the loop they are stuck in. Hikaru returns the glance, seeing only Banafsaj's mask. Despite the dust wind constantly kicking up, the porcelain-hued surface is utterly unblemished. On top of that pure and bright sea of white rests the lotus icon, the one he remembers so well during the incursion. This is his enemy, the symbol of just another soldier, but... no. Despite her unyielding elegance and violence, she is just another villain that has to go.

Just barricades standing in front of goals, the both of them.

The crowd's roar ascends to a melody of sheer, overwhelming emotion.

Perhaps the God-Eater is on her side this time. Who knows.

But in times of need she can always rely on the power of the trained mortal psyche.

Such is the power of her violence.

“FIGHT!”

Surging with the fame the crowd's hype has brought them, Hikaru and Ryujin approach Banafsaj from their end of the arena's barren center. The Dragonaut digs down and burrows through the earth, making for an inexorable advance safe from most ranged attacks. Solid cover is granted by the pillars' height as Ryujin leaps between each. Not ready to back up just yet, and choosing to defend rather than attack, Banafsaj spins two large rings of fire around her vicinity to use as cover. Her next action is to focus her combustion magic on a single point; in front of Ryujin's tunnel. Ryujin emerges close to the second fire ring's border. With him comes a series of eruptions of magma and small quakes, too far from Banafsaj to do her any harm.

High above, Banafsaj knows Hikaru approaches. Utilizing her last seconds before being assaulted in melee, Banafsaj stows the focus and draws her rapier in defense, just in time to block a flurry of blows from Hikaru by combining her shield's defense and the space her rapier creates. Hikaru reiterates what he said in the marketplace only hours ago, "WHY'D YOU DO IT BANAFSAJ?" The boy makes a simple feint and strike, easily avoided with a simple airburst at Banafsaj's feet. Two meters to the left the small blast tosses her, creating generous space between her and Hikaru's strike. Ryujin begins to break the earth to make his way through the rings of fire and join the fight. Banafsaj knows she has a little more time though.

"YOU GOT AWAY IN THE MARKETPLACE, BUT NOT HERE!" Hikaru immediately closes the gap between him and Banafsaj, positioning the soldier between himself and a good distance in front of Ryujin. Suddenly, his body explodes in a flash of Viralium energy. "VRAINING STABS!" He wastes no time following with a flurry of strikes from his electric wrist blades made of the very matter that composes his body, landing a few hits on Banafsaj's armor despite her strong defense, only to follow up with a leap, a shout, "CROSS-POINT!" and finally an X-shaped slash. As Hikaru comes crashing down on Banafsaj, he exclaims with vigor and soul, "I AIN'T GOING TO LET MY JUSTICE REMAIN HALF-DONE? YOU HEAR SOLDIER GIRL? I'M TAKING MY LIFE BACK, WITH MY OWN DAMN HANDS!" Only by devoting all her efforts towards defense and dodging does Banafsaj retain the composure to narrowly resist the final attack's knockback, even if it brutally scars her shield.

Banafsaj hears Ryujin behind her, calling out to Hikaru to ready another series of attacks. Fortunately, her defensive play has left Banafsaj with ample strength to step to the side, out of the arms of Ryujin attempting a piledriver grab, finishing with an airburst at her feet that sends the soldier over her ring of fire and behind a cluster of ruined walls and other structures at the arena's edge. Breathing room and cover. The two components necessary to proceed with her strategy. Banafsaj reaches for her belt, and sets up her next move.

On the other side, Hikaru witnesses Banafsaj escape his blade. Every attack was one she narrowly missed or just so happened to avoid. Every strike was met with footwork and skill even he had trouble keeping up with. But Hikaru knew that behind that wall, Banafsaj was cowering in fear. Now that the Hoshi bros had turned the tables, Hikaru felt the lightning surge of instinct in both his body, mind, and starry soul that he had to strike to bring this evildoer to justice. Heaving with rage and emboldened by ego, Hikaru flared up once more, readying his next move only seconds after Banafsaj had escaped. She could not be allowed to win this tournament. It was now or never.

Witnessing his brother's aggression, Ryujin sees he has to stop it before his brother makes a poor move. He speaks with clear conscience despite the exhaustion. "Wait Otouto. Chill out." He bore a smile, flashing through the dust and ash, "Nafie gives us time as she's recovering. Let's join up and tag-team—"

"THIS IS PAYBACK FOR WHAT YOU DID TO US BANAFSAJ SAFI!" With unseen but not unexpected might, Hikaru's body swells with Viralium Energy, turning him into a spinning blade composed of bright green electricity that shines in a manner akin to a star amidst the dusty and arid terrain. "ROLLING METEOR!" Instantly, and easily, Hikaru barrels through the ruins in Banafsaj's general direction. His concern is action, not precision, and for this Hikaru will pay dearly.

He barrels through the first wall, a second, and stops at the third with an explosive finish that summons a sizable wave of dust and breaks apart all nearby sandstone; although, the explosion belongs not to Hikaru. This is Banafsaj's moment. Immediately, Hikaru's attack is diminished in power as his rolling body comes into contact with a shield of black and white Lotus powers engulfed in bright violet fire. Next is a gigantic explosion of violet flame originating from Hikaru as Banafsaj's flaming shield overloads his body with excess power. All the Viralium energy stored inside him bursts open, leaving Hikaru on the brink of consciousness and unconsciousness.

But Banafsaj is not finished with him.

Hikaru feels the mine before he sees it. The agonizing and humiliating sensation of having your body, your identity, the energy that composes a Novalian torn to one thousand shreds and scattered about in ten thousand different directions. Struggling with all of his willpower, all of his drive, is no use against whatever creation from the depths of hell Banafsaj deployed moments before he crashed through the wall. Hikaru knows what has happened, or at least he has a rough and confident understanding. With the systems that compose his body unraveled he'll have to pull them together. But there is so much to do, and Banafsaj is right there, standing over his limp and flickering body with her knife in hand.

Is this it?

Before Banafsaj Hikaru lies incapacitated. The soldier aims for Hikaru's throat; specifically, the tag strung around his neck. Her hand shoots forward, surging with volatile passion and force at the sight of her enemy's vulnerability. Tremors and the sound of claws breaking down stone reverberate through the earth. Time is short. Tugging the necklace outward, her second hand, grasping the knife, comes down upon his throat. Ryujin is too close to perform more than a single strike, unless Banafsaj were to tank a hit from him. Would that be worth it? To drive the knife, her tool of violence,

into its rightful home? She knew the answer to this question was yes, but at the same time, it put her vitality at risk. For one moment, her weapon stops to taste the flesh of Hikaru's neck, and then moves to lacerate the wire in two. She needs to reposition to fight Ryujin. Now. Not waste time with these carnal desires.

With a voice whose volume was amplified no longer with jovial glee but with vengeance and uncontrollable rage, Ryujin roared the name of his technique, "LAVA CASCADE!" The ground spit out molten stone, glowing ash that obscured the approach of a Dragonaut wrestler ready not to have fun, but to fight for his brother's sake. Even if he had nothing to gain personally, it would mean Hikaru would have his old life back. Perhaps that would be enough. Or perhaps Banafsaj would be right, and it would be a poor choice departing from his crime-fighting lifestyle. Regardless, it would be an act of dishonor to leave his brother's wish unfulfilled.

Pain blasted from Ryujin's right knee throughout the entirety of his right leg. Focused rifle fire shattered his scales and broke the skin. Every single nerve ending burst and sang a chorus of agony. Banafsaj approached from a pillar. Down she came, high above the zone of magma and flame his entrance had created, descending with both shield and rapier in hand, like some sort of violet, perverted angel of death and fire. But the pain was only more fuel for his rage. Ryujin let the searing sensation of multiple alloy shells become a driving force to finish Banafsaj. Crimson blood draining faster by the second was no hindrance. He was a man of honor, and someone who appreciated a fight, especially when it came down to situations like this, to the wire.

Rapidly, Viralium energy surged into his arm, concentrated upon his fist. Banafsaj was in front of him, an open target. He leaned back, lunged forward with his fist extended. "INFERNAL STRAIGHT!" Ryujin shouted, as he whiffed and felt his leg become consumed with numbness. Banafsaj sidestepped the advance and sliced through his damaged knee with the rapier.

He came to his senses after tumbling forward. Ryujin's face laid upon the ground, choking on residual ash and dust. Every move made to avenge his brother had been so infused with rage, he had forgotten basic combat principles. The approach from the earth was easily predictable. With how much noise he had made and how much time he had let Banafsaj prepare behind the wall, it was no wonder she was positioned on the pillar ready to punish with her rifle. And going all out on offense with a straight to finish her was simply stupid. Banafsaj was a master of general combat, and weaving in and out of an opponent's strikes was no challenge to someone with her agility, even more true when facing a charge-based fighter such as himself.

Upon the ground, Banafsaj's footsteps grew in volume, coming one after the other in perfect rhythm. His attempt to counterattack with a swipe is met with another burst of rifle fire and broken skin around the bicep. Ryujin tries to stand up, but his right leg is completely dead. The numbness is beginning to spread from his leg throughout this torso.

Hikaru always told him that hope never died. Was this where his Otouto was wrong? And then he saw. In a sense yes, the wish would likely not be theirs after Banafsaj was done with him and won thanks to stealing Hikaru's tag. In a sense, no, because Banafsaj was right. Hikaru was a good kid, a good brother, a good hero already. He did not need his old life back. He had a beautiful one right here. Ryujin's eyelids shut over his irises of yellow, no longer strained with fury. "You were a remarkable and honorable combatant," he remarks. "Good luck in the rest of the tournament." He closes his eyes, lets the feeling of nothingness overcome every sensation. Then finally, darkness.

Ryujin is knocked out. As long as Hikaru does not regain consciousness and steal the tag back from her belt in the next eight seconds, Banafsaj would be the victor. She needs a fresh magazine if he does return to conscience though. With the expediency of an expert, Banafsaj pulls back the pins on her rifle. The installed ammunition fell to the floor. Banafsaj quickly finds her special magazine, the antimagic one, and shoves it back in. In doing so, she opens her vents, letting the heat nearly breaking her body apart cool down.

When she was finished, satisfied with her preparedness, Banafsaj turned to where Hikaru had been incapacitated, and found a green blur streaking past her, crouched down, so before she even had a chance to react, Hikaru's tag was back in its rightful hands.

Part 8 - Fire and Thunder

This is what she gets?

After all she went through, after every element of the strategy was orchestrated and all possibilities accounted for to ensure flexibility in the face of an ever-changing environment, a sixteen-year old boy facetanks an incredibly advanced antimagic explosive along with some of the most potent defensive magic an adept such as her can bring to manifest? Magic derived from the identity of a woman whose persona embodies fire, and magic derived from violence self-excellence and self-restraint, given the form of the lotus flower, pure and beautiful blooming in the dirtiest waters?

But the fight is not over. Banafsaj trembles, not with fear, but with unrelenting passionate violence. She came this far. She will end Hikaru's tournament run now. No one must be allowed to stand so long as they oppose the war effort. Suffering must end. She knows this intimately. So much more than Hikaru ever will. This is not a presumption based on bias, this is true fact. She brings back to memory the waters of faith, the deep hole, the endless tables, and the cot in armageddon. Mortals must suffer to remain alive, but to let such atrocities exist is a crime. Every body counts. Banafsaj will not let hers go to waste.

Hikaru faces her, amidst clouds of debris and piles of rubble resulting from the previous skirmish in the ruins. It is as if a dueling ground has been carved out for them. He is burning, quite literally, like a diamond in the rough. Like a star above the desert. So much green electricity is sparking from his person, and the boy is glowing brighter than ever before. From his body a thin wire of electricity is produced. Wrapping around the tag, it binds to Hikaru's body once again. Both stand, and they are battered, not broken, rising above the destruction among them with their swords in hand to duel once again for the wish and their salvation. In Hikaru's hands are twin blades extending from the tops of his wrists. Frankly an impractical design (a sword in the hand is infinitely more maneuverable and thus, infinitely more lethal), but one he is adept with. Banafsaj's weapons are, of course, her rapier and heater shield. Practical. Ineffective against armor, but deadly on a fast, glass-body-fighter like Hikaru.

He laughs. The boy laughs. With a chuckle and jeer, Hikaru teases Banafsaj. "Too slow!" He exclaims. "You see, I'm no ordinary human I'm actually a Nov—"

"Shut your fucking mouth Hikaru," Banafsaj shrieks. "I know you're a Novalian. I know you were framed for a murderer you didn't commit. I know the reason you stand before me is because you are imbued by the energy of the

crowd, fame turned into Viralium energy, imbued into your body to support its form. I know who you are. And I know your wish should be put to better use. So don't say a word."

Hikaru bites back, "I lost everything when the murder happened! Do you-"

"You don't know what it means to have nothing." Banafsaj shuffles her stance, words bursting out by the dozen with a tone so harsh and hot it could shatter iron. "And what about your brother?" she inquires, causing the emotions on Hikaru's face to mix into some sort of fusion between guilt and rage, "Did you ever stop to think about him?"

Hikaru wants to fight, wishes he could rip through and rend Banafsaj's sorry armor and villainous body apart with his blades. But Ryujin, his dear brother, his partner in crime, his best buddy, his Aniki, his defender in the worst of times, his mentor, pal, and friend. So instead he stands, bladed hands outstretched in a low stance, readied to engage, but not necessarily wanting to. He irks out a response, "This is more... important..." but it sounds wrong, for the words are staggered, arrhythmic, and lack boldness. But Hikaru cannot back down. Banafsaj came this far, but he came further. Or did he. No. Just stop asking questions! Just fight Hikaru! Should the thoughts of your brother stop you from that?

Banafsaj responds to the vigilante's half-answer, "No. You know it is not more important. Your purpose is corrupt." She takes a step back, aligning her feet in a traditional L-shaped dueling stance. "You were born with your powers," Banafsaj declared, "I worked for and earned mine." She extends her shield towards Hikaru, setting her rapier back. "Come, fight me. Find your desire felled before my perfect violence, willpower given physical power, my passions and purity made manifest." Lotus flowers begin to bloom on Banafsaj's person. Hikaru responds, readying his own stance, shaking with power, rage, and likely nervousness too. Too many emotions to handle. "Come and fall." She attacks, violently, without hesitation.

"That won't happen so easily, soldier-girl!" Hikaru responds in kind. Both rush each other, Hikaru approaching substantially faster than Banafsaj, coming to blows in the center of this miniature arena. "But I gotta ask," he grunts while tumbling out of the way of a horizontal slash from Banafsaj, recovering out of range and too fast for her to follow, "Why'd you do it? Go so far to fuel a war?"

Momentarily, Banafsaj focuses on the movements of Hikaru. She answers the question with a single, blunt word, "Necessity." A flurry of flashes send discs composed of his bodily energy hurtle towards Banafsaj, followed up by an arcing approach from the air. Banafsaj's reflexes are barely matching that of Hikaru, and following through with her

strategy means devoting heat to her purity arts and not defense. She narrowly deflects each shot, but not before Hikaru can close the distance.

Hikaru lands a brutal horizontal slash without much trouble, approaching from Banafsaj's flank, nearly exposing the body concealed by her armor. Another question is synchronized with the impact of the strike, and spoken with the same force. "The necessity of what? Money? Power?" Five lotus flowers blooming on her person come hurtling towards Hikaru, easy to hit thanks to proximity, propelled by an invisible force. Each one only chips the skin and the effects are barely noticeable at first. With the passage of a few seconds after impact, the color of Hikaru's body begins to lose its brightness and hue; though, only slightly.

Banafsaj and Hikaru maneuver away from each other in a single motion. They share the need for space to perpetuate the assault. The soldier stops to answer Hikaru's question, for residual anger is bursting out of Banafsaj and through her voice. "Fragments. The end to our suffering we fight a war over." Banafsaj maintains a guarded stance, focusing on heat maintenance and lotus creation. "A war you will never know." Thanks to her purity arts core, the process of production is substantially easier. The more Hikaru waits for Banafsaj's responses, the greater advantage she can muster.

Hikaru's stance shifts as he retorts, "Just because I'm a kid doesn't mean I can't comprehend war! I've been in more than my fair share of fights and drama!" His body flickers in and out, form distorting rapidly. "DOUBLE MIRROR DANCE!" With a burst of speed, Hikaru splits into four clones of himself that first climb into the ruins, then hurtle themselves at Banafsaj, attacking from four different angles.

"But the root causes? The politics? The suffering we had to endure, that we seek to liberate ourselves from?" she utters through her white mask, untouched by the dirt of the ruins. "This, you will never understand. You are too naive and ignorant to the suffering your world is built upon." Inward Banafsaj looks.

Fifty million gateways are open to her, but only fifty lead to victory. She does not feel her way through this situation, but knows her approach, recognizes it, grasping the threads and the connections and the principles and the strategy from the deadly hands of the imperfect and volatile emotions. She observes Hikaru's attack, remembers his weaknesses, evaluates her strengths, and formulates an attack pattern. But violence, the passions, she needs to express them in words. No, focus on the fight. Kneel down, and prepare an escape.

The quartet of clones chant in unison, “But I’m beating you, ain’t I?” He is not beating her. “I got you on the back foot! Your armor is scratched and shield ready to break while I’m only getting more powerful by the second.” He is getting weaker. “I know what I’m fighting for!” He does not.

She has to show Hikaru the truth of his weakness. She has to best him. After all, is intertwining one’s desire and passions with efforts for the general good not the most perfect form of violence?

“Stop lying to yourself Hikaru.” Two clones approach her, one from the high cover a ruined building provides, the other across flat ground. Banafsaj draws her rapier and lets her prepared airburst go off beside her feet, sending her hurtling away from the two clones, toward one of the two still keeping their distance. Its path is predictable, and her strike accurate. Upon contact with the tip of the weapon, it dissipates. Without sight of the fourth clone, she produces a pillar of fire directly behind her that consumes it in a violet inferno. Two remain, and based on the predictable attack patterns, both will come to attack her sides in a pincer motion. She pivots on her left foot to turn. The stockpiled Lotus flowers are sent in even amounts towards both clones. They shred through the left, exposing the real Hikaru as the body on the right, who is promptly impacted by six more flowers that cause him only to lessen in energy and increase in anger evermore. The boy’s power has reached an equilibrium now, the crowd’s strength balanced out by her purity arts. It only goes downhill from here.

Surprised by a sudden advance from Banafsaj, leading with her shield, Hikaru nearly falls over. Both engage front-to-front, parrying and dodging flurries of strikes sent by the other. Banafsaj raises her voice again, accusing Hikaru of a host of wrongdoings. “No. You are a naive boy. One who tries to do justice in the marketplace, and rushes into situations without your brother or any regard for simple mixups. Too blinded by your rage, an animal, one having failed the test of reason with absolute certainty.”

“AM NOT! I’LL SHOW WHO I AM, VILLAIN” Hikaru hollars. “HEAVY CROSS POINT!” In two diagonally sweeping motions, Hikaru brings his hands up, and smashes them down in Banafsaj’s direction, only for her to feint backwards and thrust with the Rapier as Hikaru’s hands come down, infusing the meaty hit with a heavy dosage of her purity arts and cuts from her stored flowers.

“At least I’m wishing for something good,” he chokes out, body vibrating in a pulsation of pain at the shock to his nervous system the rapier brought, combined with the sudden reduction in power. Hikaru remains standing in spite of the pain, for he is still unwilling to let someone such as Banafsaj have bested him so easily. Small patches of skin are

beginning to show, but for now, Hikaru's wristblades still remain formed. "At this point, I ain't got the energy to do my Critical Time Move, but I still got enough energy to beat..." he hobbles, "You..."

Banafsaj rolls her eyes underneath the mask. How much more must she explain to this ignorant, delusional, boy?

She readies for combat once again, taking the opportunity given by Hikaru's speech to vent more heat. With every strike, Banafsaj responds to every point of Hikaru's. "You do well enough as a crime fighter already. You do good as a vigilante" She blocks a flurry of strikes with her shield, setting up a combustion field around Hikaru and herself. Instead of following up, he is forced to retreat rather than follow through. "And you have a just heart. Naive, foolish, but ultimately just and noble. Such is difficult to come by in this age."

Through a horizontal dodge and slash, Banafsaj is almost able to follow through, but Hikaru still has the better agility. Banafsaj ends up with another narrow miss and heavy chink in her armor. "So stop it. Recognize your weakness, and stop obsessing over the past. Look ahead to the greater problems you can help fix in the future, not the missed opportunities of the past."

Hikaru dances behind her to follow through again with another strike, running straight towards Banafsaj. He tries to break her shield with the thrust, but the blade simply ends up stuck in the alloy barrier. Grunting, panting, groaning, he twists and pulls to shove it out in a ramble of desperation and anger, but cannot. Hikaru sees Banafsaj standing up, and then sees her slam the shield down to the ground, carrying Hikaru with. Both are planted into the soil. "Learn to live without forgiveness, foolish boy. Carry on as I have, seeking greater goals unerring by the misdeeds of the past." He is still struggling, so Banafsaj slams the shattered barrier into Hikaru once, twice, and thrice, until he is all but limp and slurring his speech. Hikaru can only lie on his back and utter a few more words. "Fine. I was losing," he spits out a bit of blood, and some sparks of electricity. "You win this one, soldier-girl." Hikaru does not pass out though. He unclips the tag from his neck, letting the lightning thread dissipate, and lazily tosses it over to Banafsaj. "You win," he utters while his chipped, bloodied mouth cracks a smile.

Part 9 - Forgiveness

“–And Hikaru’s rolling meteor attack, just going straight through that wall?” a young boy rambles on, “I’ve never seen someone with so much power and drive fueling them!” A wide grin spreads across his youthful, pale face with glee as the boy roughly slides a hand to fix his spikey, azure hair. “The way he crashed through that wall, just ground the scenery to dust, you would’ve had to have seen it to believe it!”

One of his companions mumbles something in response, without much tone or emotion. “Well we were *there*.” She shakes her void-hued head. With every motion, motes of violet and black drift off, and her paired antenna bob side to side on her head.

“Oh- of course I can’t forget Ryujin either! What a beast! I mean, the way he just chewed up the environment? That was something else man...”

“But Ryujin never landed a hit on Banafsaj.”

“Still–”

“Yeah, yeah. They were cool and all Ken, what about Banafsaj?”

The boy sticks his tongue out through closed lips, blowing a raspberry in response. “Frankly, she was a boring gal. Barely flashy, won using a gun, and waaay too obsessive about that violence stuff.” Ken Hado mentions. He nearly gets swept up in the mosh pit of a crowd surrounding the medical wing of the Colosseum, only to be pulled to Kotone’s side by the loose, sky-blue lapels of his gi.

“Well sorry Ken Hado, but I find winning fun, not boring,” she retorts. She pushes him back into their group, and follows.

Mounted atop a nearly life-sized plush of a sheep colored indigo, an animated teddy bear bends over backwards, so its upside-down head can face both Kotone and Ken Hado. A feminine voice squeals from its mouth, “especially the part where Banafsaj slammed Hikaru into the ground with her shield!” Its tone and innocence is mistakable for that of a little girl’s. “Over and over, until the last thing he could do was choke out his surrender, and cough up blood... Frankly,” she continued, “I found that really fun!” She bounced back to face forwards, letting the woolen steed carry its master forward.

Kotone and Ken Hado pass a glance of mutual understanding. Quickly, he breaks the silence to resume conversation of the fight. “Yeah but Banafsaj didn’t have that drive, that power,” Ken hypothesizes, his tone lowering.

“How would you know Hado?” Kotone asks.

“I just know. It’s a feeling, deep in my soul, and it’s something I know for sure. If you have enough willpower, you can do anything.”

“It don’t matter what Hikaru believed in. Willpower just can’t deal with everything,” a bulky man leading the voice objects with a tone rougher than sandpaper. “And speak of the devil…” he says to no one under his breath. He leads the others through the densest crowd, surrounding a singular room of the medical wing, a small space carved out by Crossguards in between them and the door. The group’s lead, back covered in a gigantic coat reaching his head with a massive white-trimmed collar down to his ankles, takes a step forward. “Hasshack?” one of the Crossguards ask. It only takes a couple of seconds of conversation before the guards part, letting Kotone, Ken Hado, the plush, and Hasshack step into Hikaru’s medical room.

The location is an utter departure from the hustle outside. Compared to some of the more ornate areas of the Colosseum and its halls packed to the brim with spectators, this cozy space, no more than ten meters in each direction, is covered in cornsilk plaster walls and floorboards of some generic sort of wood. Basic medical equipment, magical and scientific, lines the shelves and walls. Monitors, wires, and a couple of herbs and magical seals are placed near the head of the bed at this room’s center.

Hasshack comes in first, and he chooses not to sit but to stand halfway between the wall and the left side of Hikaru’s bed. Ken Hado and Kotone are second. Ken Hado rushes to grab the only leather-cushioned chair in the far corner of the room. Kotone instead grabs two white-colored plastic chairs from a stack of five. She looks at the teddy bear, who shakes her head in response, already seated on her sheep. The void-being puts one chair back and grabs the other for herself, taking a seat right at the foot of Hikaru’s bed.

As if on cue, Hikaru stirs to consciousness in the presence of his friends. Returned to his original form, Hikaru’s body now resembles that of a badly damaged human. While he retains the physical and mental ability to talk unimpaired, Hikaru’s arm and part of his torso are both enveloped in bandage and plaster. Everyone greets him.

“Heya bud!” Ken Hado got up from his seat, bumping Hikaru’s only functional fist. Hikaru attempted to smile, but some sort of heavy and dour aura weighed upon the boy. Only one half of his mouth curved upward, and never both.

“Hey dork,” Kotone deadpanned. Hikaru rolled his eyes, and almost chuckled. Almost. The Voidread’s constant teasing and insults were as endearing as they were annoying. No such energy to counter her verbal jabs was present in the Novalian though.

“Hello Hikaru!” Tokuma Ashita spoke. Her voice was ingrained with a juvenile energy and enthusiasm even him and Hado could not match. Always, Hikaru wondered, where could he acquire such strength. Then again Ashita was at least a little psychotic, so perhaps not wondering was for the best.

“Hey guys,” Hikaru forced the words out his mouth. Speaking was possible, but a struggle considering his mood. But suddenly, he noticed the shadow of Hasshack looming over, lowing upon the bedside as he bends over to greet Hikaru, his pseudo-protege.

“How was the fight, Hikaru? You feel alright?” Hasshack asked. If spoken by any other person, those words would carry some semblance of warmth with them, but Hasshack’s hoarse gravelly voice and tone which half-growled every other sentence made them seem all but as such. “Wanna chat?” he inquired again.

“I should’ve won...”

“No. You should have not.”

“I worked so hard...”

“So did she.”

“I came so far. From rock bottom to vigilante and streamer.”

“So did she.”

“But the fans were still on my side, powering up my Viralium Artes.”

“She has her own magic, y’know”

“So why did I lose?”

Hasshack sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose with a gloved hand draped in bulky leather. “Cause you forgot about the part about where you actually have to fight. Look,” he groggily explains, “I’ll give it to you straight kid. You were kind of doomed from the start. Before comin’ over, I had a bit of a chat with madam Safi as she was leaving the Colosseum to ‘do more training.’ She explained everythin.”

“How then? How did she beat me?”

“Well, ya see kiddo, Banafsaj arrived around six months before you did, the entirety of which she dedicated to studying past matches, training with other competitors, and fighting in the minor leagues tournaments ‘round here to get stronger. And then once the bracket results came in, she pulled up your and Ryujin’s files, reading them over and over. So much, I say her eyes should have been bleeding with how much work she did! A week straight, I tell you. I mean you were out there, workin’ hard, trainin’ hard, every day, but Banafsaj was hauling ass on a whole nother level.” Hasshack attempts to place his hand on Hikaru’s shoulder. He swats it away, limply. “She’s been at this far longer than you. Don’t beat yourself over it, alrighty?”

“But the fight... I should’ve had her!”

Kotone’s voice comes in, further adding to the conversation. “And this is where you mess up again. You also forgot the part where you actually have to fight.” She kicks her legs up, crossing one over the other, and describes further, “Hikaru. You relied too much on rage, motivation, and willpower. Against foes in your home realm, that would do the trick but things are just different around here! Banafsaj won because she played reactively against your linear gameplay and predictable attacks. The mines, shooting Ryujin down from the pillar, leveraging the lotus flowers. She was in control of herself, and won because of it.” Sticking a finger towards Hikaru, she declares in plain phrase, “You weren’t!”

“I—”

Hasshack gives him no chance to speak. “More importantly, you forgot about Ryujin! Your separation cost you the match, and your selfish wish made you forget about your older brother in a heartbeat!” Hasshack needles Hikaru, causing him to lean just a little backwards, deeper into the mattress.

“I think the old man’s got a point,” Ken jumps in, “Because those relationships, the power of friendship, it’s what keeps us heroes fighting.” He elbows the Novalian’s limp body, asking, “Right Hikaru?”

Tokuma is quick to agree with Ken, “And that’s literal for me! Rena here,” she explains while leaning down to cuddle the stuffed sheep, “Her prowess in combat is only enabled because I care for her! As does she for me! And that’s true for you and Ryujin, although not super literally. Y’know what I mean.” Pecking it on the cheek, the teddy bear giggles off her blunder and returns to a sitting position, glancing at Hikaru. She, and everyone, awaits a response.

Hikaru breathes in. He breathes out, and focuses, clearing his mind of all unnecessary emotion, until all that remains are the thoughts of necessity. Memories of his rage. Memories of his companionship. Memories of a wish once in reach, so close only hours before, now an infinitum away, but he should let go of that light. There is light around him now

to treasure, after all. His lime eyes blink open, blink twice, and he begins to apologize. “Yeah, you’re right. I forgot about everything. I forgot about my vocation as a vigilante upon receiving the invitation, I forgot about responsibility and basic manners when I met Banafsaj, I forgot about self-control and my training when I faced her on the field. Jeez... I’ve forgotten so much... Is this what it’s really like to be a great hero, to be a big shot? Forgetting everything?”

“Pretty much,” Hasshack agrees with a shrug, “Rememberin’ who yer is just as important as believing in yerself, almighty kiddo?”

“It’ll happen again when you get older,” adds Kotone, with smugness and monotone.

Ken speaks, “Kotone shut up.”

Tokuma cannot help herself but to interject, “But she’s right Ken! Ever heard of a midlife crisis?”

“Kids!” Hasshack yelps, letting silence fall upon the room before continuing, “Can we not joke about old people?”

Kotone jeers, ““Because you are one and are insecure about it?” her words laced with a jovial lightness and malice in equal measure.

“Yes! Now shaddup about it! ‘Aight?”

“Yes boss,” the other three say in simultaneous.

Hikaru leans forward. Unable to stand completely straight up, he slouches a few inches forward, Hikaru’s sight directed towards the bed rather than his surroundings. He sniveled, “I’m sorry, guys... I messed up so badly.”

“Yeah we gotcha kid,” Hasshack mentions while he leans in and embraces Hikaru. Hikaru accepts the gesture. Nearly no time passes before he is enveloped in one, giant hug by the group.

“Thanks guys, for... well, everything.”

Kotone tugs harder and responds, “Anytime dork!”

“As Kotone says,” Ken puts in, “If your brother’s gone, we still got you.”

“Uh-huh! Anytime!” Hikaru can feel the muzzle of Tokuma shift up and down while speaking, her form squished by the bodies in the hug. After a few seconds, everyone pulls away to have Hikaru catch his breath.

He wastes no time continuing in conversation, “I ought to have a word with Banafsaj though.”

Hasshack's face scrunches, and his mouth forms into a shape that indicates uncertainty. “I dunno,” he cautions rather casually, “She’s a polite gal, but I mean, are you sure you can trust her?”

Kotone cuts in, crossing her arms, “Yeah Hikaru, you have a really bad habit of doing things without considering the risks. At this point, I’m gonna have to take you to rehab, or something.”

“Doesn’t matter. She has to know that we’re on solid terms, and I don’t plan to have the conversation last more than a minute, but know that you won’t stop me. She could be dangerous. She’s not a villain though, you hear? Just a soldier, following orders.”

“Alright. Fine…” Hashack rejoins, voice indicative of a conversational surrender, “I hear. Besides, I’m more proud of ya for making that choice to set boundaries and make peace rather than walk away.”

“So,” Hikaru pipes up, “I should be healed by the day’s end, so say the doctors. Where can I find Banafsaj?”

Hashack answers his question, “Trainin.’ When the Colosseum’s shut down, with special permission from Tenki, practicing magic in the Crossroad’s Special Division office, in her room in the Kit’Inn, or the Tiger’s Fields where she’s got ample room to practice fighting. But here’s the thing, I got no idea if she wants to be disturbed.”

Kotone chimes in, “Banafsaj just returned from a fight. You’d expect a person like her to be wound up.”

“Yeah,” Hikaru agrees, insistent on his visitation, “she’ll be fine by the time I visit her. Banafsaj is a friendly type, I know it from seeing her in the marketplace.”

“No, no Kotone,” Hashack said, “She was, actin’ weird. Alright, not unusual weird, but like, offputting weird. Before we even approached her underneath the Colosseum, in the big wooden dome, she was frantically scribbling notes in a digital journal, muttering to herself, constantly cutting herself off and yammering on. She was… angry. That’s the best way to put it. Angry and obsessive. Her demeanor turned quickly once we talked but I could see her leg bouncing up and down. Anxious to leave, was she.”

Hikaru places both hands on the banister of the bed, shifting his position to fully face Hashack. “Well what was she talking about?” he inquired.

“Tactics. Corrections. Violence. Said a bunch of stuff about principles of strategy, mentioned how her rifle should have seen more usage, recited what must’ve been mantras belonging to whatever cult gave her those purity flowers. Mantras about violence, self-control, and all. About how she needs to embody excellence. And victory, victory at any cost.”

“Well, that last part would be about the war,” Hikaru responds.

“Yeah, and probably the next match.”

Ken's voice is suddenly shot when he speaks, as if a cold arrow has shattered the vibrations it is composed of, causing them to slow and lower in volume. "Do- do you mean-" he stammers.

"I dunno. She's a polite woman, but a violent one. And I know she carries some sort of weight. Her posture wouldn't be so straight if she didn't have some burden she had to bear. A burden that made her strong."

"Jeez," Hikaru exclaims as he wipes his forehead, "Is there anything we can do?"

"Cept for wait and see? Doubtful."

Hikaru cannot speak, only frown, in response.