

To those that Strive for Peace

by zacknapattack

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For Power (Taleus, Inari, Piano):

The sound of three exhausted people panting for air filled the air of the Shifting Meadows as three of the finalists tried to catch their breath. Taleus and Piano laid in a crater next to each other, the former's wrists still bleeding from where he had been drawing weapons and the latter's sword stuck deep in the ground next to her. Inari floated nearby, Red and Green floating near her sending her silent concerns as she tried to recover her energy.

The meadow around them was full of craters, some caused by the might of Inari's blows, but most and especially the bigger ones were the result of the monstrous strength that Saki possessed, having just finished training the three on her own. While Saki had claimed they had passed the exercise, the fact that she could walk back to her bar seemingly unaffected and the three were still sucking wind on the ground certainly didn't make any of them feel like they won.

"What was that potion she drank before the fight?" Taleus asked, having finally recovered enough to talk. "Was it something to make her more powerful than usual?"

"I don't think so." Piano replied, any of her nervous timbre gone from sheer exhaustion despite her otherwise remarkable stamina. "Given the color and the scent of the potion when she uncorked it

and the hardening of her skin, I'd say she drank a Rockskin potion. While the slight weight increase and toughness of her skin could've made her blows slightly stronger, I still think most of that was nat-"

"Now she learns how to talk." Inari cut in, trying to joke but her breathlessness made it difficult to parse. "She didn't talk a single word the whole time we roped her into this, but get her talking about whatever that drink was and she talks a mile a minute."

"I'm sorry..." Piano quickly apologized, her face would've flushed if it wasn't already from exertion.

"I didn't mean... nevermind." Inari shook her head, the flame-like hair looking dim. "Though I guess I wonder why she had to drink it if she's that strong already."

"Worried I'll stab her in the back, I guess." Taleus assumed, closing all of his eyes as he did. "If she didn't have that, the fight would've ended much earlier."

"Between Taleus and I specializing in sneak attacks and Inari being good at direct combat, that would be a concern even for her..." Piano commented, finally sitting up. "The fact that she fought us unarmed was a problem enough for her, but one touch of mine or Taleus' blade to her vitals would be dangerous even for her..."

"And what was I, just decoration?" Inari floated upright, frowning towards Piano.

"No no no! I didn't mean something like that!" Piano said with a panic, waving her arms flustered. "I just mean that oni are more well suited for fighting strong people, so it's no surprise she took you on directly. But because she would need to focus on you, she took the potion so Taleus and I couldn't get a lucky shot. If you weren't there, she would quickly crush Taleus and I because she could just try to beat us quickly..."

"So you're saying we're not strong enough to take her?" Taleus asked, still lying on the ground. Piano bit her lip, clearly getting upset at how the other two were reacting to her words. "That even

though I could beat a Contractor, I can't beat her?"

"That's... different..." Piano sounded meek, not looking at him. "He was immortal, and didn't expect to be able to lose from some unknown warrior. So he didn't take the precautions he probably should've... Saki's still mortal, and she knows who you are. So she had to do whatever possible to make sure you couldn't easily beat her..."

"I mean, we all made it to the end of our tournaments each." Inari added. "If she didn't take us somewhat seriously, we'd probably beat her easily."

Taleus sat listlessly on the ground for a bit as Piano stood up, before she bent down to retrieve her sword. But with how deeply it was lodged, she was struggling to remove the weapon from its dirt prison. Inari floated next to her, joining Piano in her effort to draw the blade. Both gripped tightly and pulled with all of their might, slowly tugging inch by inch from the earth.

"But an assassin always gets his mark. An assassin that can't is just a tool that can be thrown away." His blood flowed into his hands, forming a scythe with a wicked crimson blade. "But that's why I came here. To ensure that I will have the power to always kill my targets."

Piano looked kind of nervous at that, still pulling on her sword. "I suppose that's true... If you can't achieve your purpose in life, then it makes it feel more empty."

"Are you guys ok?" Inari asked incredulously. "Like seriously, you guys could just make your own way in life? Is that so hard? And if you really need help, you two can join my crew."

"What do you mean?" Taleus asked, tilting his head as his eyes blinked one at a time at Inari. "I'm already doing what I want to do. My place is with the Perpetuals."

"And I've got everything I could want doing what I'm currently doing..." Piano's tail nervously wrapped around her wrist, focusing her eyes on her stuck sword. "Not that I have too much I could want anyways if I wasn't on my present course..."

"And what are you doing?" Taleus asked, looking curious.

"Uh... nothing too special. Don't worry about it..." Piano looked embarrassed, not making eye contact still.

"Does it have anything to do with your brother constantly trying to talk to Chifu? Michiko keeps complaining about him getting in her way."

"Oh, does she? I'm sorry. I'll talk to my brother about it and try to make things easier on both of them..." Piano's voice grew quiet.

"If he was really a problem, Michiko would get rid of him. I doubt he'd stand a chance."

"Really?" Inari jumped in. "Is she that strong?"

"She's rank 2 of the Perpetuals for a reason." Taleus shrugged. "She's never failed to take out a target she was going for. Unlike me. I barely beat the Contractor, and I couldn't beat Saki just now. I need more strength if I ever want to measure up to her."

"Is that so?" Inari asked with some strain in her voice, looking up as she kept pulling on the sword. "That's what you're going to wish for? Bulging muscles or something?"

Taleus shook his head, his hair bouncing with the motion. "I'm already strong enough physically. What I need more is to unlock my Awakening."

"Awakening? What, are you having trouble getting up where you're from?" Inari cocked her head, her hair flickering like movement as she did.

“Not quite...” Piano chimed in. “Perpetuals all have an ability called Awakening, which can be said to be the ultimate conception of their powers. Some are said to even alter reality itself within the scope of their influence...”

“Oh? You certainly know a lot.” Taleus looked at her, his six eyes making Piano flush and look away. “Who told you about all of that?”

“My brother...” Piano confessed, finally pulling out her sword as Inari nearly fell over from the sudden jolt of movement. “Once he heard what you were, he did some asking around. Combine that with his studies back home before we started traveling the multiverse, and he was able to tell me the basic gist of it.”

Taleus gave her a long look, before shrugging his shoulders. “I see. Your brother seems to know how to get into other people’s business. Hopefully he doesn’t end up one of my targets after I’ve gotten my Awakening. Whatever it is, I doubt he’d be able to survive it.”

“I would have to stop you then...” Piano said it quietly, almost imperceptibly, though the way Taleus looked at her indicated he heard her loud and clear. “Even if you are a Perpetual, I’d have to take you on to protect my brother. No hard feelings, of course...”

Her sword laid in her hands, one hand on the hilt and the other running along the blade to check it for dirt or other bits of grime. Taleus’ blood scythe twirled in his hands, four of his eyes narrowing at Piano as if judging her for weak points. Inari floated between the two, looking between them with some nervousness.

“Not that you would get assigned to him.” Inari reasoned. “After all, he’s just a writer...”

“That’s true...” Piano didn’t sound so sure of that, but her flushed expression of embarrassment was also marred with a look of some confidence.

“...So you think you could take me in a fight?” Taleus asked, a curious tone in his voice.

“Um... I would certainly have to take you on...” Piano didn’t meet his gaze, looking at the ground instead.

“Well, let’s settle it now.” Taleus got into a combat ready stance, looking at Piano with a predator’s gaze. “That way, we don’t have to figure it out later.”

Piano looked startled, nearly dropping her sword. “Right now?” she asked in a panic. “But we just fought Saki, so maybe we should rest and-”

“Better to take him on now than wait till he’s fully rested.” Inari chimed in, causing Taleus to smirk and Piano to fluster. “Or waiting for him to attack you at night or something while you’re sleeping.”

“Ah... I-I suppose that’s true.” Piano admitted.

“And you already look like you recovered from our fight with Saki. You’ll make a great opponent for seeing if I can kill a target while exhausted.” Taleus raised his arm, biting into it and drawing some blood to form a set of floating blades alongside him.

Inari looked over at Piano with some surprise. She had indeed regained control of her breathing, and she was no longer sweating from exhaustion either. She was already beginning to shift her weight back and forth, getting ready for more activity.

“You’re ready to fight so quickly after that?” Inari complained, looking at Piano. “Didn’t you get beaten down by Saki a bunch earlier?”

“Oh, well, I managed to take those blows pretty well. Blunt attacks aren’t that great for me, but I can at least toughen my body to avoid instantly being crushed by someone like Saki...”

“And you aren’t much better!” Inari wheeled towards Taleus. “I’m pretty sure I watched Saki smash you into a crater!”

“I can’t let something like that slow me down.” Taleus shook off the question, gathering his breath. “The other Perpetuals have hit me way harder than she did. I can take this girl.”

“If you say so...” Inari began to move back. “You guys are ridiculous...”

“This is just a sparring match, right?” Piano asked with uncertainty, looking nervous. “We’re not going to take this seriously, right?”

Taleus didn’t say anything, giving his scythe another twirl. Piano looked nervous, but likewise got into a battle ready stance.

“Are you guys ready to do this?” Inari called. “I’ll stop you guys if it starts going too far. At least I don’t have to hold back for you guys.”

“A tool is always ready to do its function.” Taleus responded.

“I’ll do what I must.” Piano nodded. She drew a few throwing knives to match Taleus’ projectiles, glancing over at Inari as she raised her two blue coated arms.

“Ok, if you guys say so. Ready? Set. FIGHT!”

For Family (Raku, Aude, Vilivian):

The sound of ceramic cups being set onto the traditional table punctuated the spoken words of the three women gathered together that day. They had managed to get a private table at the Mean Red Bean, a famous restaurant with a wide variety of bean foods and drinks and foodstuffs that goes with beans well. For now, the trio of women were enjoying small cups of sake, in a large traditional sake bottle with the kanji for “Dragon” printed on the front.

Sat at the head of the table was Raku, who looked like she was having fun, but when the other two were distracted, she held a contemplative expression to herself. To her right sat Aude, who lounged on the cushion almost luxuriously, her tail acting as another cushion for herself. Vilivian was swishing her own cup around, reclining on one arm as she looked at her two lunch partners.

All three were wearing yukatas, in preparation to go to the hot springs after their meals. They were waiting for their red bean buns to arrive and were just talking amongst themselves to pass the time. Suddenly, Vilivian turned towards Raku. “So what’s been on your mind? You’ve been looking

sour this whole time.”

“What?” Raku jolted, startled. “What are you talking about?”

“Do you really think we’re that stupid?” Aude chimed in. “I noticed you thinking about things all day. We agreed to hang out and have fun before we go back to our final rounds. So tell us what’s in your head right now that’s making it rattle so we can relax in the hot springs in a bit.”

“Oh, you guys noticed huh...” Raku rubbed the back of her head. “It’s no big deal, I’ll just talk to my brother when we’re done.”

“Uh huh.” Aude said, clearly not buying her words.

Vilivian and Aude both stared intently at Raku, who seemed to shrink more and more under the shorter women’s gaze as they both sat up. Raku tried to sip her drink, only to find her cup empty. She looked at them embarrassed as they both leaned in further, upping the pressure on Raku.

“Ok, ok! I’ll tell you! Stop looking at me like that!” She covered her face as the two redheads looked at each other with some pride at breaking the draconic girl. Raku sat back up on the cushions as she looked at the two with some confidence.

“I was just thinking of my grandfather and how I’m supposed to take his place as the leader of our clan. And I was thinking about the wish I want to make if I win my tournament. I’m just not sure what to do.”

The two listened with intent expressions, nodding as the wind dragon spoke. When she finished, Aude leaned forward, rubbing the rim of her cup as she gave her reply. “I see. And what do you want out of all of this?”

“What?” Raku looked confused. “I mean, I want to live up to my grandfather’s expectations, you know?”

“That’s good to do.” Vilivian piped in. “The passing down of such responsibilities is one of the purposes of clans like yours and mine. I upheld my own responsibilities for several hundred years before I came here. I would hope you’d be able to do the same.”

“For several hundred years?” Raku looked concerned. “I don’t think my grandfather expected me to take his duties for that long. Though I guess I’ll have to wait till I have a descendant to pass it on to before my death...”

“But do you really have to?” Aude asked. “If you don’t want to do it, shouldn’t you just do what makes you happy?”

“But I appreciate everything my grandfather did.” Raku grabbed the bottle, looking at the kanji. “And I want to be able to hold my head up high, knowing my grandfather is looking down at me proudly.”

“And yet?” Aude primed, raising her eyebrow at her.

“And yet... I would rather just have my grandfather back.” she admitted, looking down with shame. “I was kind of hoping to use the wish from winning my tournament to bring him back.”

“Did you not consume his body to take on his power and subsume his soul into yours?” Vilivian asked plainly. “I’m surprised he was not devoured sooner, though I suppose he was waiting for a worthy heir to consume him.”

Raku and Aude both looked at her with different levels of horror. It took a couple minutes for either of them to recover enough to speak, while Vilivian just looked at them with some confusion.

"I-I could never eat my grandfather!" Raku protested, slamming the sake bottle down. "I love him very much! Why would I ever do something like that to him?"

"To ensure his strength could be used by someone more worthy of it." Vilivian said plainly. "The females are the ones that continue the family lineage, while the males exist to help strengthen the chosen women of the line in order to truly rule. Such is the way of life."

"Maybe where you're from, but that doesn't work in most other places." Aude pointed out, popping some dango in her mouth. "And if you say I should eat Armel, I'm going to punch you in the face."

"He controls your powers, doesn't he?" Vilivian asked. "Then shouldn't you take-"

"Ah ah ah. I'm not going to hear another word." Aude insisted dangerously.

The other two women began to disagree across the table, neither side fully understanding the other's point while Raku just stared at the table in thought. She thought back to all the times she spent with her grandfather, all the advice he gave her, all the training they did together. Her heart ached once more as she remembered the funeral they had for her grandfather, and she felt the weight of the responsibility his death placed on her shoulders as he had chosen her to take his place.

The desire to run away from that responsibility, of simply wishing him back and just having him once more crept back into Raku's heart. The thought of how nice it would be just to hug him like she did when she was little and not have to worry anymore, that everything was safe and back to normal.

But then she remembered Aanir's words before her second match. And Michaelis' during the second match, when she lost herself in her anger and tried to tear Valentine apart. She thought about those in her clan that would be disappointed if her grandfather was brought back because of her.

But most of all, she thought about what her grandfather would say to her if he found out she had essentially abandoned the duties he had bestowed upon her by bringing him back. She tried to imagine what face of disappointment he would make upon hearing that, but it was literally too painful for her to bear. She closed her eyes and took a deep, shuddering breath, causing the other two to look at her.

"You alright Raku?" Aude asked, her ears flicking as if to show her concern. "If you want to stop talking about it, we can move on. This is a girl's day out. We are supposed to be having fun."

"I'll be fine." Raku assured them. "Just with the final round around the corner, it's hard not to think about that kind of thing."

"I know what you mean." Aude agreed, her tail flipping behind her. "Armel and I have been trying to figure out this whole 'curse' thing before I have to fight that ghost girl and it's been driving us nuts! Though I've heard she's going through her own shit too."

"Isn't everyone in this tournament?" Vilivian asked, tilting her head. "I know my opponent seems to have her own doubts about a lot of things. That, and she's constantly around her talkative brother, which I'm not sure is good for her."

"He talks that much to you guys too?" Aude asked, surprised. "I thought he was just fucking with me by talking like that! Whoo, I'm glad I'm not the only one dealing with that crap. Raku, have you talked to Forte yet?"

Raku shook her head. "No. I've seen him around Chifu and Michiko alot, and I would rather avoid dealing with all of that. But he does occasionally try to reach out, but I'm usually busy with Senko."

"Oh, I bet you are~" Aude teased, leaning in. "It was soooooo hard to convince you to walk away from her to hang out with Vili and I~"

Raku's face turned a bright red, her dragonic tail flicking behind her nervously. "I-I wasn't that bad, was I?"

"Your infatuation with the mummy girl is pretty obvious." Vilivian pointed out, pointing the skewer her dango were on at Raku. "Having a romantic partner is pretty important."

"Yes it is~" Aude said in a singsong tone, winking at Raku. "And I think we know who Raku's thinking about for that~"

"Oh yeah?" Raku countered, sitting tall. "And what about you and Armel? Don't tell me you two are spending all that time alone just 'figuring out your curse.'" The gratuitous amount of air quotes being used was almost insulting.

Aude began to flush herself. "I-it's not like that! He helps me control my powers! We're working together to win the tournament and solve each other's problems!"

"Uh huh. And he just happens to be your type too." Raku teased, now on the attack as she leaned in. "Must be nice for you to have everything work out like that~"

"That does seem rather fortunate." Vilivian piped in, leaning back in her cushions as she looked to the wall.

Both Aude and Raku's eyes gleamed as they looked at Vilivian as the fox girl spoke. "Oh? And what about you Vili? I've seen you talking to your opponent a lot~"

"Piano?" Vilivian seemed unfazed. "I admit her blood is rather interesting to me. Her blood color is rather rare, so she is someone worth spending time with."

"And is that all she is to you?~" Raku chimed in, her and Aude leaning in Vilivian's direction as they tried to corner her.

"Looks like our food is here." Vilivian explained, pointing to the sliding door. Sure enough, the chef walked in with their red bean buns. Aude clapped her hands together in excitement, while Raku sat

up in preparation.

As the three began to dig into their little snack, Raku quietly thought to herself. Realizing suddenly what Aude and Vilivian had done by changing the subject, she put down her bean bun. Aude looked over at her, ears flickering in confusion.

“Thank you both. This has already been a lot of fun.”

“Hmm?” Aude looked confused, before nodding her head. “No problem. That’s why we did this.”

“Indeed. Having fun is what a ‘girl’s day out’ is all about, according to you two.” Vilivian added.

“I know. It’s nice to get away from all the heavy thoughts of this tournament. Now let’s finish these bean buns. There’s a hot spring waiting for us!” Raku picked up her bun and started eating again.

“Way ahead of you sister.” Aude said, cleaning her face with a napkin as she finished her bean bun.

“As am I.” Vilivian said, pulling on her yukata. “Now that that’s done, I can start taking this off to prepare for the hot springs?”

“NO!” Both of the other girls shouted, Raku nearly choking on her bean bun as Aude leaped over the table to stop Vilivian from stripping. It was clear that the three still had much fun to be had on this little day together. And at least for the moment, they could set aside all of their worries they had brought with them to this tournament.

For Vengeance (Inari, Taleus, Vilivian):

The Sacred Forest was not a place many often went to willingly. With all of the ghosts and other dangers it presented, it would be the last place most people would want to meet. Which made it the perfect meeting spot for those that didn't want anybody to overhear whatever conversation they were about to have.

"So I've heard you Perpetuals are some of the best assassins there are." Inari asked, leaning up high against a tree nearby.

Taleus' six eyes looked up at the ghost girl, as if insulted by the question. "Of course we are. I take it you need somebody killed?"

"You could say that..." Inari said, looking away for a moment. "Though it's more like I'm trying to track her down."

"So you want to kill her yourself?" Taleus asked, tilting his head. "Then why come to an assassin?"

“Because I can’t find her on my own terms...” Inari admitted. “She always comes and goes as she pleases, never staying around long enough for me to catch her. That, and the way she manipulates people...”

Inari gave a shudder, remembering the Crossguards twisted into her image. She couldn’t imagine what Sana was doing right now, lurking within the shadows of the Crossroads, causing problems not only for herself, but the other contestants. She heard from Piano that Sana approached the martial artist, but the timid girl had run away out of nervousness before Sana could touch her. A lucky break for the shy girl, Inari had thought grimly.

Taleus didn’t seem to care all too much about whatever internal dialogue Inari had going on. He just put a hand on his hip and tapped his foot. “So, who’s the target? What’s her relationship with you? And why do you want her dead?”

Inari gave a deep sigh, still not prepared after all this time steeling her nerves to tell this mostly stranger about such a personal topic. “Her name is Sana Okagami. She’s a five tailed kitsune in her twenties...”

“Ah, so that’s the name of the other Trickster running around...”

Another voice suddenly joined the conversation. Taleus raised a hand to his mouth, preparing to bite down to produce a weapon. Inari held a hand out for Red, looking in the direction. After the rustle of brush and tree limbs, Vilivian showed herself to the duo, brushing off some leaves as she did.

Taleus seemed to relax, not bothered by the sudden arrival of Vilivian. But Inari was still on edge. “How did you find us? And what do you mean ‘other Trickster?’ Did you see Sana?”

Vilivian seemed to take the almost accusatory words flung at her with good stride. "I simply sensed the blood of the Assassin there." She pointed to Taleus, who narrowed his six eyes at the Matriarch. "His blood has a strange flow within his veins and has a rather peculiar scent. And with no one but the dead floating around here, his scent stands out even further."

"Are you saying my blood stinks?" Taleus' face twisted in anger as he took a step forward, getting in Vilivian's face as she looked up at him with an almost bored expression. "Are you trying to pick a fight with me?"

"No, Male." Vilivian said coolly. "I was just coming out here to see what this scent was, not crush some male hyped up on his own power."

Taleus' eyes began to twitch, his wrist moving towards his mouth. Vilivian, for her part, began to gather blue magic into her arms as she sized up Taleus properly.

"Ok, ok, enough of that!" Inari interjected, pushing the two of them away. "I didn't bring you out here so you can argue with the demon lady." The floating ghost girl then turned to Vilivian. "Now, you were saying something about another Trickster?"

"Ah yes, the other fox running around, her tails moving like fire and her blood flowing like a sickening sludge. Her smiles and honeyed words promised pleasure, but her eyes only spoke of danger and deceit."

"That sounds like her..." Inari muttered under her breath, before looking Vilivian in the eyes. "Where was she?"

"I saw her while I was walking along the Zo River. Volley and I were going fishing by the waters when we spied a lone girl staring into the water. Volley seemed worried that she might jump in so he ran forward, but I looked where she was looking. And for a second, I thought I saw another figure in the water with her reflection."

“Another figure...” Inari didn’t like the sound of that. “Don’t tell me...”

“Now that I take a look at you, it did bear some resemblance to you.” Vilivian confirmed Inari’s worst fears despite her protest, causing the ghost girl to curse in anger.

“Of course it did. She’s never been able to let go of me even after all of this time! Even now, she’s still lurking around in the shadows, messing with every part of my life like it belongs to her! I joined this tournament so I could wish in some way to finally be rid of her! And so she comes skulking in one more time just to claim me for herself before it’s too late!”

Inari gave a scream of anger, clutching her head as her flaming hair flared to match her mood. Both of her conversation partners took a step back in surprise, not really sure how to react to this outburst.

“If she just left me alone, maybe I would be fine!” Inari continued to yell, the quiet forest absorbing her voice with its silence as both the living and the dead listened to the girl that stood with a foot in each. “I wouldn’t have had to join this stupid tournament! I wouldn’t have had to deal with that stupid fox woman that’s running this place! If only I had killed her when I had the chance...”

Her voice died down at the end, her voice somewhat hoarse after all of that shouting as she panted from anger. The other two just looked at each other, six eyes meeting two, as they tried to figure out which one should talk first.

“Soooo...” Taleus spoke up first, not sure what to say. “I can see why you want to find her now. So are you still going to hire me to kill her orrrrr...?”

“Hold on, hold on.” Inari shook her head, pointing at Vilivian. “Keep going. What did she do as you guys got close?”

Vilivian nodded as she continued her story. “The oni child was about to run up and touch the trickster, but I managed to hold him back before he did. She then turned to us and gave a greeting.

Volley tried to be friends with her, but I kept trying to pull him away so we could go fishing.”

“That’s smart. You want nothing to do with her.” Inari grit her teeth, listening to the tale.

“She then asked me if I knew a girl named Inari.” That got the ghost girl to tense up, as Taleus shifted his stance nearby.

“I said that I knew of you, but I didn’t know where you were. She seemed pleased with that, and handed me this to give to you.” Vilivian reached into a pocket and pulled a small wooden token. “I told her I wouldn’t promise anything, but she insisted I take it. It’s almost as if she knew I would find you out here...”

Inari reached forward, her hand shaking with rage at the small, innocent looking token. The front had a simple design, but Inari knew the back would have the real message. Sure enough, a short little message had been carved into the back using a fox claw as the little love letter to Inari was revealed.

“You looked absolutely ravishing in that last match you had! I think one more and you’ll be perfect. I can’t wait to be together again, my sweet little Inari. I’ll have a special meeting spot waiting for you once you beat that other dirty fox girl.

You are mine forever,

Sana Okagami”

Inari stared at the sickening note, especially the little hearts that were engraved in it. Then with a roar of anger, the half-ghost threw the token with all of her might into the haunted forest as her two companions looked at her with neutral expressions.

“GOD DAMN IT!!!” She burned ever more furiously, forcing Vilivian and Taleus to take a step back to avoid being “burned” by Inari’s hair as it flared even more. “She thinks she can do whatever she

wants! And I can't do anything about it!"

"And that's where I come in." Taleus said confidently. "You said she was by the river? I can follow that trail and have her head delivered to you in no time."

"That's not going to work..." Inari said glumly.

"What's that?" Taleus wheeled towards Inari, his teeth gritted in anger.

"She's likely long gone. She might have even left a surprise for me if I were to go there."

"Oh yeah? And what kind of surprise is that?"

"Crossguards made to look like me, if I had to guess." Inari shivered. "To remind me that I'm supposed to be her toy."

"Well, that's certainly creepy. But wait, are they as strong as you?" Taleus seemed to get excited at that.

"I don't think so. I got this strong through my own efforts, not this curse she put on me. But I'm sure they're as strong as I was when I first got turned this way..." Inari looked at him, confused.

"Then if I can kill them easily, I should be able to win over you with some effort?" Taleus asked, grinning as he bit his wrist to create a blood scythe. "This should be fun trying to track her down."

"Are you trying to track her or just polishing your fangs, Assassin?" Vilivian asked, stepping forward. "Because when it comes to finding her, I think I would be the more suited companion."

"But she already came to me for help." Taleus protested, putting his foot down. "So this is my job to do."

"I'm just saying it would be faster if she used my senses, since I met her and know what she smells like." Vilivian pointed out. "And I know how to control myself in front of my prey."

"Alright, alright!" Inari shouted, getting in between the both of them. "I'll just have both of you help me look! That way, I don't have to listen to you two argue!"

"Fine."

"That's acceptable."

"I'll work on paying you two back after we find her, ok?" Inari asked, looking at the two of them.

"If I'm the one to find it, I'll expect you to pay the Perpetual's price." Taleus agreed, spinning his scythe in his hands.

"And if I find her, then I'll have you help me with a problem I've been having with some of the more vocal people of the Crossroads that are against me. Piano is trying to help, but the Blackblood is too sensitive. I doubt you'll have the same problem she does." Vilivian rolled her shoulders, preparing her muscles for the work she was about to do.

Inari gave a sigh, already regretting turning to these two. They both seemed rather eager to go on the hunt, almost more than she was. While Sana was dangerous for sure and she needed to be stopped, she almost feared her two new companions just as much.

This eerie feeling only grew when they went to the river and found about a dozen Inari's waiting for them. Watching the two bloody fighters tear into multiples of her was certainly a disturbing sight as the two made short work of the twisted Crossguards. They both even seemed to enjoy tearing "her" apart over and over again, huge smiles on both of their faces.

While there were no clues as to where she was hiding there, the trio did not seem dissuaded. Turning their attention to the Crossroads as a whole, the three began to move forward into what would likely be a chaotic and violent search for where Sana Okagami was causing her mischief. But that is a story for another time...

For Fame (Aude, Piano, Raku):

Up in the Dragon's Post, the sky was always sunny and clear, the air perfectly crisp and clean as those that walked around it quickly discovered. Which made it the perfect place for one to set up an impromptu baseball game as needed.

Out on one of the baseball fields attached to the resorts, three contestants were clearly taking advantage of it. Sitting in the batter's box is Aude, wearing her usual attire as she tapped her bat to home base before getting into swinging position, eyes trained on the pitcher.

On the pitcher's mound is Piano, now dressed in an outfit more fit for playing baseball. She wore a simple purple shirt with gold stripes, along with a pair of purple shorts and a purple baseball cap that had holes for her longer horn, the other short enough to fit under the hat. Her ponytail peeked through the gap in the back of the hat as she rubbed her fingers along the baseball as she thought about what kind of pitch she would send Aude's way.

And out in the outfield, gathering wind to prepare for catching the ball no matter where it went was Raku. Her outfit consisted of mostly white, with hints of blue to brighten up the outfit. Her blue baseball cap helped keep her long mane out of her face as she kept her eyes out for the small ball that would likely be sent hurtling in her direction in just a moment.

Piano hid the ball behind her back as she adjusted her grip on the ball. She decided on a fastball at first, just to check the superstar's reflexes with the bat. Getting in a ready stance, she readied herself on the mound before delivering a blistering fast pitch right towards the fox girl.

And with a satisfying crack of the bat, the ball was sent flying straight towards the outfield, which Raku easily flew up to catch. Aude gave a confident smile, resting her chin on her bat as she leaned forward onto it. "C'mon Piano! You know better than to throw the ball straight into the catcher's mitt with me! Show me what you can really do to that ball!"

"You're right, I'm sorry..." Piano apologized, adjusting her cap to cover her eyes. She held her mitt towards Raku, receiving the caught ball once more as she took a stance on the mound. This time, she adjusted her grip to go for a curve ball, aiming for the upper portion of the strike box to try and trip up Aude's skills.

She wound her arm back, using a professional's stance and throwing technique as she launched the next baseball at Aude. Sure enough, part way to the superstar, the ball began to move up and to the left from her perspective. But it only took a slight adjustment of her grip before Aude was knocking the next ball out of the park... or close enough, with a wind dragon flying around to catch them.

"That was better. But you've got to be more confident with how you pitch if you want to trip me up." Aude gave a confident smirk, flipping the bat in her hand with a stylish flourish. "You told me you had some talent for baseball, so I want to start seeing it. And to do that, you've got to grow a spine!"

"Try not to push her too hard, Aude." Raku warned, walking over to the pitcher's mound to put a comforting hand on Piano's shoulder as she handed over the ball. "There's no need to stress yourself over this Piano. We agreed to help her practice, and that's all you really have to do."

"R-right. O-of course Raku." Piano stammered out, trying not to look too embarrassed as Raku tried to maintain eye contact with her. "B-but I don't want to disappoint Aude too much by not playing to her expectations. I'll try to do better..."

"If you're ok with it, then there's no problem. But if you're feeling overwhelmed, just give me a sign and I'll put an end to this little practice for you."

Raku gave Piano a confident smile, squeezing the shyer girl's shoulder comfortingly. Piano gave a small smile back, looking small despite being the same height as the dragon girl.

"Ahem." The two jumped as Aude loudly cleared her throat. "If you two lovebirds are done looking into each other's eyes, we do have a game to continue."

"L-I-I-I-lovebirds?!" Piano seemed panicked, her tail instantly winding tight around her wrist as her face turned a deep crimson.

"H-hey!" Raku seemed more combative, her face also red as she let go of Piano's shoulder and shook a fist at Aude. "I don't need to hear such things from you! I'm just trying to help her relax."

"Yeah yeah." Aude rolled her eyes, but she had a cocky smirk on her face as she popped herself back into batting position. "I'm already two oh on you, and I'm hoping to go for the triple."

"O-ok." Piano prepared herself to pitch once more as Raku quickly went back out into the outfield. She wound her arm back and sent the ball hurtling towards Aude. The fox girl was confident in herself and went to swing... only for the ball to sink under her swing and hit the metal fence behind her.

Aude looked at the ball as gravity dragged it to the ground, then looked to Piano with an incredulous look. "Ok. Not bad."

Setting the bat to lean on the fence, she walked over to grab her glove and the ball as Piano swapped positions with her. Aude made her way to the pitcher's mound, her tail swishing with mild annoyance while Piano tried to make herself look small heading towards the batter's box, her tail curled in on itself as she passed by the golden superstar. Neither felt the need to wear a helmet, trusting the skills or talents of the other to avoid getting hit by the ball.

“Current score is two one. Let’s see if I can’t make it five one.” Aude gave a cocky smile, leaning forward as she examined Piano. She stood up straight and looked at Raku, giving the dragon girl a nod, before turning quickly and delivering a blistering fastball towards Piano.

It was only through the talents Piano had stolen from others that she was able to even hit the ball. While she was surprised at the speed, the muscle memory of the talent instantly took over to give a satisfying smack of wood on ball as it went hurtling almost straight back and slightly up from Aude.

While Piano had been surprised by the speed of the pitch, Aude seemed ready for the return, leaping up slightly to try and catch it. Her glove tipped the ball slightly, slowing its speed and sending it arcing more, making it easier for Raku to reach out and catch the ball. Piano’s mismatched eyes were wide, as Aude turned back with a grin.

“Ok, so I guess I can’t get the clean sweep. But a game like this is more to the audience’s liking.” Her grin had an almost manic nature to it, her ears twitching as Piano looked around nervously.

“Wait, are we being watched?” Piano sounded almost scared. “Did you tell Miss X what we’re doing? I thought you said this was just going to be practice?”

“And it would be practice if people were watching. Practice for you showing off those baseball skills in front of a crowd. You and I, we could really show these local guys what a real baseball game looks like.”

“B-but isn’t it enough that I’m in the Cross Tournament?” Piano asked nervously, her grip on her bat tightening.

“Nope.” Aude said simply, before throwing a curveball Piano’s way. The Devil Blood adjusted her swing, before managing to hit the ball off to left field. “You’ve got some real talent hidden in there. You’ve got to show it off, you’ve got to put on a show for everyone to see, to show that you’re one of the best. Then we both can compete to see which of us is the best and put on a show for the audience.”

"I-I'm not too sure about this... But I wouldn't want to make you upset..." Piano looked conflicted, not sure what to do.

"That's enough of that." Raku was walking up with the ball, putting it in Aude's glove with some force. Aude winced, pulling the ball from the glove and shaking the hand to shake away the pain. "Can't you see you're scaring the poor girl?"

"She gets into fist fights with demons and trolls and other scary looking monsters, but she can't handle a small crowd?" Aude shook her head, looking annoyed. "I want to take her in front of the top teams in this town and replace their star players with her and I and show them what a ball game really looks like. Make their heads spin after we blow them away with our final rounds of the combat tournament."

"Why are you so obsessed with putting on a show?" Raku asked, her eyebrow raised as her tail slammed into the ground behind her as if to emphasize her words. "Why do you insist on pushing people who clearly aren't comfortable to go along with your game?"

"Because that's how life works." Aude shrugged, tossing the ball back into her glove a few times. "You want to make it anywhere, you've got to work hard, you've got to get noticed, and you've gotta shoot for the stars. And I'm not going to let anyone drag me down with their nervousness. She's going to have to learn to step up out of her brother's shadow and show the multiverse how much of a badass she really is. Otherwise, why did she even bother agreeing to this practice?"

"But you're just pushing all the pressure you're feeling onto her.." Raku pointed to Piano, who was looking down at home plate with a glum expression. "She's just trying to do her best to help you out, and I wanted to help you both out, which is why I'm here. But if you're just going to keep pushing her and bullying her beyond her breaking point, then I'm going to have to--"

"I still have one more pitch to receive," The two women arguing on the pitcher's mound nearly jumped as the small voice of Piano reached them. Looking at the Devil Blood, they could see she had a determined look on her face, the bat in her hand ready to swing the moment the pitch came out.

Aude gave a cocky smile, shooting it back towards Raku who frowned. "Well, you heard the girl. She's ready for her last pitch, so you better get ready to catch it. Not that you'll need to, cause she's not hitting this one."

"Ok. Just watch how you talk to her..." Raku warned, before turning to walk to the outfield again.

"...There's not really anyone watching." Aude admitted, not looking back at Raku, the dragon turning to look at the fox girl's back. "I was just doing it to try and rile up her competitive streak. She's certainly built up a backbone since she's been here. I just need to make sure it isn't going to break easily. That wouldn't be any fun to beat."

"...Ok..." Was all Raku could manage to say, making her way to her position as Aude's foot came off the mound as she stepped forward to throw the ball, sending it snaking low to try and throw Piano off.

Piano's talent tried to compensate for the pitch, but only barely managed to graze the ball, sending it spinning back behind her. Aude gave a grin and a wink, taking off her glove as she moved to switch with Piano.

"Three three. We're all evened up now. Let's see if one of us can pull ahead in this next round." Aude gave a stylish flourish with the bat as she took hold of it once more, spinning it in the air before catching it again and giving a practice swing.

Piano nodded, making her way towards the pitcher's mound. She stopped halfway there, turning back to Aude. "I-if you don't mind answering, what are you hoping to wish for if you win? Is fame really something you can wish for?"

Aude gave a scoffing laugh, shaking her head. "Who'd ever wish for fame? That's a waste of a wish when you can just earn it yourself? No, I've got another wish in mind. But I don't think I'll tell you yet. Maybe if you win this little practice, I'll tell you."

“Ok.” Piano nodded, stepping up to the mound and taking a long look at Aude. The two women stared at each other for a long time, as Raku slowly prepared herself to be ready to move quickly, sensing that this next pitch was likely going to be intense. The wind around Raku began to howl as she prepared to use it to get a burst of speed.

Piano got into her ready stance, keeping her eyes on Aude the whole time. Then with a step and a swing of her arm, the ball went hurtling towards the fox girl. Her verdant eyes narrowed, wondering why the Devil Blood sent another fastball. Just before she swung, however, she recognized the spin of the ball as a change-up, the ball beginning to slow as she realized this. Holding back her swing slightly more than she had been about to, her experience allowed the bat to slam into the ball and send it rocketing towards the back of the field.

Raku exploded into action as the ball went flying, hurling herself into the air after the small white projectile as it spun its way out of the field. But even with all of her speed, she still didn’t make it, the ball sailing just inches from her outstretched glove, flying off into the distance as Aude had successfully hit a homerun.

Aude gave a confident grin, tossing the bat casually to the side as she began to strut around the bases, proud of another victory and further proof of her superstardom. And the applause the other two gave her certainly helped stroke her ego further before they all went off to celebrate and relax together.

For Independence (Piano, Raku, Inari):

The crashing of waves below was always a comforting sound for Piano. She remembered the first time she heard the sound of surf crashing against rock, when she had traveled out of her home Cubby in Etch those years ago. It was the sound of peace, of serenity, of a lack of warfare that up until that point, she had never believed was even possible. Hearing it now, in this place, brought her back to that first moment that made her heart soar with joy at the prospect of freedom it gave her.

It didn't help that people like Raku and Inari were around to ruin that illusion.

Of course, those two likely had their own, independent reasons for coming to the cliffs overlooking Ume Bay as well. Piano reasoned that she didn't really have any way of asking for them to leave. If she could be there, there was no reason she could think of to make them go away.

But she certainly would prefer if she was left alone to meditate. Or at the very least, if they could stop arguing, it would be less bothering to her. Though she would still sense them nearby, which would still mess with her concentration, as they would make her nervous just being there.

"All I'm saying is that sunset is better than sunrise." Raku said pointedly, looking over at Inari as the ghost girl floated at eye level to her. "Not that sunrise isn't pretty in its own way. But if you want to show someone something, you'd show them the sunset."

"Well here's why I say sunrise is better." Inari countered. "Sunrise tells you that you made it to another day. That demons and monsters and crazy stalker exes and other dangers didn't get you in the night, and you can breathe easy knowing you're safe."

"But nobody is getting up on purpose early enough to see it." Raku tilted her head towards the beginning of the sunset as the sun began to dip in the sky. "But people will always make time to see the sunset, especially in places with a good view of it."

"But nobody's going to go 'Oh, thank goodness I got to see the sun go down again today. I'll be safe through the night now!'" Inari mocked. "No one in their right mind anyways. And the rising sun makes for a good start to one's day, no matter where you are."

"Here, why don't we have a third party settle this?" Raku stated plainly, looking to Piano. "Hey Piano! Mind settling something for us?"

Inari joined her gaze onto Piano, who almost seemed to shrink under the pair's eyes as she glanced towards them nervously. "Yeah, you'll be perfect for answering this. So which is better? Sunset, or sunrise?"

Piano's face darkened as it flushed from the attention, her eyes not meeting either of theirs. She looked to the ground, as if afraid that she would disappoint them by looking at them as she spoke.

"W-well," she began, stammering slightly. "I can definitely see the appeal of sunset. It's very pretty and nice to look at and makes a good end of the day..."

"Ha! See?" Raku seemed proud, chest forward and fists on her hips as she looked at Inari with a smug smile.

"... Plus, it being night time soon means that those without the ability to see in the dark have a harder time spotting you. And if an aerial attack is incoming, then if you turn off all the lights, they won't be able to spot the town and there'll be a greater chance for more people to survive.

"Yeah... wait, what?" Raku now looked confused and mildly concerned, looking at Piano.

"But sunset also means that you made it through the night like Inari said..." Piano continued, too embarrassed by being addressed to hear Raku and Inari's noises of confusion. "But in places with lots of water, mist tends to be prevalent in the morning, and with how sleepy most people are in the morning, an early surprise attack is also possible, so it's not a sure sign of safety... And also-"

"Hold up, hold up, hold up!" Inari shouted loudly, waving her hands in front of Piano's face as the Devil Blood jumped in fright from the noise. "Where the hell are you getting all these ideas from? I'm used to dealing with monsters and ghosts and other things that go bump in the night, but you're talking about all this stuff makes it sound like you've been in a warzone."

"W-well, y-yes, I have..." Piano admitted, making both of the other women react in shock once more. "The entire section of the world I'm from is in a large-scale war. Demons, angels, dragons,

giants, monsters, gods, and everything in between. And caught in the middle are regular people, forced to hide in bunkers before each major attack in the hope that we won't be found..."

"Oh wow..." Raku almost seemed at a loss for words, not sure what to say. "I'm sorry you had to go through all of that..."

"Yeah... Getting chased around by exorcists and monsters was pretty rough, but at least there were places for me to go that were safe. It sounds like you had nowhere to go." Inari looked concerned, reaching out to Piano who almost seemed to shrink at their sympathy.

"O-oh, it's ok!" Piano tried to comfort them instead. "It wasn't so bad, all things considered. My brother and I had to find other places to hide when it happened, but we were fine! We knew what we were doing!"

"Wait, I thought you said people hid in bunkers?" Raku pointed out. "Are you saying you didn't?"

"N-no..." Piano admitted again, to their horror. "It was expensive to get access to a bunker... Not to mention the insurance costs to maintain it..."

"You have to pay for safety in your world?" Inari protested, looking appalled. "That's so messed up! No wonder you'd join this tournament. A wish for some sort of peace, or at least provide somewhere safe for normal people, right?"

Piano shook her head, looking sad. "Unfortunately, I don't think the Ruler of All would accept that. He made the Cubby specifically to create the wars to keep his enemies busy with each other. The God Eater might be strong, but I doubt she'd continually override his will in the world he controls without me coming back to win the tournament often. And with the tournament being once a year, I don't think that would be enough..."

"This Ruler of All guy sounds like a major jerk." Inari stated plainly, crossing his arms.

“That’s a bit of an understatement...” Piano said timidly. “He’s a god-tyrant in the worst ways possible, destroying our world and reshaping it to suit his needs and whims. Anything outside of the bounds he decides on is met with swift and unmerciless judgment. Everyone lives in fear of his power.”

“And there’s nobody left to stand up to him then?” Raku asked, looking as if she would be willing to do so. “Everybody just accepts life under him?”

“In terms of rising up and overthrowing him, yes, there is no one that even remotely has a chance.” She shook her head. “He managed to slay gods casually and sundered an entire world. Nobody could even imagine defeating him, let alone overthrowing him.”

But then she gave a small smile. “But there are ways people retaliate against him. The reason he broke up the world and separated the people was to strip them of individuality and connection, taking away what made people special. So some of us look for ways to assert independence without taking direct action against him.”

The two other girls looked confused, looking at each other with raised eyebrows before turning back to Piano. “What do you mean by that?” Inari decided to speak up first, floating up to the two taller girl’s eye levels.

“There are little things people do to show that their spirits were not fully crushed.” Piano explained, looking slightly more confident. Her tail flicked behind her somewhat and her smile grew slightly. “Like naming shops after locations in the world before the sundering, keeping traditions from the past, recording events in a way that doesn’t please the Ruler, stuff like that. Things they can hide amongst themselves, hidden in the shadows his agents don’t look. That’s where people in our world typically go to truly live as themselves.”

“I see.” Raku said calmly. “And I suppose you are one of those people, quietly fighting back?”

Piano's face instantly drained in color, her happy tail movement instantly stopping as it curled around her wrist protectively. "W-w-w-what do you mean by that? H-how could you possibly think of that?"

"You said 'some of us' just a second ago." Raku said simply, a proud smile crossing her face. Piano's hands instantly went to her mouth as Inari also began to grin, floating next to Piano now as the young devil girl looked embarrassed. "That certainly sounds like you are one of those people that's sticking it to this Ruler of All."

"Wow, I didn't know you had it in you, Piano." Inari said slyly, nudging Piano's ribs with her elbow. Piano buried her face in her hands even further, trying to hide every inch of her expression as she almost tried to curl into herself. "Here I was thinking you were all meek and shy, and yet in your world you're practically standing up to a god! Guess you can't judge a book by its cover... except your brother, of course. That's a book whose cover I wished stayed closed."

"I-i-i'm not that special..." Piano mumbled into her hands, though the other two clearly heard her over the crashing surf below. "A-a-all I really do is travel around with my brother and help him out..."

"And yet here you are, in another place entirely in the multiverse, fighting in a tournament to get a wish for yourself." Inari pointed out, floating down to try and meet Piano's covered eyes. "I bet he doesn't like it when people leave his world."

"A-a-a-any immigration, both in or out of the world, is m-m-met with harsh punishment..." Piano confirmed, sounding terror-stricken at the thought. "I-i-if the Ruler's men ever found out about my brother and I leaving, they would s-s-surely come after us to kill us..."

"I'd like to see them try." Raku said, cracking her knuckles as she did. "While I'm sure you'd probably have them eating dirt, I certainly wouldn't mind teaching them a lesson or two for trying to mess with you."

“You can count me in too.” Inari said, punching her fists together with some excitement. “I’m used to dealing with holier-than-thou types picking on people weaker than them. What’s a few more under my belt?”

“B-but aren’t you both helping out Senko too?” Piano asked, looking confused, but a little more confident as she removed her hands from over her face.

“If you don’t think I can’t protect you both, you’d be wrong.” Raku said with confidence, standing taller than Piano despite both girls being the same height.

“I’m sure Senko would insist on us helping you even if we didn’t want to.” Inari reasoned, the blue glow on her arms seemed brighter in the moment. “Besides, Saki can keep her safe for us for just a few moments while we send some guys packing. I’ve got two hands, and both of them are meant to protect others.”

Piano looked at the two with slightly watering eyes, still looking small but starting to stand up straight again. “You guys don’t have to do that...” When the two of them glared at her fiercely, she shrank slightly once more. “... but thank you both anyways.” She gave them a genuine smile.

“No problem.”

“Happy to help.”

Both women gave the Devil Blood a big smile. The three shared in the moment for a bit, before Raku’s gaze suddenly went past the two in front of her to the landscape behind them.

“By the way, Piano...” Raku said slowly, looking at her as she tilted her head. “You never really settled our debate. Which is better, sunset or sunrise?”

“Right, you didn’t finish that!” Inari said, wheeling back towards Piano. “Come on, you have to pick one!”

"I-i... B-but I..." Piano stammered, holding her hands up as the two approached her.

The next couple hours involved the two of them slowly needling Piano for an answer one way or another, as Piano tried her best to appease them both and curl into the smallest ball a person is capable of being, embarrassed to no end.

For Purpose (Vilivian, Taleus, Aude):

The rushing water of the Zo River would ordinarily present a huge challenge for the unprepared or for the weak. Vilivian, of course, was neither of those, so the river proved to be no challenge for her. Sat on one of the rocks jutting out from the center of the river, she stretched out her limber legs as if preparing to exercise, before returning to a relaxed position as the spray of rushing water danced across her skin. She could feel the clothes Saki gave to her begin to stick to her skin, and she would've sooner simply been rid of the thing and enjoy the comforts of the river in peace.

But the male and the fox girl sat on the shore across from her made that impossible.

The male's blood ran with an almost twisting path, moving through his veins both impossibly quick and agonizingly slow as it moved. It smelled of a sort of richness that she had never smelled in any other mortal, a powerful, heady smell that nearly overwhelmed her senses. It didn't quite have the quality of the Blackblood's dark ichor, but it was certainly special in its own right. It felt untamed, yet under control. Powerful, yet subdued. It was a mixture of strange feelings, and all of them broiled in a way that matched its owner's disposition perfectly.

In comparison, the fox girl's blood had a rather normal feel about it. It luckily didn't have the drunken stupor that the Trickster's blood had whenever she was around the drunken goddess, nor did it seem to possess any special qualities compared to most people. It had a quickened motion about it, denoting her status as some sort of athlete or physical person, and the smell was pleasant, but otherwise unnoteworthy. A perfectly normal person's blood, all things told.

The fox girl- Aude, her name was, Vilivian remembered- was calling out to her, waving her hand above her head as if to get her attention. "Hello? Crossroads to Vilivian? You ok out there? You look cold with all those wet clothes. Maybe you should come dry off before you get sick! You still have a match to fight, don't you?"

"I do." Vilivian confirmed with a nod of her head. "But this meditation shouldn't cause me any harm. This is nothing compared to what I'm used to."

"Are you sure?" Aude raised an eyebrow. "Your clothes are practically sticking to you from how wet you are. I didn't even think clothes could get that wet without practically falling apart. And how would that look if you walked through town naked cause all the stitching fell out from getting wet."

"Why should I care what others think of me in this town?" Vilivian asked, tilting her head. "Most of the town already sees me as a monster after my last round. I doubt their opinions of me will be changed from seeing me without clothes on."

"Welcome to the club." the male- Taleus, she thinks- intoned, sounding almost bored. "It's like they've never seen an assassin at work before. What, do they think all of our jobs are pretty just because of what they see on TV? Sometimes a job gets nasty."

Vilivian was also confused by the job of assassin. Humans already struggled to fend off monsters as it was, it was strange to imagine they would waste time and energy killing each other in such a way. But looking at this male, she could easily feel the bloodlust coming from him, his six crimson eyes looking at her as if trying to see how to take her down. But he also showed restraint despite that, keeping from lunging at her as they talked.

"And what did you do to earn the ire of the common people, Male?" Vilivian asked curiously, tilting her head at him.

"I'm not sure exactly." Taleus admitted, shrugging his shoulders. "I think the thing that pissed them off the most was cutting off that one mummy girl's arms. But how else did they want me to

take her out, kill her? I'm sure they'd be mad at me for that too. Just can't win with these people."

"I see." Vilivian looked thoughtful, stretching out one of her legs. "Would this happen to be the girl that the Spirit User and Dragon both squabble over?"

"That's the one." Aude chimed in, her tail swishing behind her as she shifted her stance as a spray of water made her lean back. "I took a bit of a hit in popularity for my first round, but I think the second round made up for it. What about you, Vilivian? What made you so hated?"

Vilivian tilted her head, stretching out her other leg as she reached for her toes to stretch her muscles out fully. "My first round was against the Child, the one related to Saki. He held his own rather well, so most people seemed ok with it even as my transformation scared them."

"That doesn't sound too bad." Aude commented, Taleus nodding fervently next to her with his eyes closed.

"But in my second match, I pushed my opponent to reach for his true heights. Many thought that I was tormenting my opponent needlessly, but I wanted him to feel the pride his position as a soldier warranted so that I would have a complete victory. I guess the audience misinterpreted my intentions and called me a monster after that."

Taleus and Aude stood silently as they heard this, both of them looking down at the water with similar crossed arms as they thought. Surprisingly, it was Taleus who spoke first.

"Why did you do that?"

"Why did I do what exactly?" Vilivian asked, opening her eyes to look at him.

"Why did you push him like that?" Taleus thought for a second, trying to find the right words for it. "You're fighting for a wish too, right? So why would you risk losing just for some pride? A victory is

a victory, regardless of how prideful they feel. Getting the job done is the whole point.”

Vilivian looked even more confused, sitting back up to look directly at him. “Because that’s part of the reason I left my position to join this tournament; to look at the purposes others have for being here and testing mine against theirs.”

“And that’s worth putting a wish at risk?” Taleus seemed confused, a few of his eyes narrowing as he looked at her. “Just cut them down and get it done with. Prove that you’re strong enough to earn it.”

“I kind of agree with her approach, actually.” Aude chimed in, as both of the others turned towards the baseball superstar. “If you beat them too quickly, then it’s not entertaining enough for the audience. You’ve got to let the crowd get riled up by the intensity of the fight, before you pull out the big move to earn the win!”

Vilivian now looked at Aude with some confusion, crossing her legs as she leaned in. “Why should the opinions of the non-warriors have any effect as to how two people risking life and limb in combat conduct themselves?”

“Because this whole tournament is meant to be a source of entertainment for the people here!” Aude replied simply, gesturing widely as if to reference the town behind her. “If we weren’t meant to entertain them, they wouldn’t go through all the effort of broadcasting it and having Miss X commentating and all of that! The show is the point! So we’ve got to put on just as much of a show as our desire to earn that wish!”

Taleus just shook his head, clicking his tongue. “If they want to be entertained in fighting, then why don’t they do it themselves? What’s the point in just watching? You don’t get anything out of it.”

“I must agree with the male.” Vilivian got an asconsced look from Taleus at that, though he didn’t seem sure why he should be offended exactly. “There’s nothing to be gained by simply spectating a match. One proves themselves by pushing themselves to the limit on the battlefield and going beyond. It’s why I keep pushing the Blackblood so that she can achieve her best.”

“That shy wallflower?” Aude asked incredulously, tilting her head to the point that it looked like her crown was going to fall off. “She’s got some flashy skills, but her personality is anything but. She might put up a bit of a fight, but I doubt she’ll push someone like you to your limit.”

Vilivian gave Aude a withering look, causing the fox girl’s ears to lower before she regained her courage to glare back at the Matriarch. “If that’s your assessment of the Blackblood, then there’s nothing I can do to change your mind. But I’ve felt her gain a purpose for herself in these few days she’s fought. If someone’s going to put up a fight worthy of witnessing, it’s someone in the same position as me.”

Taleus just gave a cocky smile at that, crossing his arms again as he took a defiant stance. “You didn’t know what purpose you serve? No wonder you have time to think about stupid things like that.”

Vilivian rounded her focus over to him, who didn’t even flinch as the demon woman’s gaze fell upon him with a look that would crush a lesser man. “I had another purpose once. But when I was given a chance to pursue another purpose I was given the idea for centuries ago, I decided to take it. But until I knew I was going to face the Blackblood, I was still unsure if my purpose for coming here was right. But feeling her solidify her own goals, I knew I couldn’t face her with a blunted blade.”

“Yeah, you gotta have some motivation to put on a good fight to make it all worth it.” Aude agreed, nodding. “The crowds like a fight where both sides are putting their all into it, putting their very dreams on the line! It’s too bad that my first opponent didn’t really have much motivation. My second did, and she put on a hell of a show. And looking at my final, I don’t doubt she’ll be able to put on a show too.”

Taleus still looked confused, turning to Aude while shaking his head. “But that doesn’t matter when this tournament is over? I certainly don’t care what the people I kill have to do for their purpose in life. Do you guys even care about the people you kill when you get back home.”

“I’m a superstar.” Aude said with a shrug. “I mostly just beat back jealous competitors and noisy paparazzi reporters for the most part. It’s only when I take the field that who I’m up against matters.”

Vilivian looked at the two with a thoughtful expression, leaning forward towards them. "For a long time, I didn't particularly care for what the people I killed thought. Most of them were merely humans looking for eternal youth. Most I knew wouldn't even survive past me, so I let them impale themselves upon the threats beyond me."

"For a long time means your opinion has changed." Aude pointed out, her tail flicking. She adjusted her crown, feeling it slip as her hair began to dampen from the spray of water from the rushing river they were talking over.

"Correct." Vilivian confirmed with a nod. "I was met with another challenger who brought a blade of silver to defeat me, as the others had before him. But this one moved with a different air, and within what felt like an eternity, I was brought to the brink of death by this male. But even as I lay dying, he bent down and brought me back. From there, he taught me things about humans I had never even experienced before. I learned more about humans in those few days than I learned from fighting them for centuries."

"And you learned to appreciate them from then on?" Aude asked, tilting her head.

"I learned that humans are much more complex than I had given them credit for while I was the Sentinel of Graal." Vilivian shrugged. "Most have proven that to not be the case, calling me a monster. But then there are those that prove themselves to be more interesting. And with this opportunity to obtain a wish, it's allowed me to see humanity in more facets than I did sitting in that hole in the ground. It's been eye-opening, though it's left me with more questions than answers."

"If it's messing with you so much, then you should stop asking questions." Taleus pointed out, brushing a wet strand of hair from in front of his crimson eyes. "It sounds like things were simpler before you met that guy. And it's not like getting to know normal people has made you happy. If anything, they hate you more now that they've gotten a good look at you."

"That's not exactly fair either..." Aude looked at him with a sharp look, trying to retort. "It's not like everyone's-"

“The male has a point, Athlete.” Vilivian cut in, standing up and leaping over to stand with them again, the three shorter finalists nearly eye to eye with each other. “I think for now, I’ll focus on the Blackblood and see what purpose arises from my clash with her.”

“If you say so...” Aude crossed her arms for a moment, before a shiver made her shake herself, especially her tail as she flung drops of water from it. “For now though, I’d like to focus on getting changed into dry clothes and getting something warm in my belly. I’ve heard Saki’s got some sort of fish soup she’s making today, and I want to see if it’s any good.”

“Right.” Vilivian nodded. “The Child and I caught some fish this morning, so I suppose the Bartender is having to go through all of it.”

“Food does sound good.” Taleus agreed, making his way towards the Crossroads. “A full stomach and a bloodied blade make for a fulfilling day.”

“But you both better change first before you try to eat!” Aude called as Vilivian followed the Perpetual. Both of them turned to her with a blank expression, causing the fox girl to groan in anguish as she chased after them, likely to force them back into dry clothes as another peaceful day took over the Crossroads.

To Those that Support (Michiko, Forte, Michaelis, Armel):

“Three cheers for the finalists!~”

There was a clinking of cups as the fox deity led the celebration, their cups of alcohol swishing as the five gathered joined in her cheer. At the head of the table was the Goddess of the Crossroads, in her usual Chifu persona. Her rosy cheeks indicated that she had already started the “celebrations” well before the others gathered to meet her.

To her immediate right is Michiko, the Perpetual lounging comfortably on the cushions the group were all sat upon. She swirled her cup in her hand, clearly enjoying the luxury of the drink as she kept her eyes on Chifu. Across from the assassin, the walking bibliography that is Forte was likewise leaned in to examine his fellow tablemates, wearing a more relaxed attire by only wearing his dress shirt and vest as he let his pen-like wand rest on the nearby table. He eyed the woman across from him with a raised eyebrow, the silent contest they had begun over Chifu continuing as they silently postured close to the goddess.

Across the table from all of the shenanigans around Chifu were two other males, one living and one not. Michaelis kept his eye on the duo sat to either of Chifu’s side, wondering how well this was going to go. He looked to his fellow member of team calm, Armel, who floated above his own cushion, taking sips of his drink as he gave Michaelis a shrug, who then took a sip of his own drink.

Chifu, seeming to either be unaware or ignoring the two trying to stake their claim on her, raised her glass in another cheer and a drunken smile on her face. “This tournament has been so much fun~ All of your fighters have proven to be such wonderful additions~ Good job on supporting them thus far~”

Michiko gave a grin, looking at Chifu from over her drink. “Taleus has certainly been doing a fantastic job in this tournament~ We partially put him up to the challenge as a way to prove himself and push him to get stronger, but he’s more than shown himself capable. He’s even brought in more jobs for us Perpetuals in just these few days. We’re going to be swimming in jobs and money over the next few months thanks to him.”

Forte gave a toast to Chifu’s words, faking another sip of his alcohol as he had a proud smirk on his face. “My blood-kin is certainly a most formidable force on the fields of melee and bloodshed. While I had been much afeared her demure demeanor would give rise to a pacifistic tendency that would detract from her overall martial capabilities, she has nevertheless resolved to far greater feats of physical prowess than she’s displayed in past engagements. I have found this little endeavor to

have been an act most miraculous for her disposition when it comes to accomplishing tasks of a more visceral nature.”

Michaelis just nodded along with Forte’s words, understanding them all individually but nearly being overrun by them all at once. When the wordsmith was finished, the doctor spoke up. “Raku’s done very well for herself in this contest, as expected of the Fyujinn heir. Her behavior in the last match was a little concerning, so I hope she can keep a handle on herself for her final match. Especially with an opponent as intense as hers.” He gave a look to Michiko, who simply gave him a grin and a flirty wave. He shrugged at that response, before looking to Armel at his side.

The Young Emperor gave a tilt of his head, as if thinking about Aude’s performance again. “Well, she’s certainly put on a good showing so far, if I had to put it into words. We still have some things to work on, but she’s doing fine as far as the tournament goes.”

“‘Some things to work on’ you say?~ Do tell~” Chifu teased, leaning forward dangerously onto the table as if to listen to every word from Armel.

The ghost would’ve flushed if he could, before clearing his throat. “That’s not what I meant. Either way, I don’t really think that it’s something I should get into with a bunch of strangers. It is a bit of a private matter.”

“Forsooth. It would be terribly rude of us all to assay the young specter with further prying into the dubious affairs of his personal qualms with the woman who’s headpiece he currently presides within as an abode. After all, I can scarce imagine the offense any one of your number would launch at such an invasive display of curiosity as to the matters of your personal matters outside the confines of this tourney’s completion.”

Armel looked at Forte confused, unsure of whether the writer was helping him or making fun of him. The smirk on the Devil Blood’s face made it hard to tell which emotion he was portraying, instead, he cleared his throat, looking away as violet and gold stared right back at him.

“Right. Thanks.” Armel then grasped for an alternate topic instead as Chifu leaned back, pouting before taking another sip of her drink as she shot a glare towards the writer. “No matter what’s

going on with Aude, her opponent is going to be a pretty big problem. The way she practically tore apart her previous opponent was certainly scary.”

“Ah, the ghost girl.” Michiko piped up, leaning to one side casually as if she wasn’t trying to get closer to Chifu as she spoke. “She’s certainly quite the fighter. If Taleus didn’t already have the position, she might have been approached to become a member. After her last fight, I’d say she’s almost has the qualifications...”

“Huh?” Armel looked at Michiko confused. “What do you mean by that?”

“Oh nothing. Just thinking out loud...” Michiko leaned further, almost putting her head on Chifu’s lap. Unfortunately for her, Chifu leaned over closer to Forte’s side to grab at the booze on the table, causing the assassin to nearly fall over. The other three tried not to laugh too loudly as she sat up, shooting a glare at the writer who had clearly moved the alcohol there just for that moment.

“Speaking of scary opponents,” Michaellis spoke up after recovering, looking to Forte who raised an eyebrow his way, “your sister’s opponent is pretty intimidating too Forte. What was her name, Vilivian?”

“Ah yes, the beast in the guise of a human.” Forte almost seemed to wave away the apparent threat of the woman with a flick of his hand. “She certainly holds her own in terms of martial capabilities and magical might. Mayhaps most powerfully in both regards in all matters save for the likes of Armius and Yamarashi.”

“Aren’t you worried about your sister going up against her? I mean, from what I saw of her matches, she had to lose quite a bit of blood to beat her other two opponents.” Michaellis knew the dangers of that much blood loss, and thought that Forte’s lack of concern was troubling. “If she had to lose more blood to beat someone like Vilivian, she could go into shock and die before she wins. Maybe even after she wins.”

“My sister is well aware of the mortal limitations of her form.” Forte assured, turning fully to address the cat-man. “She has trained her body to non-magical perfection, honing techniques that masters of the martial arts have been cultivating for millenia. If anything, I would imagine my kin has as much ken in martial prowess as her opponent, if not greater. I’d ask that you pass some of your concern towards her opponent, as much as you pray for my sister.”

“Well, aren't you confident in her skills?” Michiko asked, putting her drink to the side as she leaned her head on a hand, a pipe now in her hand as she prepared to smoke. “I wonder how a match with Taleus would’ve gone? I’m sure killing her with a blade made of her own blood would be an appropriate finish for such a match.”

“My sister has fought monsters of great size without use of that unique implement of hers to cut down the range disadvantage.” Forte gave a casual shrug, looking at Michiko with mild amusement. “And while her experience with monsters, magic crafters, and other such forces are rather well-trod paths for her martial career, her experience with assassins is lacking for certain. I’d pray that your Taleus would prove to me a most apt opponent for her, that he might enlighten her as to the tactics to prepare her defenses for future encounters.”

The two other boys leaned back in their cushions slightly, the clear tension between Forte and Michiko almost visible between them as they eyed each other with dagger sharp gazes. Their sickly sweet smiles they gave each other did nothing to hide the obvious venom they had for each other, though it did seem to fool an oblivious Chifu as she continued to happily drink as her face grew more and more red as she got sloshed.

“Oh really? You think your sister could take on a Perpetual just like that?” Michiko asked with mock surprise, putting a hand to her cheek to try and sell the act. “How impressive she must be. Maybe I should pay her a visit before her next match to wish her luck.”

“Forsooth?” Forte asked, a dangerously bemused tone in his voice. “What a strange twist of fate, for I had also imagined myself conducting an interview with the young Taleus. Get to know just what the mindset of the freshest Perpetual as he strives for his wish... wait, to what end has the bloodied assassin taken up the blade in this tourney again?”

Michiko took a drag of her pipe, to give her mouth something to do besides deliver the first threat that sat at the tip of her tongue. Once she cooled down slightly, she composed herself enough to respond. “He’s here because he wants to attain greater power to be useful to the Perpetuals.”

“And that matter has naught to do with your interest in accosting the God Eater for your own personal leisure?” Forte asked, a pleased smirk on his face as he leaned forward.

Michiko just shrugged uncaringly, a smirk returning to her face as she blew smoke in his direction. “Like you’re any better. I’m sure you roped your sister into joining this tournament just to get a chance to ‘interview’ her yourself.”

Forte raised an eyebrow, leaning back in his cushion as Chifu began to slur her words, her head slowly descending onto the table as she muttered drunkenly to herself. Michaelis and Armel looked to the fading Chifu, then to each other, before looking back to the dueling two. Compared to the fights they saw from the actual warriors, this felt much more dangerous. Partially because for the first time, they were in the range of the danger.

“Do you wish to imply that I would threaten the well-being of my own blood, merely in an attempt to catch an interview with a figure, important as she may be?” Forte’s wand was in his hand, spinning the pen-like device in his hand with all the weight of a loaded gun. “That I would risk the precious and only life of the one that’s been at my side for most of my days? To that person do you suggest I rendered towards harm’s path in order to satiate my own occupational desires?”

“The very same.” Michiko said simply, the assassin too cool-blooded to be scared by the implicit threat in Forte’s voice. Clearly the author didn’t scare someone of her caliber very easily. “You seem like the type to do whatever you have to in order to get what you want. I respect that, of course. Though it must be so heartless of you to put your sister in danger just to talk to a little fox girl.”

“As an author, making the time for the act of conversing with figures of decent import. But to what end does an assassin of some renown and import go to speak the self-same figure? I would imagine a skilled butcherer of men would have more bloodshed to conduct that would not necessitate such excursions into frivolity. Or mayhaps your claims of prowess are mere exaggerations of said feats, as a skald might for the story of an epic battle of their favored warriors.”

“Are you calling me a liar?” Michiko’s voice dipped low, another cloud of smoke billowing from her mouth almost like a dragon’s breath.

"I would never deign to call out the bluffs of a woman. Such acts are part and parcel to the wiles of their character, which allows one to be endearing as one can be. To take that away would be as if to deprive a knight his armor, or a mage their staff. An irreconcilable aberration of the natural social order of things."

"I didn't take you for one to be considerate of what should be." Michiko mocked him, leaning back. "I figured you are the type to take what you want and then leave without another word."

"What a barbaric accusation you would levy against me." Forte seemed vaguely offended, although his insufferable smirk still remained on his face. "First you accuse me of merely being here to flaunt about with a goddess, then you accuse me of being a blackguard of ill-repute. Mayhaps we should consult the source of our conflict to opine about her preferred behavior of conversation partner?"

The two turned to the spot where Chifu had been sitting, only to notice that she was gone. The pair looked confused, before turning to the other two. As they did, they noticed that Michaelis was sitting back down onto his cushion, going into a rather formal pose as he returned. Looking up as he got comfortable, he noticed the glare of the two verbal warriors were centered solely onto him.

"Oh, sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt." His twin tails flicked behind him, calming his nerves as he addressed the two. "Chifu looked like she had already worn herself out, and I didn't want her to catch a cold sleeping out here. So I took her to Saki to return her to her room. Hopefully we can finish up the celebrations without her."

The blue haired woman gave a slight pout, before taking a puff of her pipe to avoid speaking. Forte gave a sigh, shaking his head in slight disappointment as he set his wand back down onto the table.

"It is little to be remiss upon. We should allow our gracious host to enjoy the serene embrace of slumber's hold. We shall conduct ourselves with great festivities in her stead."

Forte took hold of his cup, giving it another raise into the air in toast, which the other three matched after a moment's hesitation. They all took another sip, before all four set the cups down at the same time.

"So, now we're going to have to find something to do before the final matches really begin." Armel chimed in, speaking for the first time in a while now that hostilities seemed to have settled thanks to Michaelis' intervention. "I know all of them are busy getting to relax before they all have to fight each other to one end or another. Luckily, we don't have to worry about fighting each other, but I suppose we'd want to focus on helping the one we're trying to support."

"I think that's a good idea, Armel." Michaelis tried to encourage the ghost, rubbing his arm as best as he could. "I brought some tea with me that I was going to make for Rakurai, but I wouldn't mind sharing with others. I'm sure you all would appreciate the taste of some of my brews."

Forte looked intrigued at that idea, setting his cup to the side. "It has certainly been some time since I've enjoyed a potable concoction of the drainage of the fortune teller's herbal trade. I pray that the Fuyujinn household is possessed of leaves and brewing techniques of impeccable quality."

Michaelis had a look of some pride on his face, his back going straight and his tail moving behind him as a prideful smile graced his face. "Don't worry a bit about that. Raku's grandfather was able to gather a number of different plants from his journeys around the realm he protected and brought them home. They make the best quality teas, and I was trained on how to bring out their flavor in the best possible ways. I'll have you asking for more by the time you've finished the first cup."

"You seem rather proud of your skills." Michiko commented, giving him a wink. "I'll have to take some time from my otherwise busy schedule to have a cup or two. I was also thinking of exploring some other parts of the city while Taleus is goofing off. I was hoping one of you gentlemen could accompany me around town."

"I suppose if Aude and I aren't busy, I could take a look around myself." Armel offered. "I didn't get much time to look around before the matches, and the last time I did, I ran into Inari and had to deal with that weirdness. After that, I got caught up in trying to talk with Aude after the first match."

Hopefully we can get a good look around.”

“Hopefully.” Michiko replied in a teasing tone. “I was also thinking of looking at the hot springs. Would you be able to take me there? Or are you too loyal to that fox girl of yours?”

Armel looked a little embarrassed, turning his head away to avoid looking at the illusionist. Michaelis stepped in, imposing his hand between them. “Now now, there’s no need to tease the boy like that, Michiko. I’m sure you can organize a hot springs day with the other girls. Maybe it might be a good idea for the guys to do the same.”

“It’s a shame that most of the guys lost their rounds so early.” Armel said, somewhat remorsefully. “While they’re still around, some of them are still dealing with the fact they lost. They might need a little more time to themselves.”

“That’s true. But even just the three of us and Taleus might be nice.” Michaelis looked at Michiko. “The boy could use some time interacting with other guys in a normal way for probably the first time in his life.”

“Knock yourselves out.” Michiko shrugged. “Luckily, none of you are really fighters, so he might be able to stay calm around you all. Too weak for him to bother trying to fight, unlike the girls.”

“Oh...” Armel suddenly seemed less enthused about the idea. “Well, that’s good I suppose...”

“We can also try to find other things to do as well.” Michaelis added, gesturing towards the rest of them. “After all, it’s not like we’ll be kicked out when the tournament ends. And maybe the others will be open to ideas too, once the sadness of losing their matches wears off.”

The other three began to nod, before one by one they added ideas and reinforcements to the plans of the others. The rest of the celebration mostly went well, although Forte and Michiko still continued to exchange snipes at each other. But other than vague, non-specific threats that the two gave each other, the rest of the night went pleasantly, with Michiko and Michaelis getting

decently drunk while Forte and Armel stayed sober.

The latter two helped the former two when the night came to a close, future plans firmly put together as all went to sleep that night with smiles on their faces. Especially Chifu herself, who hugged her pillow close to herself with a huge smile on her face, this year's tournament being a roaring success both in and out of the arena. She hoped that next year would be just as successful for her as this one was.

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