

Angelique & Vivi

by JadedStrayHyena

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Reference Sheet

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Audition	Passed
Round 1	Lost to Piano & Forte
Round 2	
Round 3	
Tournament Status:	Lost in R1

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[Angelique & Vivi] Audition: Don't Call This Determination

What is the crueler fate? To be continually subjected to torment and pain by outside forces? Or subjecting oneself to the same?

Inside a sparsely lit room sat a young woman. She was trying to make herself as blind to all emotion and thought as she currently was as far as most of the details in it. She sat in the middle of the room - across from her plush bed and away from the door and the small desk and office chair in the room. The window was as shut as her mind. She would have to address it all eventually - unfortunately as she would put it - but for now, she sat cross-legged in that spot with her focus solely on three bubbles around her head.

Colored black and gray, the bubbles were barely visible in the room teeming with shadows. Occasionally, they rippled and warped like something was attempting to break out intermittently. But they mostly remained serene around her like a large lava lamp. This was something she was taught to constantly practice - she didn't have much choice in the matter.

Focus on only the magic...your breathing... It does not control you, you control it...

Then she heard something at the furthest edges of her hearing - beyond the four walls of her room. The bubbles shimmered with the magic within them reacting to her lapse in focus.

Tune it out...just Vivi trying out a new recipe or something...

After pushing out the thoughts she invited in of the successes and failures of her roommate's cooking excursions, the bubbles stabilized once more. But soon more noises poked at her

concentration. They weren't the sounds of cooking at all. There was too much movement for that.

I don't care if she finds something to amuse herself, but I told her how annoying these control exercises are when it's not quiet - and what happens when I screw it up! What is she doing down there--?

Her thoughts quickly cut off to address the bubbles now in distressing flux like a visualization of a bass-heavy song. Breathing slowed as she got back to taming her magic, but the noises of curiosity had already slithered into her mind and were slowly gobbling up her focus like the favored prey they were.

She could have just dispelled the bubbles and cancelled the control exercise, but she wouldn't do it. No one would blame her for stopping this...no one but herself.

She went through every bit of the proper technique she was taught. But she wasn't seeing much change at first. That caused frustration and only siphoned more focus from her. The bubbles continued to be on the verge of popping, but the young woman refused to move an inch in a continued attempt to take back control. She felt compelled to try to wrangle the volatile magic orbs back to stable forms like she was taught.

One bubble proved more receptive to her efforts than the others. Slowly it returned to a stable state.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

The other two bubbles didn't agree with this however and took the third with them by majority vote. The sounds of the bubbles exploding were closer to gunshots ringing out. They could be heard far beyond the room and the house in general. Black and gray stained the walls for a few moments; the gray faded like smoke until they became nothingness and the black slid down the walls like liquid, mixing with the shadows of the room before they too became nothing.

But the young woman wasn't as concerned with the outside world or the potential staining at the moment given she was knocked to the nearest wall head-first. A lamp fell from the shockwaves but didn't break upon hitting the ground. Her short blond hair was disheveled as she was quite literally knocked head over heels from her starting position. As she rolled herself right-side up, flicking her hair out of her eyes, she huffed and scowled to herself.

Years later, she's still right... Control is a bitch...

"Angie, you alright in there?"

The blonde didn't answer immediately as she stood up and dusted herself off, inspecting her body for any injuries. Head - fine. Torso - all good. Legs - feeling odd but only from sitting cross-legged for so long.

Her arms...her arms. She often found herself staring at them - her greatest frenemies - in random moments like this.

"Angelique!?! Are you hurt?"

She finally looked away from her arms as the voice of her roommate now emanated from right behind her door. She looked around the room, cursing not having a better place to practice.

"I'm fine...give me a minute..."

"Just checking. Got something to show you that you may like!"

Angelique had to wonder if that was what caused the noises that disturbed her. Her roommate knew what she liked and could consistently lift her spirits, but she doubted it would fully make up for another explosive ending to her magic control practice. She could cast just fine in her opinion - so the fact that the odds of her completing the exercise on any day could accurately be decided by a coin flip was aggravating. It's been years without feeling like she's made a large enough dent in progress.

It's a line she felt painfully reflected elsewhere in her life.

Eventually, she opened the door. Her golden locks were smoothed down quickly. She was still in blue pajamas with one button near the top not present. The sleeves were quite long - going right down to her fingers.

Before her was her roommate - a dark tan and very built woman with uncombed black hair that just teased her shoulders. Dressed in violet banana shorts and a white sports bra, the woman grinned as Angelique's face became visible. It's the smile that showed her very sharp teeth.

In her large, cupped hands was a little white fox with red markings from temple to tail staring up at her. She knew Angelique loved animals.

“Viola, where did you--”

“This little guy got in through the window!” Viola replied.

Angelique’s eyes widened. The little fox was adorable and the markings on it were so intriguing to her. Viola knew her too well. But as joy filled her expression like a balloon, she noticed something in the fox’s mouth. It was a crimson envelope with golden trim and a seal depicting some kind of lotus flower.

When Angelique finally diverted her attention to said envelope, she stopped blinking and simply stared at it. Viola wasn’t sure if Angelique was still breathing for a moment. Then there was a sudden whiplash as her eyes widened in a type of panic but her mouth was stretched wide and her teeth were bared in rage.

This worried Viola. This *frightened* the white fox. The blonde looked like the sight of the envelope was about to make her shriek at horrific levels and tear heads off without using her hands.

Instead, she quickly retreated into her room, slamming the door in their faces. *Then* they heard her scream along with objects being thrown to the ground.

“Angie? Are--?”

“WHO THE HELL WOULD SEND ME ANOTHER ONE OF THESE THINGS!?”

“You get invited to things that often?”

It was a while before Angelique responded. They couldn’t tell from outside of her room, but she was quite literally shaking. What Viola *could* tell from outside Angelique’s bedroom was that Angelique’s magic was *surging*.

“More...than half...of these damn tournaments or magical challenges I took came in mysterious and fancy envelopes...” came a growl. “Not one of these stupid things have gone well and yet someone seeks me out for another like I’m on a damn subscription service for this!”

“Maybe your time elsewhere got you more of a fanbase than you thought?”

“None of those times went that well! *Epecially* the last one! This is just mocking me to send this now when I’m the way I am!”

Viola grimaced a bit since she was there for the last one. “Maybe they didn’t know--”

This only caused another bit of rage to bellow from the room and Viola visibly flinched. Viola knew the last tourney - the one she had met Angelique in the first place - was the biggest one as far as importance as well as setbacks for the currently raging blonde. To even *pretend* she had fully gotten past the aftermath of that journey was a horrific fallacy.

Viola bowed to the possibility that she was being overly optimistic with her words - there was indeed a chance whoever invited her had no clue of her past - but Angelique needed some optimism in her opinion. The human’s opinion of herself was as dark as her shadow magic.

Viola gently took the envelope from the little fox’s mouth and started to read.

Meanwhile inside, Angelique had gotten quieter in volume alone. She was still between utter hysteria and thunderous unresolved rage - stuck at the exact midpoint between them and feeling both equally. She broke out in a cold sweat, clinging to one of her pillows like it was her connection to reality. But it was quickly slipping because the arms couldn’t even feel the anchor. They couldn’t feel *anything*. They weren’t her real arms - another thing she lost along the way.

She wasn’t fully in her room anymore. She was back in all those failures that eventually led to her losing so much. They played in an unstoppable loop like a swirling whirlpool and she was struggling to breathe. It was hard enough to swim in that pink royal dress even if her arms didn’t appear to be fading in and out of reality.

Why.....even put this in front of me again... Every time I tried, the universe took from me over and over! How much is left to even take!? Why...why even let me be able to cast that spell that day if not to make me hurt longer...

Bringing a cute animal to let my guard down...what kind of sick joke is this!?

The worried knocking of Viola snapped her back to reality - though she didn’t move from the spot yet. She kept holding that pillow with her metal arms until her breathing could stabilize once more.

"I'm sorry - I didn't know it'd be about another tournament," said Viola through the door. "Much less one offering a wish."

A wish...seriously? Not a magical item or some favor? That's way too suspicious... All those envelopes are...but why does this one bug me so badly?

"But...it's not a team thing like last time. It's one on one fights over three days."

"...who?" said Angelique through the door.

"What?"

"Who sent this? Who in the most wretched of hells sent this?"

"Doesn't really-- Hold on... It's signed...The Madame Chief of Crossroads. Not 100% on who that is. But I have heard of Crossroads. It's a really old story I heard about while traveling. It's said to be an intersection between almost all known words - both physically set by land and sea but...y'know...connected to the astral realms too. And this fox's coloring reminds me of another old story I heard - The God Eater."

"God Eater? Sounds morbid."

"A once average Kitsune that somehow bested or tricked a God and inherited its power when it got consumed. It's said she created Crossroads and defends the place from threats."

"Add three to the suspicion score then," grumbled Angelique, her hands gently pulling at her hair.

If a catch-free wish wasn't suspicious enough of an offering on its own for her - much less one offered by one of the biggest trickster races in myth - one offered by a kitsune with potentially divine power was *bound* to be full of shenanigans.

That didn't fully stop Angelique from unconsciously thinking of what she could do with a wish that was hitch-free. The more obvious candidates and the ones that felt impossible and forbidden all popped up with little in between.

They always go wrong...even if I've gotten stronger, they always seem to go wrong... I should do whoever else may get this a favor and shred it right now.

Wait, am I really that spiteful? There's a slight chance this is legitimate and I'd be screwing that

person over.

Okay, maybe I am that spiteful, but shouldn't I be? I've already slightly fallen into the stereotype of every major shadow mage and Dark Arts user I've ever researched... Maybe going might be a chance of...

Nononono this feeling is probably part of the same trap I'm falling for! Even if I win, this could just screw me over further! What next - my legs too!?

Angelique drove herself nuts in her room before Viola's words got through to her.

"I can fight on your behalf, Angelique."

This causes Angelique to fling the door open again. "Wait wait what?"

"You're freaking out about this already. Getting this right now isn't going to help you as far as recovering from...the last tourney."

Viola was holding the open letter sideways and a small silver charm on a string dangled out.

"We both know I've been itching for a fight anyway. And it's not like I care about wishes anyway."

Angelique couldn't deny her roommate was a demon of physicality in multiple senses of the word. Her leading the charge would surely increase the chances of winning.

"...but what about your memories? Or stuff about your past?"

"Me not having those isn't getting in the way of living life. You...you're having so much trouble as is. Not that you're not capable and stuff, but you'd benefit more from this. I owe you so much, Angelique. Doing this for you is nothing."

As Viola turned to officially accept the invitation, a metal hand reached out to grab her arm.

“No...I’m...I want to do this....”

“Angie, are you sure? If this wish catches enough ears, it means some tough customers will--”

“I can’t keep hiding! I...even if I don’t get this damn wish, I have something to prove. After all the times I messed up or got carried through, I...can’t help wanting to try this. And find out who wants me there so badly.”

“That determined, huh?” Viola sighed, scratching her head with a sly smile. “Well, being a coach works too. I’ll be backing you all the way.”

“May need you a lot if I’m honest. Let me just accept this thing before I regret it.”

The little fox jumped from Viola’s hand to Angelique’s shoulder with the silver charm on a string in its little mouth. She took the charm and put it around her neck. It twinkled quite beautifully. Angelique thought it didn’t suit her. Regret was already creeping in.

When she sensed the aura around the little fox shift, she quickly scooped up the little fox in her arms like she was chastising her pet for making a mess in the house. She had felt this enough times to personally fear it.

“No teleportation - stop stop stop stop!” she said in panicked falsetto.

The fox suddenly stared at her, not understanding what it was doing wrong. Viola thought the little fox was in a trance.

“I-I need time to prepare and pack first! W-we’ll make it there on your own!” Angelique insisted.

Shaking its head, the fox seemed to understand and merely teleported itself away.

“Couldn’t admit that you have teleport-sickness, could you?” said Viola with a snicker.

“S-shut up! I did need to pack and decide what to wear anyway!” insisted Angelique. “And you can’t wear *that*.”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“Not sure you’ll be happy with the attention a bra and shorts is going to draw.”

“You know *style* isn’t my thing,” Viola said with a shake of the head, “but I’ll do my best to put in an effort for you. And I’ll call a guy I know to get us to Crossroads.”

After a nod, Angelique closed the door once more - this time more gently - as Viola went about her own preparations. She leaned against the door and slid to the ground with a silent groan.

...That’s way too nice a word for this, Vivi. It’s more like a compulsion. A Death Drive in full effect with the slightest hope becoming blinding and making you forget the odds and the track record.

You were ready to do this for me, but I just couldn't let you. And if you asked me why, you'd say I'm just being paranoid or silly. You have a lot more to lose than me if this thing goes like the others. As much as you say you owe me, I'm not going to exploit that like this. You sticking with me all this time is already so much.

She finally got up to drag out her travel bag out of her closet and pack for potentially three days in a foreign land. As she sorted through clothing and tools, she stopped to stare at a drawer she had left open. Tugging it fully open, she stared at the sole item it contained. A weathered book with worn-out, dog-eared and creased pages. The book that first exposed her to dark magicks, curses and the like.

She knew Viola didn't like this particular book for personal reasons and Angelique didn't blame her one iota. Obsessed as her younger self was with learning magic, even she would have given it a wide berth once she learned about the nefarious history of it. Naturally, she only learned *after* she was a few spells deep.

Not sure to risk bringing you - not just for dredging memories up, but I’m not sure it’s worth it to use a spell I never used before just to even try to win this. I’ve memorized plenty. I’ll be fine. Besides...easier to save space for tools and scrap to keep repairing my arms.

The drawer was closed and locked. She continued to pack her bag, looking for outfits that wouldn’t draw too much attention. At times, she would come upon clothing she had packed for other adventures - stuff she thought she had long discarded because it reminded her of said adventures and how different she was then. Long luxurious hair, confident smile, an “insufferable” royal attitude.

She wished this could end well. But then again, she wished that for the past ones as well.

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Angelique had to question how many friends Viola had made from her travels and errands. She expected a ride on a magical boat - no matter the size - to be something quite costly, but Viola insisted the ride on her demonic friend's personal vessel would cost them nothing. Angelique was gazing out on the deck of what she considered a small white and silver yacht looking out upon the ocean. A large reddish gate-like structure was visible in the distance amongst a low ethereal fog clinging to the water like a blanket.

Her outfit was simple - a black hoodie with long sleeves, red and black plaid pants and sneakers. Hoodies became her favorite piece of clothing since that day.

"You didn't make some sketchy deal for my sake, right?" questioned Angelique as Viola came on deck to join her. She attempted to dress more than her basics with a halter top and athletic pants. Angelique wasn't one for fashion, so she wasn't going to judge. At least it was slightly better than her homewear.

"Nah, he just owes me. He'll come back for us in three days," assured Viola.

"...not assuming too much?" asked Angelique.

"Even if you don't win, it's a rare place for someone like you to see!" Viola wrapped her arms around the already grumpy blonde. "Food, music, culture--"

"I'm not here to have fun," grumbled Angelique, snaking out of the demon's hold just enough to pull the hood of her sweatshirt over her head. "This could still be just a huge trap or a joke at my expense. Let's just find out who's big idea to invite me here was - whether it was Miss Divine Vore or not."

"You aren't going to call her that if you find her, right?"

"Depends on if all I've said is right or not. I'm no one's plaything."

Eventually, they sailed through the large gate. No fog existed on the other side of the gate. In fact, when Angelique looked back the way they came, she saw no fog like they crossed through a portal or stargate. The greater port came into view; the rest of the land was not visible to them beyond two tall towers watching the ships entering like ants from on high, a sheer cliff the towers were

built on and what appeared to be a beach off to the right.

“We really did cross to another world...” Angelique’s mouth briefly hung open in a brief moment of wonder.

“You sound that surprised? I did say what Crossroads was before we left.”

“I know, but...all the *past stuff* was teleportation to get there each time. And I never went on many vacations. So the travel here...makes it more epic, I suppose.”

Viola made a mental note for her friend to take the scenic route back after the tourney was over.

After a brief goodbye to the ship captain, Angelique and Viola disembarked with Viola taking the lead and carrying their bags. The dock area was bustling with a mix of beings - and it wasn’t mostly kitsune as she briefly thought. There were humans, demons, harpies, various beasts - and all were dressed uniquely. One was a glasses-wearing human dressed like a fantasy witch. Another was a fox girl with some kind of crown and an obsession with baseball based on her attire. An asian-looking military type, a robot, a red-skinned woman with horns - it was hard to judge who were the visitors and who were the natives.

While Angelique was curious enough about this foreign land and its bustling port area, she was still suspicious. It was the site for a magical tournament after all - it *couldn’t* be fully trusted.

“So now where do we go?” muttered Angelique, her hood still up.

“I can sense more people further up,” said Viola. “Thinking it’ll be easier to ask around once we’re up the steps.”

“Yeah, I guess...”

“You alright?”

“Beyond being torn about this place? Just...trying to figure out where I’m hearing little bells from. You do hear that too, right?”

“Now that you mention it...”

It got easier to place the sound as it was clearly getting louder. It was a woman stepping towards them, looking the same age range as Viola, but comparably slimmer with long dark red hair adorned with a white flower. Of course, the closer she got, the more obvious it got to Angelique that she - like Viola - wasn't human either and too much comparison to humans as far as age would do her little good. Didn't quite stop her from mentally tearing herself down anyway as she took in their appearance.

They were the same height - though the woman was wearing heels, so Angelique was mildly taller if they were on the same level. Her reddish eye shadow drew attention to her golden right eye. Her black dress seemed to be strapless and ended at her knees. Well, most of it did. One leg was exposed with how the dress was cut to show off the flowery design on her stocking. Over her shoulders was a separate piece that was laced up at her neck and went all the way down to her arms. In one hand was a pipe she was smoking as she approached - though she stopped as she got within an arm's length of them. She also had a slightly drunken sway to her steps.

She's so classy and beautiful. I just got here and I already feel like a gremlin in comparison. Is it too late for me to swim home?

"Welcome to Crossroads, travelers," she said with a gentle smile.

"Thanks! Seems like such a nice place," said Viola before cocking her head to the side. "Are those bells in your footwear?"

The stranger shook her foot to show the bells off and make them ring on demand - though she seemed to lose her balance for a nano-second. "They just looked so cute, so I decided to get them on a whim," she said with a giggle. "You think they're too distracting?"

"No, they look great on you!" said Viola with a laugh. "You sure you're able to walk in them right now? Kind of smells like a bit of alcohol on you."

More giggles from the smashed siren. "I can walk just fine. But I can't help it - the alcohol at Crossroads is known across the world."

"Really? Now I'm curious," said Viola with a grin. "I do like having a few drinks."

"I could escort you two to the Fox Inn," she replied. "Some of the best food and drink you can get in Crossroads. You seem like you would have fun stories."

Angelique was immensely glad she didn't come alone. Handling a conversation with someone so vivid wasn't something she thought she was capable of in her current state.

"Well, you've been quiet, miss," said the redhead as she stepped around to get a closer look at Angelique. "I bet you're here for the tournament, huh?"

Angelique got a bit startled - mostly from her moving faster than she was expecting from someone who was drinking and her being in thought the whole time. "H...how did you--"

"I've seen quite a few people today," she replied. "Just certain things are noticeable, hehe. But there's no need to be nervous this early."

Angelique had no idea how literal it was when the woman said that. Said woman could see an invisible fox-like tail trailing behind Angelique. It was present on all potential competitors.

"...I'm not nervous," clarified Angelique. "Just...suspicious."

"I wouldn't worry either way," the stranger replies. "The Crossguards are around to help everyone with troublemakers - native and traveler alike."

Angelique's suspicion helped her find her voice and she narrowed her eyes. "You wouldn't happen to be the Madame Chief of this place, would you?"

"Oh my, you'll make me blush with such a comparison," giggled the buzzed beauty. "But I think you're mistaken."

Angelique wasn't fully convinced - again, it wasn't the first kitsune she had met and the whole place made her uncertain - but when shooting in the dark, sometimes one just had to save their ammunition. Besides, she doubted anyone who would get called "God Eater" would be so drunk and silly. It was a bit disgraceful in her opinion.

"So...I guess you wouldn't know how people got invited to this thing?" continued Angelique. "Or heard about it?"

"I have heard some were found by chance, but others were specifically suggested and sought out by reputation," replied the redhead.

"Well, I get a bad feeling this was a sought-out case," grumbled Angelique as her earlier bad mood resurfaced. "And I have to question what damn fool came up with the mistaken idea to invite me--"

“WHAT DID YOU JUST SAY!?”

That’s when someone ran up to where the three stood. Decked out in military-style boots, black pants with a red stripe along the outer leg, golden suspenders, and a red bolero jacket, the rat-like being was looking quite furious. The cap he wore atop his mop of black hair had the same emblem that was on the crimson envelope Angelique and Viola received and he seemed to be wearing something black and skintight beneath his jacket . But none of that wasn't what gave Angelique the most pause.

For one, he seemed to be blindfolded; it was either a justice metaphor gone overboard or a special fabric that benefited him in some way. And the other...there was an opening in the black top that slightly exposed his chest. Sure, a bit of his hips were exposed the same way, but Angelique had at least seen that in practice before. She hadn’t made an opinion on male cleavage before this point.

“You were invited to Crossroads by our Madame Chief and the first thing you do upon our shores is insult her!?”

Angelique once again couldn’t muster up a quick reply, so Viola spoke up on her behalf. “Hey, maybe chill out? You’re not exactly setting a better example right now.”

“No one has the right to call Madame Chief a fool! And Madame Chief never makes a mistake!” they continued, still completely irate while the redhead only giggled and took steps back from the scene. “I will take her to task for her words if a thorough apology isn’t what I hear next from her!”

“...I don’t know if the Madame Chief was aware of...certain things before seeking me out...if she was even the one who fully came up with the idea to invite me,” Angelique finally replied. “If it wasn’t her, then I apologize for my...overreaction.”

“That wasn’t good enough, little girl,” growled the figure with his tail thrashing.

“Don’t call me little girl,” said Angelique with a twitch. “Who are you to judge my words anyway?”

“I am Setsudan, one of the Crossguards. I am just one of many who owe quite a debt to Madame Chief - and I wouldn’t be the only one who would take issue with your sacrilege!”

Angelique found herself getting more agitated with Setsudan. It was easy to see that the Crossguards were quite a big deal - the symbol implied as much - but his devotion to the Madame Chief was getting overbearing. Angelique fully crossed the line to hating this place.

"You're new, aren't you?" asked Viola.

"So what if I am?" Setsudan replied.

"Because reacting to someone new to your land like that doesn't sound like something you were taught to do," said Viola. "And it sounds like you're trying to defend someone who doesn't need your defending and *your* feelings are really the ones that are hurt?"

Setsudan growled more as some of the bystanders were paying closer attention to the scene. "Step aside. This is between me and the girl - and she can clearly speak and act for herself."

"I'm going to have to counter that by asking you to be the bigger man and let this go," replied Viola.

Setsudan advanced towards them with every intent to get past the muscled arms of Viola to get to Angelique. What he didn't expect was for there to be a spiked club to suddenly be between them - with the flat end of the dark red club pressed against his chest.

"No, really," she said, still as calm as earlier. "I gotta insist."

This only angered Setsudan further as he took two steps back. "She understands what it means to potentially anger someone so important and powerful to these lands and yet you protect her instead of instructing her to apologize. Unless she isn't all there - then in that case, *I* should be the one apologizing."

"What did you just say about me?"

Angelique stepped out from behind Viola with an intense glare. The insult that registered *wasn't* the one Setsudan intended and only worsened the blonde's state with a perceived shot to a sensitive topic. Her mind whirled about how much he potentially knew.

"I thought I was clear. Or are you hard of hearing too, your highness?"

Strike two as far as Angelique was concerned. If anything bothered her more than a shot at her physical state, it was being reminded of anything related to her past persona.

"I'll warn you once not to call me such things.."

"Now the Princess makes demands, does she--"

Angelique's foot quickly connected with his groin, interrupting his speech. A few people laughed, including the redhead she was previously talking to. Viola's guess about him being new rang closer to being true. Especially when she thought she saw another Crossguard watching from a distance and not exactly jumping to help him out.

"Now you're pissing me off, rat boy," said Angelique with her magic surging.

Setsudan slowly got back to his feet - still quicker than anyone watching expected - and his snarl and twitching ears and tail told the story of humiliation and anger.

"Now you've done it... I won't allow you to ruin the name of the Crossguards as well as Madame Chief!"

"You did that all on your own - acting and talking like some damn hotshot," said a still fuming Angelique. "I'm surprised they don't give you a gag to go with that blindfold!"

A few caught themselves laughing and that only made Setsudan angrier. Now he only felt more pressure to "discipline" Angelique.

The only clue of his next move was how still his tail suddenly went still after all the time spent thrashing. He drew a blade out of his sleeve and dashed towards Angelique. Behind him appeared to be copies of himself - each with their own short sword.

The crowd was shocked the moment the weapon appeared with some commenting about the Crossguards leaning solely toward hand-to-hand combat. To hide a weapon rather than simply carry it openly had a mixed reaction regarding how they believe that was received by other Crossguards and the Madame Chief.

Viola took in all this information, but she wasn't going to get involved immediately. For one, her dealing with this wouldn't settle this; with him so focused on Angelique, it may only draw this out for their whole stay. And second, Viola did not need to get involved yet. Angelique wasn't weak on

any level in her opinion, no matter what certain losses said.

Madame Chief will praise me for this, Setsudan thought, grinning devilishly as he and copies were quickly in range of Angelique. *This insolent child has no idea what a mistake she made!*

He had no intent to do serious harm to Angelique - especially with him knowing she was an invited competitor. But if she couldn't compete after her disrespect, he was more than fine with that. He was firmly in the mindset that Angelique had to be taught a lesson and he was going to be the one to teach it.

But it was Setsudan who would be taught a lesson instead. As he drew near her, she dodged his slash. While impressed, he wasn't concerned as the copies were right behind her, ready to cut her. He could see them...not moving? And with pink where their eyes should be?

The second after the confusion registered, an intense pressure started to weigh him down. As much as he tried to fight against it, Setsudan dropped to his hands and knees under what felt like increased gravity due to the earlier low blow weakening his resilience. That's when Angelique jumped into the air. On the underside of her shoe was a black and gray bubble made of magic.

It wasn't a spell and Angelique would never claim it was. She had just messed up that magic control exercise enough to know much of a kick the penalty had. So, from about day one, she started using it for offense as well. It was either by itself or used close together with a physical strike. While curbing a Crossguard held in place by a gravity spell might have been enough, stomping an explosive bubble into his head was more impactful - and fun if she was honest. It knocked him out and finally stopped him from talking. His copies dispelled themselves once he was unconscious.

The crowd was in shock at the display. The blonde had barely broken a sweat. Some were cheering and others were laughing - including the redhead that was laughing at the beginning. Maybe laughing a little too hard in Angelique's opinion.

"And to think you said you were nervous," she giggled. "It doesn't seem like your invitation was a mistake."

Angelique returned to being behind Viola, not interacting much with the others around once more - including said drunk dame. "No...still pretty sure it was."

"Well, after seeing such a display, I must treat you two and show you around," she insisted. "After I get your names of course."

“Oh, I’m Viola and this is Angelique.” Viola had to gesture behind her since Angelique was no longer in the mood to interact with others. “And what do we call you?”

“Oh, others have called me Chifu~”

“Well, Chifu, thanks for the offer--”

Viola found herself cut off by the clearing of the throat and tugging on her arm by Angelique.

“Can we get to the inn already?” she muttered at the level of a whisper. “You can go have fun without me once we’re checked in.”

Viola looked surprised. “You don’t want to--”

“I want to just stay in until it’s time for the round,” said Angelique, eyes half-lidded. “I’ve seen more than enough if this is the welcome I’ll get.”

Viola turned back to Chifu. “Hey, maybe a rain check? ”

After making excuses and getting the directions from Chifu, Angelique and Viola departed. Chifu didn’t look disappointed and was fine delaying it, indicating the bar wouldn’t be far from the inn. The crowd that watched the beatdown also dispersed. Only then did the other Crossguard show up. This was a female Crossguard that lacked the cleavage window of her fellow and her suspenders were off her shoulders and at her sides. While she seemed to be similar to Setsudan, she wasn’t as slim as he was, had a shorter tail, and had large noticeable ears.

As she scooped up the still unconscious Setsudan, she looked up at Chifu and quickly looked back down.

“I apologize for the trouble, ma’am,” she said somewhat meekly.

“Do not apologize,” she giggled, grinning *much* wider than she had been since the encounter started and showing her fangs. “I learned quite a bit from this.”

Chifu smiled and walked away, leaving the Crossguard visibly confused for quite a few reasons - one of them much more significant than the rest.

Chifu was a woman of many secrets - and one of them was only a secret to those who didn't live in Crossroads like Angelique, Viola and any other travelers. She was the Madame Chief of Crossroads but disguised as more pedestrian than she was; the aforementioned God Eater was face to face with the competitor and her plus one without either one realizing - though Angelique did accidentally guess. She enjoyed the little things that she couldn't enjoy when in her more..."divine" form - like drinking, smoking and chatting up anyone new to town like a mysterious stranger. The immortals needed their little pleasures to keep eternal life from being hellish - like sending out invites across dimensions to a tournament she was throwing for the fun of it. As one would.

But Chifu was on the dock of Phoenix Coast with purpose. She was hoping to run into young Angelique. Amongst the lies and half-truths she told, one thing was perfectly truthful. With some invites, the only instruction to her little familiars was to find those notable or strong in some way - those that would take the bait of course. In the case of the other, Chifu did hear rumors here and there that she wanted to see in the flesh.

But Angelique wasn't truly on her radar...not until something happened. Her name appeared on a list she was writing when it wasn't there before. And now, she found herself intensely focused on the reclusive blonde. To the point she had her most hot-headed and intensely devoted Crossguard recruit to be just in the right space to get a reaction.

I wondered who would dare try to influence me and for what purpose. I might be closer to the second part now. Enough Dark Arts to even make your tail turn color briefly, quite a mysterious power on top of that - all at such an age. You're quite the curious human, miss Angelique. And I want to learn more.

Someone quite desperately wanted you here enough to think they could manipulate me so confidently. Quite lucky for whoever this is, I remain curious enough about their little scheme to allow their machinations. For now.

It may prove to be amusing...that and seeing what will make you react more and more - to crack that little shell you shoved yourself in. I need to know why you are the way you are. Mortals live a life much too short to be so miserable~

[Angelique & Vivi] Round 1: Don't Call Us Similar

[Original doc](#)

Damn it...this place seems even more interesting now with the sun going down...but how can I trust any of it? It's a tournament location...the other shoe is going to drop eventually. But...maybe...

Angelique Tarrow - disabled, despondent and deceptive dealer of dark divination damage, desired to explore - despite her previous claims of not wanting to. The only time she left the Kit Inn room was to have dinner. The rest of that day was split between meditating and the other half fuming over that arrogant Crossguard. Now night had set in and the place only grew more inviting due to her magical attachment to the darkness.

Vivi's room next door was quiet - so she either was sleeping or out drinking and looking around, with Angelique's claim she wasn't going anywhere likely kept well in mind. It's not like Angelique didn't appreciate all Vivi had done - but even if she decided to change her mind earlier than this, the demon deserved time to explore without a killjoy human attached to her hip.

Vivi had urged her to at least look around, so she would. Just not how the demon envisioned it. Out the window she went with shoes in hand and shadows to slow her fall. It wasn't like she was on the top floor anyway.

After slipping her footwear on and pulling her hood up, Angelique took a deep breath. She was going to walk around, so there was a chance people would talk to her. She had to be prepared for that. But the night would help her anxiety about the whole affair.

Just enjoy this now before you lose tomorrow and can get the hell out... May never see this place again if we're lucky...

Mapping out the place was easier than Angelique thought it would be - mostly due to her overhearing conversations and remembering earlier events. But even she knew how incomplete it was still.

There are five gates of the city proper. The gold fox is the main because of course it is. The vermillion bird is the south gate...that's the direction of the beach, the port where I had to deal with rat boy, and an urban area... Crossguard HQ is above that. To the north is some kind of village and a river...and that colosseum right in the center---

Angelique's thoughts were interrupted by someone crossing in front of her, forcing her to break so they didn't collide. She briefly felt an urge to call the stranger out, but she held her tongue as she didn't care for an additional encounter that day. She settled for getting a look at them to remember their face for when she was out with Vivi tomorrow.

He was about a couple of inches taller than her with a similar skin tone. He seemed about the same age range as well. His black hair was short and slicked back. His eyes were a paler shade of blue than hers. And despite the weather, he was dressed in a white tux with a powder blue tie.

Angelique was mixed on what to think of this. A whole suit seemed a bit much - but that comment was colored by her own...lax fashion that was maybe a step above Viola's.

Could be read as pompous....arrogant...but also suave and cool. A professional...or aspires to be. Almost--

Then her thoughts stopped due to one mental word. *Princely*. Now she hates the sight of him. Things typically went into only two boxes with Angelique; the guy before her fell on the other side of the divide due to that mental descriptor. Unfortunately for Angelique, their eyes met and he chose to stroll over for some reason. She could only hope this would be quick.

"So I'm in the right place after all," he said once close enough.

"...am I supposed to know you?" Angelique grumbled lowly in response.

"This is Crossroads, correct? A land ruled by a wish-granting Kitsune?"

"That's what locals say at any rate. You really that lost?" Angelique couldn't help but add a sneer to her reply.

"I had figured it to be so. Because it seems that divine fox has granted my wish - meeting one as lovely as you~"

Angelique let out a noticeable exhale before turning around to leave. She couldn't believe she just heard that. She couldn't believe that said line was directed at *her*. The impeccably dressed young man got in front of her before she took another step.

"Forgive me for being so forward," he said, looking slightly apologetic in the face of Angelique's scowl, "but I was taught to express my feelings openly. And looking at you, I feel quite taken aback."

"You want to save that hot air for any balloon rides that need it?" shot Angelique.

"Pardon?" He didn't seem to understand.

"Just get out of my way," said Angelique.

The tuxedo-clad flirt was surprised at how fast Angelique moved between various shops in the business district, weaving in and out like a shadow before he could finish his next statement. She wished she could be facetiously gracious about someone walking up and doing such a thing, but it only unsettled her how someone could tell such obvious lies.

Lies. She was often undecided if to say "lies" or "falsehoods" when it came to that kind of thing. Guess it depended on how hidden she was that day.

In either case, she couldn't go back to the inn right away with the slight chance he'd follow with more lines, so she looked for a place to loiter until she was sure he was gone. That was when she noticed it. A bit past the Fox Den tavern was some sort of forest.

Sounds perfect. Plus another thing to explore.

She ran over to said forest, quickly going through a blue gate topped with a dragon of the same color. It was incredibly difficult to see the sky once within it except for sparse spots in the canopy. Angelique didn't mind. There was enough light to look around. And for her, the darker the better.

He'd be a moron to follow me here. Just need to hang out for a little. Now...what's so special about you?

Angelique found out soon enough as a wisp darted between trees out of the corner of her eye. Then another. Then another. Angelique had no way of knowing this forest was called the Sacred Forest and that it was teeming with wandering spirits.

They gathered around her, but Angelique wasn't fearful. She was mesmerized by them. They too, in turn, seemed surprised that a human with an odd magical presence was simply walking around in their domain. Neither spoke to each other; they simply watched each other, thinking of getting closer out of curiosity but didn't...all except for one.

"You squander your life...coming here, huuuumannnn..." The ghost was quite grotesque looking, shrieking through a stretched mouth that didn't seem to have a jawbone. "Not all of us...are so kind...to simply watch you..."

"So you call this living...?" She grumbled. "Good to know. Any life is a life, right?"

The spirit felt disrespected. Angelique couldn't care less. As far as she was concerned, it was too easy to be on the outside looking in and claim that any complaints didn't matter.

"I should take it from yooooou," howled the ghost.

Angelique pocketed her hands. "I live by accident...this world is nothing but cruel to me. If you want this life, go ahead and try. But I tend to fight back out of instinct."

The other ghosts gave Angelique and the sinister specter room - circling around what they expected to be a fight. Angelique barely moved as her ghostly opponent started to summon forth its power.

"It's too late to beg for forgiveness!" It howled.

"Wasn't planning to, you Scream wannabe," Angelique dryly retorted.

Before it could do anything, a beam of light cut across the forest and pierced it through the middle. The gathered disembodied souled fled at the sight while Angelique's spectral opponent hissed like

it was wounded. It too eventually fled with the rest.

Angelique didn't feel relief at all. She wasn't some damsel to be rescued. In fact, once she heard her "protector's" voice, she only grew irritated.

"That was close, wasn't it?" It was the guy in the white tux. An orb of light was in his right hand.

"You define close as hasn't even started?" shot Angelique, mentally grumbling about how he used light magic. Not that she *hated* Light Magic, but she was on the other side of the fence as it were. "I don't remember shrieking for a white knight."

"You appeared to be in danger!" The stranger replied. "This forest is quite dangerous for the living to dwell!"

"I don't know - I feel pretty dead inside," quipped Angelique. "What's *your* excuse for running in here then? You starting to go braindead?"

"I've come to help you - the one who has stolen my heart!" He proclaimed.

"So yeah, braindead then," was her reply.

Unlike last time around, the insult registered with the young man and he looked quite stung. "Your words wound the living and the dead like a spectral rose."

"What can I say - these days, I live in the shade," shot back Angelique. "And I don't need to be babied."

Angelique started to walk away, but paused the moment she heard him start to follow.

"WHAT!? Are you asking for a fight!?"

"No, I... I simply wish to apologize before you disappear again. My name is Gabriel. I truly didn't mean to upset you."

"Why does that seem so...what's the word...not believable? But whatever - apology accepted. Get lost."

"There's something I wanted to tell you before you ran off. Can I say that first?" asked Gabriel.

"Ugh, fine. Get it over with."

"Beware - there is danger and deception in your future regarding this tournament."

Angelique paused. Her tag, as usual, was hidden under her shirt and hoodie and not visible in the slightest. And as far as she or Vivi noticed, the entrants in the tourney weren't fully advertised - just teased with the tagline "magic, machines, and martial arts". Angelique went from irritated to simply suspicious.

She also didn't get what he was trying to "warn" her about. Every tournament or trial she's been to or heard about had some secret stuff happening. She was more familiar with that fact than oxygen.

"What are you - psychic? Or telling a little white lie for me to pay more attention to you?"

"I would never deceive you," said Gabriel. "And if I could glimpse the future, I would see if we had a future."

A mild sigh. "You really need to quit while you are behind. I'm starting to think the deception has already begun."

Angelique noticed this particular shot really stunned Gabriel - the light in his eyes briefly dimmed for some reason - so she took the opportunity to disappear once more. This time, it seemed to stick. She couldn't sense him follow, so she snuck back to her room.

However, she didn't settle right to sleep. And no, it had nothing to do with Gabriel; that thought had already been put away. She was choosing until everyone had left the hot springs before getting clean and taking a dip of her own before bed. She had never experienced it before and deep down, she wanted to try it once.

One pleasant experience before - as she assumes - everything inevitably goes to hell.

=====

"Yo, Angie! You asleep?"

Vivi was outside of Angelique's room, making sure she was getting prepared and wasn't sleeping in like she would back home. Mornings weren't the blonde's favorite things.

Vivi's answer was a couple of explosions. Seems Angelique was very much awake - meditating and doing her magic practice.

"Sorry - just we never got told when the matches were starting, so--"

"It's fine."

"You don't sound--"

"I'm fine. Just want to get this over with."

"Calming down and making sure you've eaten properly may help you now more than meditating until you're blue."

"Yeah...I guess. Sorry, V. Just yesterday wasn't the best."

"I know you're really suspicious, but that doesn't mean it will all be bad. Just keep an open mind!"

Vivi's smile dipped briefly upon not hearing a reply back for quite a time.

"I want to practice just a little longer. I'll be down for breakfast in a while. You're going back there, right?"

Vivi relaxed again. "Good food and Saki's cool to talk to."

Viola and Angelique had dinner at the Fox Den the previous night. While Angelique didn't drink any alcohol that night like Vivi encouraged her to, she agreed with the sentiment that eating most of their meals there was the better idea.

The tavern was usually busy constantly due to the kind of people who passed through. Yet every table was clean and polished, especially the well-stocked bar. Vivi wondered how much the owner of the place slept. In either case, Saki, said owner and bartender, was behind the bar once more like she never left it with the only difference being it wasn't as packed. She was the most relaxed Oni one could ever meet. She was dressed like a typical waiter with the exception of the red tiger print apron around her waist. Her hair was pulled back to reveal her cone-like horns.

"Yo, cousin."

"Morning... cousin. You're actually alone this time?"

The night Angelique first met Saki, she admitted she briefly thought the bartender and Vivi could have been related - demons and onis are close beyond cultural divides and they both are quite muscular and surprisingly mellow. None of the three took it very seriously, but Chifu, drinking nearby, found this hilarious and started claiming them to be distant cousins despite that being false.

"She's meditating and stuff, but I'll order for the both of us," said Vivi. "By the time it's done, she'll be down here."

"Fine with me," said Saki.

After figuring out what to order - there was no point in getting Angelique a typical breakfast she would have back home - Vivi parked herself at a table and waited for the food and her roommate to show up. She ran a hand through her hair in boredom, wondering why she didn't think to comb it a bit more than she did.

"Are you eating alone, miss?"

Vivi glanced back to see a figure approaching her - a male who was of similar complexion to Saki, but noticeably younger than the bartender. His black hair was cut short and behind his glasses were mismatched eyes - the left a bright gold and the right a shade of purple. He was very slim, handsome and impeccably dressed; a crisp white shirt, black vest, tweed jacket, black dress pants, and Oxford shoes. A bowler hat topped his head.

"Waiting for someone," Vivi said with a wide smile. "Now who are you supposed to be?~"

"A wordsmith and intrepid inquisitor yclept Forte." He then bowed in an extravagant manner, tipping his hat just barely. "I take it you're from elsewhere, taking a chance to be another beholder of the bread and circuses present here?"

"You could say that," replied Vivi, only partially sure of what he said due to his vainly vomiting vocabulary. "Call me Vivi. But couldn't anyone say the same of you since you're here? Like all this didn't draw your interest."

"Forsooth, it tempts the soul of one who seeks inspiration," replied Forte. "Though such violence isn't my cup of tea. Couldn't imagine hurting a soul even if they do deserve it."

"Anyone who says 'cup of tea' too often usually doesn't have much fight in them." Vivi chuckles. "I bet I could lift you above my head with one hand~"

"No need for such a display--"

Despite saying that, Vivi had gently held Forte by the wrist with a mischievous grin like she would do just that. But before anything occurred, she let him go while glancing towards a corner of the tavern.

"That your friend getting all worried? They might as well join us! I want to meet them!"

Stepping out from a shadowy corner of the tavern was another very similar to Forte, but female and with two mismatched horns - one much longer than the other. Where his hair was short, hers was long and tied in a ponytail. The heterochromic colors matched, but were in opposite eyes and she wore no glasses. Where Forte's features were sharp and he was confident, hers were softer and she was more demure - or adorable as Vivi herself would put it. Even their clothes seemed the opposite with her dressed similarly to an attractive stage magician's assistant. An elaborate lilac coat, golden vest, white dress shirt, fishnet stockings, high heels that matched her coat - all that over a violet leotard. She didn't dress like the type to be in the shadows, yet she was.

"My dear sister, Piano," corrected Forte while gesturing for her to join them. It certainly wasn't planned for her to join the conversation, but it was much simpler for her to do so than have attention drawn in two different directions. "I must say, your senses must be highly tuned. I hadn't even noticed she was there until you had pointed her out - and with expert ease it was executed. This character of yours is clearly mere subterfuge with your clever intellect ready to chicane clerk and chapman alike."

"Got to be the first time I've had someone buttering me up before breakfast," Viola snickered before turning her attention to Piano. She noticed the coat was more elaborate once she got closer. She had never seen a coat with coattails in the flesh before this point. "And you - if this place was even slightly busier, I might not have noticed you at all! That another trick you practice a lot?"

"Somewhat," replied Piano in a quiet voice.

"One could ask such the same of yourself," continued Forte abruptly. "A star of the land you hold dear, I am sure."

A slight raspberry from the demon. "I don't have a land to hail from anymore. I just do what I will."

"And what is it thou *will*? You prove yourself recklessly free to err as thou will and traveling to distant lands like a free spirit yet tether yourself to a slugabed? Not that one could judge one such as yourself as one without ambition. I wouldn't dare cause such trepidation upon your youthful spirit."

Viola was growing more confused with Forte's wording but she caught most of it. "When I want to do things, I just do them. Are neither of you spontaneous?"

"I'd rather not be," said Piano.

"Perhaps on occasion," adds Forte... "It depends on who I am with. Like you, I find myself a mummer to my muse."

Forte continued to chat with Vivi right until the food arrived. It was a more typical breakfast for the area with a couple familiar things - grilled fish, rice, eggs, and soup with Vivi having larger servings for herself.

Vivi did say she was waiting for someone, but in the end, she let them sit before this point. Couldn't be rude and let them stand the whole affair. But eventually, Angelique arrived with her hood over her head and hands pocketed.

"I hope you didn't just invite random people over to our table," she said once she was in range, distinctly looking away from the two Devil Blooded.

"Eh, yes and no," said Vivi with a hand through her hair. "These two are--"

"Just leaving, right?" Angelique said, half hiding behind the demon.

"You don't have to be like that, Angie," insisted Vivi. "Just give it a chance? For me?"

"I assure you that we shall not be troublesome, miss...Angie, is it?" Forte stands to bow once more. Piano nods while adjusting herself to be slightly further away from the table.

A groan from Angelique. "Don't make me regret this, Vivi."

Vivi ate while being questioned by Forte while Angie simply ate and did her best to ignore the others at the table while keeping her hands mostly covered. Her best in that regard wasn't enough as she occasionally tugged her head up to gaze at the guests at the table. Forte didn't interest her too much, but Piano - much like other things involving her brother - was quite the opposite. Though

Angelique couldn't tell if it was curiosity or flat-out jealousy, it was still filed under interest.

She leaned over to Vivi to whisper something to her - an action that drew both Forte and Piano's interest.

"Oh, Piano - Angie said that she likes your outfit and wants to know if you've done a lot of stage magic."

Angelique grumbled since she didn't say "like" with that much enthusiasm. Piano was surprised this wasn't asked right out of Angelique's own mouth. Forte was more ...intrigued.

"Oh. Thank you," Piano replies. "I have spent a lot of time entertaining others, but I am relatively new to stage magic."

"I didn't expect your traveling partner to have a subdued streak like my sister," said Forte. "Does she have an entertaining appetency as well?"

"We couldn't be more different," Angelique could be heard grumbling.

"So, are you another with no true origin like your traveling partner?" asked Forte casually.

"Nothing so fascinating or interesting," dismissed Angelique.

"I knew you'd be here!" cried a voice behind the table near the entrance of the tavern.

Near the entrance of the Fox Den stood two figures in Crossguard uniforms. And from Angelique's immediate groan, she knew one of them was Setsudan - the hidden sword God Eater fanatic. Next to him was a female Crossguard noticeably shorter and curvier compared to the slender Setsudan.

"Haven't you bothered her enough?" said Vivi, looking back. "Still on this Madame Chief thing?"

"Set, you're forgetting what your orders were," the female Crossguard muttered lowly.

"I'm not here about that matter from yesterday," insisted Setsudan with one hand holding onto one of his suspenders. "No, I'm here on a matter of personal pride! I must challenge you again!"

"Thought you gave up your pride and sense of shame for a bigger mouth," grumbled Angelique.

“She doesn’t want you bothering her,” said Vivi, feeling mildly irritated by how much this was bothering her friend. “Don’t you have Crossguard work to do?”

“After embarrassing me like that, I must prove myself worthy once again!” Setsudan demands, drawing his blades. “Don’t you duck my challenge, Princess!”

Forte and Piano noticed that Angelique didn’t even look in Setsudan’s direction despite his intent and weapons drawn. Though she noticeably twitches upon being called Princess. It was made clear enough the blond was behind the supreme defeat of a Crossguard. Was the city’s authority seen as that little of a threat? Or was this Setsudan considered that lacking and fought to - in his own mind at least - remain worthy? Fascinating.

Angelique was more focused on the table; she noticed that Vivi - despite constantly talking to Forte - had finished just about all of her food. Only Angelique had food in front of her.

“Vivi, if you want at him, be my guest,” said Angelique. “You want a fight more than me.”

“You sure?”

“Have fun,” Angelique insisted. “Bruised ego caretaker isn’t in my character description. Just be careful. Saki’s one of the few people who haven’t made me hate this place; don’t let her stuff get damaged.”

Vivi got up from her seat, cracking her knuckles with a grin. Viola *loved* to fight and Angelique didn’t want to deal with Setsudan; if that wasn’t win-win, Angelique wasn’t sure what was.

The only downside to this was she was currently alone at the table with Piano and Forte until the fight ended or she finished her breakfast - whatever came first.

“Was I mistaken or did that authority figure proclaim you of royal lineage?” asked Forte.

“Please just stop talking,” grumbled Angelique. “Vive left - you can do the same.”

“I suspected such a thing from your appearance. More than a mere baseborn dandiprat to be sure. Those of a higher station tend to have a certain look while downplaying their incredible importance--”

“Seriously, I am warning you,” shot Angelique once more. “Stop it.”

"I merely find myself very curious," insists Forte, "and I clearly haven't hidden this very well. Neither have you hidden how sensitive you're being to gentle inquiry."

Angelique almost felt bad for snapping at Forte...if it wasn't for that thought on its own bothering her. Why was *she* sorry? He was the one chatting them up and not just leaving when she made no secret about not wanting to eat with them.

"Not everything is for inquiry of any sort," said Angelique, eating her food slightly faster. "Only makes you sound more entitled than your vocabulary ever could."

"Your frore deposition only makes you imagine hostility against you and label me some blackguard," insisted Forte. "I merely welcome discourse as it becomes an author like myself."

"And your tone only makes you imagine that you're that charming," shot Angelique. "Not everyone wants discourse on everything that is said."

"Your traveling partner enjoyed speaking with me and vice-versa," replies Forte. "My work is all about communication."

"Vivi is like that. I am not," grumbled Angelique.

"Yet you gave her a chance to let us sit with you while you dine." Forte seemed to smirk at this. "She is a trusted figure."

"...friends tend to be that," admitted Angelique. "She's better than I deserve."

Piano remained quiet for most of this. She had no interest in needling Angelique and any interest in the idea of her being royalty was unclear. She only came over at her brother's insistence - and with the one who was at most a threat to him outside in a brawl, she debated simply slipping away.

That was before Angelique addressed her.

"Piano, right? ...You enjoy entertaining? You seem so shy."

"It isn't something I thought I'd take to, but I do," she replied. "It's a little way I can help others."

Before Angelique could reply, a body went hurtling in their direction. Before Angelique could dodge or Piano could protect her brother, the figure stopped themselves from crashing into them -

handstanding on one palm amidst Vivi's empty plates on the table without breaking a single one or even tipping one over. It turned out to be the Crossguard that had accompanied Setsudan. Piano and Angelique watched with slight awe with the ease this was managed.

"I apologize about this, travelers!" she said with her free hand holding her hat in place between her large mouse-like ears.

"Doesn't look like it was your fault. You that guy's partner?" asked Angelique.

"Recently assigned together about a month ago," she admitted with a smile. "My name's Mabushii! Your friend is really into fighting, huh?"

"She loves it," sighed Angelique. "Maybe too much."

Then, just as haphazardly as the Crossguard came flying through the entrance, so did a short sword that could be identified as like Setsudan's. But rather than how Mabushii gracefully avoided contact, it ended up cracking a bowl, spilling the remaining soup in it onto the table and embedding itself into a plate of fish - what was left of Angelique's breakfast. Angelique was already irritated by Forte before this extra bit of annoyance- now she was just mad.

"I've officially had it with this place," growled Angelique. "And almost everyone here."

"I apologize, miss!" Mabushii said once back on the ground, bowing towards the blonde.

"Not you - you did what you could. *Some* people are just impossible," replied Angelique after a brief look at Forte.

"The simple crime of inquiry is an offence that I will bear," said Forte. "Mayhaps you should bethink oneself of how you have taken words beyond their context. Forsooth, thou make yourself froward to dismiss me for curiosity all share regarding the ruling classes of various societal structures."

"Didn't mistake you for that much of a *child*," Angelique said while scooping up the plate with the sword in it and scooting out of her chair. "I don't trust you. And the more you act like you're innocent the more it makes you suspicious. *Nothing* and *no one* surrounding a tournament is completely honest, entrant or bystander. There's always someone with an agenda."

"One believes it's your sensitivity making you make an enemy of anyone and everyone," insisted Forte. "To be so guarded is only to your detriment, would it not be?"

Angelique looked away from Forte when that comment came up. "Maybe, maybe not... The past shouldn't determine the future, but it certainly informs the present."

“What has a gyre on your soul that makes you act like a pythoness?” Forte asked, getting up as well. He wasn’t sure what she was doing with that plate next.

“I really wouldn’t worry about *my* soul,” Angelique muttered.

Soon Vivi had re-entered the Fox Den with a dazed Setsudan over her shoulder and a couple of cuts on her exposed arms. The first thing she took notice of was Angelique’s expression.

“Something happened, huh?” the demon asked.

“Next time you want to tell me about giving this guy a chance,” muttered Angelique, “*don’t.*”

Setsudan was just aware of his surroundings enough to notice one of his swords that got away from him during the fight. He pulled himself free just enough to lunge for it. While Angelique did backstep, she felt an additional pull on her hoodie, pulling her even further back and dodging the grab. She didn’t get a chance to even look back with Setsudan in front of her; he needed showing up first.

Angelique grabbed the short sword with her teeth to pull it out of the plate as she slammed the remaining food and its plate into the cross Crossguard’s face, leaving him laying.

Only now could she get a chance to look back to only see one of Saki’s staff - an elven girl - much further away and wiping down a table. Much too far away to have physically done much.

Who did that then? Could it have been-

“Sorry I took so long,” said Vivi. “Was the food alright?”

Angelique grumbled once the sword was out of her teeth. “...it was good, I guess. Let’s get out of here.”

Angelique stabbed the sword into the ground through the shoulder of Setsudan’s jacket, slightly pinning him to the ground. She then shot a brief glare to Forte who hadn’t moved for this whole affair - though Piano had left in the chaos.

"If I see either of you clowns again, you'll both regret it," she snarled.

Angelique and Vivi left the Fox Den after a brief goodbye to Saki. It was a while before Vivi spoke up and let the blonde calm down.

"Things went that crazy when I was gone for maybe two minutes?"

"You shouldn't play with your food. I had a bad feeling about him from the start and you talked me out of it."

"He insulted you?"

"He got *nosy*."

"That was Setsudan's fault a bit."

"It only made the bad feeling more noticeable honestly."

Angelique stopped in place.

"The more I heard him talk, the more it reminded me of a sorcerer you and I both know. Same unsettling feeling behind the words. Even if he's a *little* better than that...even if he or his sister aren't in this tourney--"

"A bad omen. Don't worry - I won't spell it out. ...but it doesn't mean this will go the same way."

Angelique grumbled mentally at such a sign. Viola didn't need to spell it out because it was being played out in Angelique's head already. Being reminded of the team that eliminated her from the last tourney - the last major moment before her life would be *destroyed* - before the first round of another was cementing every bad feeling regarding how bad it would go.

It may be this round. It may be the last round if it gets that far. But there was no more shaking a certain thought. This tournament was a mistake to accept.

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Hours later, the first round of matches in the God Eater's tournament were beginning. Like Angelique, everyone fighting in the tournament was given a piece of paper with one of the letters A, B, C or D. Likewise the brackets shown advertising all this only had the letters scattered around out of the usual order. Each letter would be called for a match - meaning no one would know who their opponent was until the fight started.

Angelique couldn't care less. She was only thankful that she wouldn't be waiting long for her fight. There was a fight occurring before hers, but she was in no mood to watch it. She just waited for the call and for the battlefield to be ready for her.

"And now it's time for match B!" cried the overly cheerful voice of the announcer. "Competitors - to the arena!"

Let's get this over with...

Vivi was naturally in the stands; while the demon wasn't in the front row, she was close to make sure she could get a good view of the fight. She already was informed she couldn't give exact advice - which factored into her being a couple of rows back. Angelique was no pushover, but Vivi knew her struggles and worries.

She was more used to physically having Angelique's back. Anytime she could just watch or was otherwise unable to jump to help was going to bother her.

Thankfully, one distracting thought was the look and palpable excitement of the announcer - the master of ceremonies, Miss X.

"I'm not sure you're ready enough, Crossroads!" she shouted as she floated above the coliseum. "Let me hear just how ready you are!"

Heavily reminiscent of the idols she had briefly seen on television in Angelique's world, Miss X seemed to be the personification of "cute and lively". She had her pink hair drawn into long pigtails and one loc of hair colored black along with a black cat ear headband. She had an elaborate black outfit that went all the way up her neck with white ruffles and a multicolored tutu-like skirt. One slightly tan leg was in what appeared to be a striped thigh-high stocking with some kind of garter and the other in a short pink ankle sock; both were tucked into black mary jane-like

shoes with little bells attached.

"Introducing first, walking out of Gate Alpha, is quite the mysterious competitor! She's very easy on the eyes but anywhere else she hits ya won't be as lucky! This Devil Blooded is certainly dressed to entertain, but is she dressed to kill in Crossroads!? We're about to find out! Some call her the Silent Shadow - it's Piiiiiiiano!"

Compared to when Vivi last saw her, Piano's expression was much more neutral. Despite the crowd cheering and catcalling with all eyes on her, Piano was completely calm and ready for the fight to come.

Even if Vivi had an inkling that Piano was an opponent, so little was given away about her and her fighting style that could be advised about. Of course, the same was true of Piano and knowing just as much about Angelique.

"And introducing her opponent, entering from Gate Omega! She's quite mysterious in her own way - especially those eyes that look like they've seen the world twice over! As cute as she is, be careful how close you get because she is no pushover. She's defeated a Crossguard on her first moments on these shores! Her name means angelic, but who knows what secrets made her lose her halo? You can call her the Heaven's Blight - liiiiiiiit's Angelique!"

Angelique entered with hood up and hands pocketed; despite not looking like it, she heard every word from Miss X and found it all a bit extra. And slightly worrying. She had used that Heaven's Blight alias only once when she followed Viola on one random adventure.

The God Eater knows exactly who she pulled up if X didn't just make that up off the top of her head...and I'm really doubting it's a coincidence. So now it's why the hell did she invite me...

"Can you make those announcements any more exaggerated?" grumbled Angelique. "What next, theme music?"

Miss X's eyes lit up. "You know what - that's a great idea! Maybe I'll see if I can get that for the next round!"

"Oh dear god, I was being sarcastic," replied Angelique with a shake of the head.

Miss X disappeared and reappeared near Angelique's side. It was only through this it was noticed by Angelique - and Vivi who was sitting near Gate Omega - that there were pink pawprints on the underside of X's shoes and more little bells on the back of her outfit.

Only Angelique was close enough to notice her irises were literally hearts. She was so cutesy it was going to make Angelique slightly sick for a couple of reasons.

Like dealing with someone like Piano wasn't going to bother me enough... There's always something to make me hate myself more...

"You're not going to fight with your hood on the whole match, are you?" she asked. "I get fashion is important, but do you really think it's going to stay up the whole time?"

"Can you let me worry about that and give me some space?" Angelique shot back, doing her best to not take a swing at the melodious MC.

"Can I talk to you later then?"

"Maybe - I don't know - just move!"

Miss X disappeared once more and reappeared floating a bit above the arena, perched on a glowing platform. Hovering above one of her hands was a holo-screen showing a versus screen with drawings of Angelique and Piano.

"Everyone knows the rules from the previous match, so let's get started! Match 2 of Round 1...starts now!"

The rules of the fights Angelique was aware of. The typical knockout or incapacitated rule, surrender or losing the tag that got the fighter entry. Both of the tags were hidden, so that wasn't an immediate idea to go for.

Both took a stance and the audience took notice that both were taking similar fighting stances - though Piano was taking a much lower stance and Angelique with something closer to Muay Thai with one foot off of its heel.

Great...she kicks too. And she looks like she's taller even without the heels on top of having way more muscle--

Her thoughts were interrupted by a sudden kick towards her face that she just managed to sidestep. Angelique wasn't underestimating Piano in the slightest, but that speed still wasn't something she was ready for.

Angelique responded with a kick of her own that was pretty close to Piano's but with less of a run-up. Piano dodged this easily. This continued for a while with Miss X delighting in calling it a "mirror match" until Piano elected to throw a punch. Rather than copy that, she merely deflected that with one of her arms and quickly kned Piano twice in the abdomen. Piano laid a heavy kick to Angelique in turn, nearly taking all of the air out of her.

She scampered back but not before Piano caught her with a few more kicks and sent the blonde tumbling over.

"Angelique quit playing Simon Says and Piano made her pay!" announced Miss X. "She played a martial arts melody with her opponent's torso!"

One of her strikes is like two or three of mine, thought Angelique as she got back to her feet. Why don't I just surrender? Ruin everyone's fun by not giving them the fight they want? Would serve that Madame Chief right...

"Come on, Angie! You got this!" Vivi was cheering her hardest for Angelique - and loudest.

She believes in me...stirring up what little pride I've got left... Well, people have gotten into fights for less.

Angelique was back on the attack and the kick-dodge exchange continued once more. And once again, it was interrupted by Piano's throwing fists and elbows as quickly as she threw knees and kicks. But Angelique proved more prepared this time around.

She held onto Piano's arms tightly, muting their offense. Tied up in a clinch of sorts, the kicking game resumed as the other tried to prevent any major offense...until Angelique decided to fight dirty.

Just as Piano was maneuvering herself to escape and get back on the attack - proving how flexible she was - Angelique's foot connected with her crotch and most of the crowd hissed and winced, especially the female onlookers. But there were no rules beyond how to win and no outside help, so there were no utterances from X or anyone else official.

While Piano dealt with the heavy amount of pain such a blow would produce, Angelique's hold on Piano shifted. Soon her fingers were locked behind Piano's head, interlaced with her ponytail and holding her head downwards. Then the knees started to fly up rapidly into Piano's face.

"A Muay Thai clinch from Angelique and she's now laying in those knee strikes!" Miss X was floating around, getting a better angle of the action and letting what she saw be shown on the screens around the coliseum. "After a shot below the belt, Piano may be locked in with nowhere else to go while she's getting belted! I think Angelique may have some hair gripped as well; I told you there were secrets behind those eyes!"

Piano toughed through the pain of the low blow to stop Angelique because all of the knee strikes would take their toll if not interrupted. But like X pointed out, Angelique had a bit of Piano's hair as well with her clutch, making separation even more difficult. But Piano would find a way as Angelique was soon to find out.

The blond hissed as she felt pain on her left knee, not knowing what had occurred. All she felt before that moment was something dripped on her. This caused her rapid-fire assault to slow and give Piano an opening. She immediately threw a kick with her right leg like she knew what ailed Angelique and it would be harder to block with her left leg. This forced Angelique to break her clinch to block with her left arm.

Piano quickly used the new space to lash out with the limbs on her right side to get the grip to fully break. Angelique blocked the best she could with her left arm; she considered this the closest she had to an advantage over the athletic Devil Blooded and wasn't going to fully let that go.

That's when Angelique got alarmed when she was able to take better notice of slight changes to her attire during said blocking. The parts of her pants that covered her knees were a bit eroded - her left knee especially. Her left sneaker suffered similar, but with much lesser damage. It was hard to tell what had gotten onto them, but wherever a black liquid had gotten on her left knee, it felt like it was burning her.

Piano twisted out of what was left of Angelique's clinch and locked in one in turn to hold the human still to deliver a high kick. Angelique grabbed Piano's ebony ponytail and yanked it, throwing the kick slightly off track as Piano was thrown to the ground. It still clipped the blonde's head, disorienting her. It was in this brief moment she noticed something black was coming out of her nose.

Damn it, I feel stupid. Her race is called Devil Blooded...I should have figured something would be up with her even if I didn't know the exacts, but I got so caught up in this! I basically gave her that opening!

Piano was barely on the ground for a second before a brief surge of a black substance left her nose. The pressure was much too bizarre for a typical nosebleed; she must have had some power over her blood. Angelique went for a stomp with her already ruined left sneaker, not willing for any of that blood to get anywhere else. Piano turned on the ground to dodge the stomp, spinning herself into what looked like a breakdancing maneuver and swinging her legs towards Angelique.

But as Angelique got some distance, she noticed two objects were flying at her. She dodged one and caught the other, briefly taking a look at it. A sharp object being thrown at her was one thing, but why was it colored some kind of purple?

It was only when Piano resumed a vertical base that she noticed there was a slight height difference in now and it clicked.

Why else would she wear heels to a fight like this, even if she's that used to it? They're basically little daggers!

“What a crazy exchange!” Miss X said while the crowd was starting to whip itself into a slight frenzy and chanting Piano’s name. “Piano denies Angelique her chance at an advantage and entertaining this crowd all at the same time! Weaponizing her blood, hidden weapons, surprise breakdancing - what can’t Piano do!?”

Angelique was getting more irritated than she thought she’d be. Mostly because she got more invested than she planned to be. The regrets came back with a fanged vengeance, tearing at her brief flurry and what it did for her self-esteem. Now the audience aside from Viola seemed to be firmly behind her superior opponent. If there was any rooting for the “underdog”, she couldn’t hear them.

If I’m really trying to win here, I’ll have to start using some magic soon. No point trying to keep it completely a secret when I may lose anyway. But with how pissed I’m getting, I can already feel it surging. I’ll get lost in it. But do they even care? They just want violence...they’re already chanting her name like I’m some ugly annoying thing to get past!

She doesn’t look like she cares either. She just keeps trying to get more of a fight out of me or she would have gone for more knockout shots like the one from the start--

Piano withdrew a couple more daggers from her outfit and tossed them at Angelique before dashing at her herself. Without the heels, there was a slight increase in speed - like she wasn’t fast

enough as it was. But Angelique's counter had her flipping backwards.

This time, Angelique had caught both daggers thrown. One was in her other hand and the other was between her now slightly exposed toes of her left foot. She even tried to kick with the same foot, which forced Piano to back up. But now she was the one who was facing daggers being thrown at her; her tactics were being copied again. Naturally, Piano dodged all three, but to the surprise of most, the one thrown with Angelique's foot came the closest to wounding her. Angelique was grinning at what she managed; her fragile confidence was back.

"Now is that a trick or what!? Angelique doesn't seem to have brought any weapons of her own, but she seems so at ease with those daggers, she could wield and throw one with her *foot*! Who could have seen that one coming!?"

Vivi couldn't help but smirk from the stands since she obviously knew how much that was practiced and who got her into the sharp things in the first place. She didn't think it would enter much in a battle situation, but once again, Angelique had taught her something.

Angelique grabbed the other stiletto dagger that flew past her earlier and was back on the attack. Piano rushed forward to meet her.

The dagger was thrown while Angelique was focusing her magic elsewhere. Piano dodged. Angelique went for a roundhouse kick. Piano ducked under. Piano went for a kick of her own. Angelique dodged, leaving Piano's kick to connect with one of Angelique's bubbles. With a literal bang, she was pushed back. The moment she looked up to locate Angelique once more, she saw a few more orbs were coming right at her.

Deflecting them would be a trial, so Piano took to dodging and cutting through them with more of her daggers without getting too close. It seemed she was getting the better of the situation once more until an intense pressure started to push her body down to the ground. It was an incredible strain to even remain standing against the force, but Piano only took a knee while the ground around her started to slightly crack.

Angelique was on top of her in a flash with a punt kick, kicking one of the bubbles into Piano's head and trying to grind the Devil Blooded's face into the arena floor.

"Angelique's bag of tricks is deeper than we thought!" Miss X seemed to be especially enjoying Angelique's extra aggression. "First little bubbles, then a gravity spell and she is all over Piano!"

Piano showed how much strength was truly hidden away as she fought her way back to a vertical base and punched Angelique back. Angelique growled as she didn't stay back for long, laying in more knee strikes to Piano's body - though she was more careful to avoid her face and that blood.

As Angelique ran in and left her feet for a kick, Piano thrust kicked her back. But Angelique wasn't sent flying far; the shadows beneath her grabbed onto both her and Piano. While Piano was held still, Angelique was able to spring off of them, using the momentum from the kick to flip while doing so. Her heel cracked down on the top of Piano's head - right between her horns.

"And Angelique finally starts to firmly take the advantage against Piano for the first time with a shadow-assisted axe kick! She said 'block this overhead' and Piano could not!"

Angelique backstepped before Piano could lash out against her, but she didn't pursue. Both took the moment to catch their breath while the crowd cheered. They weren't chanting Piano's name at this point - or at least not as loudly as before.

Angelique met Piano's gaze with a grin she couldn't manage to hide. The usual sensations from using her magic only intensified with knowing that using it turned the tide. The biggest "mistake" in her mind was not using it sooner. She could win for once; she could feel it in her bones.

She closed her eyes for barely half a second to steady her breathing. But the slightest of sounds cut over the noise of the arena. Did Piano already make a move?

She opened her eyes...and she could only scream. Her arms past the elbows were gone. All that was in front of her on the ground were scraps of metal and seared black fabric. In the milliseconds that she shut her eyes, her arms were blasted off.

Piano looked incredibly surprised - not for the "discovery" she was fighting someone with mechanical arms however. She noticed something was off ever since seeing her at breakfast. And how tightly Angelique had her in that clinch only confirmed it for her. No, the scream is what surprised Piano. Angelique screamed like she was in pain and incredibly horrified.

The arena was briefly stunned silent by what they all could assume was interference. Those who hadn't picked the worst time to blink saw the beams of light cut across the field. This included Vivi who was intensely searching for who dared such an action. While she didn't see the attacker in the act - they had long left the spot the blast came from - she had caught a glimpse of a familiar bowler hat.

Angelique mentioning the last tournament beforehand made Vivi see red now. Thanks to that, she remembered their then team getting into serious trouble due to another slick talker's treachery.

Vivi was out of her seat in a flash, heading up the stairs of the arena for what she believed to be Forte. Her target noticed the charging demon and fled towards an exit. But Vivi proved faster and

summoned her weapon, preparing to knock the Devil Blooded flat. But all she hit was air.

An illusion... Someone has something to hide, don't they?

Arguably, the Silver Tongued Snake had plenty to keep secret about. But this wasn't one of them. Aside from chatting up others in the arena, including a high-rank Crossguard, Forte was so well assured of his dear sister's victory that he could focus more on those he was vocally grifting. He had no reason to so blatantly interfere. But when he noticed the attack, there was no reasoning with the Demon at that moment - not after Angelique's earlier agitation and not with the very suspicious timing. When cooler heads prevailed, he would reappear if needed.

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Whoa...so the rumors in class are true? This is why you wear long sleeves all the time?

Yeah yeah, get the jokes out of the way. Angelique has prosthetic arms. Give her a big hand or whatever...

I'm not going to make fun of you. I think they look great! You look great!

You're just saying that...

I'm not! You're like...super strong to manage through however you lost your arms! And these look well made!

...a friend worked on them really hard for me. Best gift I ever got.

I'll bet. So can they do cool stuff? Rocket punch? Lasers?

What? No! They don't and I don't need or want them to. They're just for living life. Only so much I can do with my feet.

I get it, I get it. ...but I bet the robotics club would have a field day thinking up "upgrades" for you if they knew.

Yeah, well, they won't. ...he took weeks to make these just for me when he had heavier stuff going on. So I'm not screwing with the design. At most, I'll keep repairing them so they stay as is.

***Besides being a big help...it's my last memory of someone I'm positive I'll never see again.
If anyone ruins these arms...***

=====

While Angelique had sunk to her knees, hyperventilating and lost in the past, the crowd openly muttered and talked amongst themselves while Miss X excused herself from sight briefly.

Most uttered in concern for Angelique. Most hadn't realized Angelique didn't have her original arms. Some were amazed she was putting up such a fight with that knowledge in their heads. Others believed Piano was taking it easy on her. Some of the latter group started to snicker and chuckle. Angelique heard most of this and it felt deafening to her. She knew her disability would color what was thought of her and this was proving to be as much of a nightmare as she predicted. Piano could see the human growing more and more unstable.

"Your Madame Chief has rendered a judgment!" Miss X reappeared on the arena floor. "She isn't exactly happy that someone dared to interfere in these matches. It also looks like someone had it out for Angelique and she is quite tempted to just award the match to her!"

This spooked Piano slightly. It's one thing to lose a match - but to lose under such circumstances would prove especially problematic. This was the opposite of the entertaining she had hoped to happen in the rounds.

"Buuuuuut," Miss X turned to look right at Piano. "Since Madame Chief is sure you didn't know about this, she's going to give you a chance! If you can convince Angelique to continue the match, it shall continue! But you don't have a lot of time!"

Piano was more capable of speaking than she looked and had a strong sense of empathy, but even if she could express herself more openly and spoke with the utter confidence of her brother, she knew it would take a Herculean effort to convince Angelique to continue with the energy directed at her.

She cautiously walked up to Angelique, avoiding the strewn pieces of metal from what was her opponent's arms and stopping in place when Angelique stared at her like she was part of the mocking crowd.

"You knew they would judge you no matter what..."

"Like you aren't?"

"I'm not judging you. I understand how you must be feeling."

"Doesn't look like you would..."

"...not physically, but the feeling that others couldn't understand what you've gone through."

Angelique looks at Piano with serious doubts. She couldn't judge by appearances and she had no clue about the kind of world she came from, but it was a hard sell. Still, it didn't sound like she was lying to her. Compared to Forte, that wasn't saying much, but still.

Some members of the crowd started jeering, wanting to watch a fight and not some talk. Granted, they *all* did, but many of them were understanding that something was wrong with Angelique due to an outside party messing with things and held the blame of things going wrong to said party.

But others weren't as patient with their bloodlust taking center stage instead.

"Finish the fight for yourself, not for them," said Piano.

"...stop acting like you'd be happy if I won," grumbled Angelique at a low volume, knowing the past is against her. "You're here to win like anyone else and you just want a chance to close this out."

"Personally, yes - I would like to have that chance," admitted Piano. "But I would have no regrets if you came out the victor."

"None...? Not even about whatever you came to wish for?"

Piano shook her head. "Even if I knew what I wanted to wish for, I would not."

Angelique laid on her back, seeming to deliberate even considering this while the more outspoken members of the audience applied peer pressure. A fight ending in a disqualification wasn't what they wanted either.

Damn it, in the end, she's right. The wish wasn't the biggest thing on my mind when I said yes to this. It's finding out why I was invited here...and to see if I had what it took now. And taking the win means nothing. It's that damn God Eater's pity.

So even if I lose, screw it. Let's try to shoot the moon.

Angelique suddenly pushed both feet into Piano's torso, sending the Devil Blooded backwards. Angelique then did a kip-up and was back on her feet once more.

"Don't blame me if you're hurting tomorrow!" Angelique said with a vicious grin.

Piano merely nodded, black blood still stained above her lip, before going right for a punch. It collided with Angelique's nose before she got a chance to move, but Angelique used the momentum to spin into a heel kick counterattack before stumbling back.

"Looks like the match is back on! And both now are bleeding from the nose!" Miss X shouted, getting the crowd agitated once more. "Matching each other in strikes and throwing weapons so far - but does Piano have an answer for that shadow magic!?"

Both stared each other down, wiping the blood from their faces - Piano with her hand and Angelique using what was left past her shoulder. Rather than see if Piano would make the first move, Angelique decided she'd grab the initiative by the neck. That's when the shadows beneath her started to move and her hair started to rise like she was underwater.

The shadows rose from the arena floor in inky tendrils and they immediately went on the attack, lashing at Piano. Despite how fluid they looked, their strikes stung the Devil Blooded, cutting at her outer clothing and leaving marks on her body. Piano was forced back slightly, but drew a short sword to combat the shadows and fought her way back within arms' reach of Angelique.

A punch was thrown that Angelique ducked. Piano grabbed Angelique's blond hair to hold the shadow wielder still, but the shadows grabbed Piano in turn before she could pummel Angelique.

"I'm not sure if Piano underestimated Angelique's shadows or Angelique was playing her opponent like her namesake!" Miss X was only getting more excited as the crowd was stunned by the magic at play. "Either way, she's tied up and she may be in big trouble!"

Angelique's grin only grew wider as some of the shadows continued to whip at an ensnared Piano, revealing more peeks at the lilac leotard through the tears until Angelique's hair was released. Then the Devil Blooded was picked up and slammed multiple times by the shadows in a vicious display before being tossed across the arena until her body tumbled into a wall.

Angelique seemed to be truly lost in the damage, drinking in some of the stunned reactions. She mentally wondered if they were still entertained when she was winning. Then she started to mutter to herself. Some believed she was starting to lose it even further - but the more magically inclined recognized it as a magical incantation.

"Take aim, my shadow archers!" Angelique screeched. "Notch the might of darkness for your target is in sight!"

One by one, shadows rose above Angelique's head and formed large and menacing-looking arrows. Soon the air above her was covered in arrows - all directed at Piano who was still getting to her feet.

Piano stared at the intimidating display of magic. Not only were there still tendrils moving about, but there was a multitude of arrows ready to fire. Getting past all of that to defeat Angelique would take a lot of effort if she thought victory was still in reach.

"Quite a show of force from Angelique! And--" Miss X paused as a display popped up next to her and took up part of the screens in the arena. "And somewhere in the chaos, Angelique snatched the tag from Piano - even I didn't realize! The thirty-second countdown to get it back has begun!"

Piano immediately brought up a hand to her neck. Amid the marks from the attacks and the popped buttons on her ruined shirt, her neck was bare. It wasn't supposed to be bare for the tag that came with her entry was around her neck. Angelique only stared and grinned madly like she would fire at any second, but didn't.

Now she had to find it and get it back with less than thirty seconds to do so. One of the shadows that tangled and struck her either cut the string holding it and it was scooped off the ground or it was snatched right off her neck during the attack. Either way, Angelique's expression hadn't shifted nor had the attacks shifted much. Was getting the tag just a lucky happening or was that the plan all along?

Piano couldn't sense which shadow could be hiding the tag. Her only hope was to knock out Angelique quickly. She only had time for one move - maybe two.

Blood started to trickle out of Piano's nose once more as something about her changed. Most didn't know about her ability to manipulate her Ki and now was the perfect time to use it. She didn't even seem to be breathing before launching herself at an insane speed.

The arrows didn't fire, but the shadows moved when she did, trying to reach Piano before she could do anything. Despite the human's best efforts, Piano nailed a kick at blistering speeds and sent Angelique flying into a wall.

"She nailed a kick right to the head before Angelique's magic could react!" Miss X was enjoying every second of the fight. "She may be snagged now, but will Angelique manage to stay conscious long enough to win!? She doesn't have to even use those arrows to defeat Piano now, but she might still go for it!"

The only thing stopping the shadows from being faster than Piano completely was Angelique being unable to keep track of her. Since she couldn't, Angelique did what she could - protecting herself with said shadows from the kick and the subsequent wall slam. But it still rocked her to the point she felt very dazed.

Her eyes lazily glanced at the nearest screens from the ground. Fifteen seconds. Fourteen seconds. Thirteen seconds and she had Piano trapped under the metaphorical eye of her Shadow Arrows.

Piano struggled against the shadows controlled by a currently uncoordinated Angelique. If she could get free, victory could still be hers. But the arrows were still in play - now moving to point at the area she was held in.

They fell like bombs from an aircraft. Piano pushed herself just enough to tear free of the shadows with the constructs closing in. Dust was thrown up from the multiple impacts to the battlefield. The audience couldn't see a thing.

"Five...four...three...two...one...it's over! We can't sense that Piano reclaimed her tag - Angelique is your winner and will advance to the next round!"

When the dust cleared, Piano was down on her knees. She wasn't seriously injured, but the pain as well as the fatigue from manipulating her Ki to that degree caught up with her. Angelique was only just sitting up. The crowd was applauding them both - they expected Piano to be ruined by the arrows or Angelique getting caught by one last strike.

"...you didn't even aim for me," Piano muttered in surprise with only Angelique able to hear her above the crowd.

"Nnngh...I may have been in a bad mood from all this, but that doesn't mean I'd overdo it," said Angelique. "You're the one who pulled me out of the way in the Fox Den. Just consider us even."

Shadows first helped Angelique up before they helped Piano up. Then Piano's tag was tied next to Angelique's since the string was snapped. Since the match was over, Vivi was able to jump down to the arena to help Angelique. There were few parts of Angelique's arms that were worth taking, but Vivi collected all the scrap that she could.

"...you really are being cool about this..." Angelique mumbled in shock.

"Congratulations," Piano replied with a slight bow. "I'll make sure you find medical attention."

"I'll be fine," mumbled Angelique again. "I...I don't want to deal with anyone else right now..."

Piano could understand that, but also doubted that she didn't need some medical attention.

Angelique started walking towards the nearest gate - the one she entered from. "...you're cool...but I don't want to deal with your brother," she muttered. "Whatever he is writing, leave me out of it. I'm not worth documenting."

Miss X started to point out to Angelique that it's tradition to go through their opponent's gate - symbolizing the opponent blocking the way to victory - but the Madame Chief stopped her and let Angelique and Vivi go. Angelique passed one of the other competitors on the way from leaving; the military-like figure she briefly spotted on the port when she first arrived was there working on a mech. They looked at each other but didn't say anything. The situation was suffocatingly awkward given Angelique's state and Angelique hid behind Vivi as they walked quickly off.

Meanwhile, up in her special platform, the God Eater was still laughing. Not just from the battle - as chaotic as it was - but from an event within it.

She expected some odd events involving Angelique, but this was more than she was initially expecting. So blatant and destructive. How flashy and amusing.

Finally, they show themselves. Well, one of them. I'll let you escape...for now. This is one of those stories that works best if I play dumb, isn't it? Let you believe you're so sneaky~ But you'll show yourself again. You need to. And then your little plot will get exposed more and more.

But you better hurry, foolish little manipulator. I'm not exactly so patient. Where the shrewd little writer failed, I think I will succeed in quenching my curiosity. And I think I could ruin everything that way~

Angelique and Vivi returned to the Kit Inn at Angelique's insistence. She just wanted to shut her eyes despite Vivi insisting she gets treated first. But soon, there was another issue and Angelique's scream could be heard pretty far.

Angelique's room was ransacked and her bag was clearly searched. Stuff was missing. Vivi's room was messed with as well, but not to any major degrees like Angelique's - except for one. All the tools and spare metal meant for fixing Angelique's arms were gone. The assumption going forward was whoever blasted her arms off and fled was making sure they couldn't get them repaired easily.

Angelique's rage returned with a vengeance. She didn't take all of it out on Piano, so she had plenty to spare. When Crossguards - two males and a female - showed up at the room to handle a "disturbance", Angelique's rage scared the hell out of them. Through their visors, Angelique's two fox tails were black and dripped with darkness.

One of the senior Crossguards on scene tried to calm Angelique down while understanding her situation, but Angelique was having none of it. He was quickly seized by Angelique's shadows. Her speech occasionally distorted from her magic surging higher than it already had previously as she ranted and raved about the series of unfortunate events. She threatened the Crossguards to correct the injustices or they would have a nightmare on their hands. And the way she said it, there was tangible concern she was 100% literal in that threat.

Vivi and the other Crossguards managed to calm Angelique down enough to release her captive and they promised to solve this problem as they quickly departed.

"Hey, I know you never drank before, but maybe right now, you should consider it?" Vivi was nervous since she hadn't seen Angelique this angry in years.

"...just leave me alone for a little bit...please?"

"...alright. I'll come back up to make sure you eat and get treated later. Maybe there's a repairman in town."

Vivi sighed as she pulled the door closed. She wasn't going to wait on the Crossguards either. As far as the demon was concerned, she had to make sure who made Angelique suffer like this paid dearly.

"Um, excuse me. Is this a bad time?"

Vivi turned her head to see who was talking to her. Then she had to look down since the speaker was a bit shorter than her.

It was a glasses-wearing human with bright green hair tied into two braids. There was a belt with two pockets tied around a blue dress with a yellow trim and matching puffy shoulders that were attached to the straps. The color theme continued with her thigh-high boots, gloves and a large, slightly pointed hat.

"Um...yeah, miss witch. If you're here to speak to Angelique, this is not the time."

"E-excuse me, but I am not a witch," corrected the young woman. "I am a Mage and my name is Wendy."

"You sure you aren't a witch? I know a witch named Wendy from television--"

"I am not a witch! I--" Wendy took a deep breath. "I have come to see if I can talk to your friend. See if I could help her in some way. Her magic was surging quite a lot during the round, so I thought..."

"So you saw the fight. That covers a lot." Vivi sighed. "...hey, just come hang out with me for a little bit, Wendy. I'll let you see Angie later. Right now, I don't know if she even wants to see me."

While Vivi was escorting Wendy downstairs and away from the door, Angelique seethed on the tatami floor, not bothering with the effort of pulling out the futon.

I can't even feel happy about winning for once... Everything's going to hell already! And those damn Crossguards - they get eluded that easily!? When I had a dimension, I didn't let this chaos happen! I'd run this place better than--

...I wonder if that's even possible...if I win that wish...

=====

Excellent...she's already shifting. It's all going to plan.

...

Nonsense. You did well, Gabriel. Do not worry for her - believe in the plan. I've calculated everything multiple times. When it all ends...we'll all achieve our happiness.