

Quan Huynh

by Ice Cube

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Reference Sheet

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Audition	Passed
Round 1	Won
Round 2	Lost to Piano & Forte
Round 3	
Tournament Status:	Lost in R2

ICE CUBE



Aliases/Nickname(s)

Ice

Pronouns/Gender/Sex

[They/Them]

Vocation

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DeviantART:

[LifeofIce](#)

[Quan Hyun] Audition: Oh, to compete for a wish

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Chifu. Cheeeeeeeee- fooooooooooooo- Maybe she should spell it with a Q. Or, maybe she should change it! Maybe- Great. Now, she has been so bored she has been thinking about changing her name. Time to spice things up now, eh?

She sent out familiars- they looked just like her!- out into the worlds. A few in this one, a few in another- as always, every single little fox easily seduced those mortals into accepting her challenge, a wondrous fighting tournament set in her own little realm, just for her! How wonderful!

Of course, there are always a few..... Difficulties. See, this world hasn't been that special, but it has been promising. And it would be *annoying* to send her familiar somewhere else. With a hum she checked on her little vixen's progress. Not a single one accepted her offer, often hurrying away before the fox even approached. One with fox ears even petted her little creation, without even heeding the letter it has been clutching in its mouth! It's own kin! What disrespect to a fellow trickster- it's good to indulge a youngster *once* in a while.

Perhaps her mistake has been not sending her creation to those who truly wanted it. The desperate, the needy- but even they didn't want her letter! Chifu scoffed as a beggar looked away from the fox nudging them insistently with its snout. Then perhaps she needed someone foolish *and* desperate- not that it would be hard to find one of those.

Finally, finally, she directed her vixen towards the marketplace. Sure to be full of thieves and go getters, makers of their own destiny too desperate to consider getting a job, and too stupid to figure out how to trick their way up in the world, like any real trickster should do. There were many- some felt full of magic, but couldn't even sit up or see her familiar, while others were weaker, already chased off by those huge wolves one stall had been employing. They were simply too boring to be in her tournament, she wanted a *fight*, not a slaughter.

She already did one of those, and frankly, it had been uninspiring.

Her head snaps down as she lounges in the sky above the marketplace. She saw something. Something fast, now *that* could be enjoyable. Hunter and prey, the best dynamic one could have in a fight!

She hums as she observes- a boy, snatching food from the stall, leaving only a poof of dirt and dust behind him to mark his existence in front of the stall. Her face stretches in a toothy smile as she sends her familiar after the boy.

The little fox trotted at its master's behest into the alley, hiding behind a few boxes, just so Chifu could observe for a few seconds longer, and maybe enjoy a little laugh.

The boy glanced around- ooh blue eyes, pretty- as if to search for any danger- before he unwrapped his skewer and began eating. What has been odd though, has been his hair. Originally down and ratty looking, his black and white hair was now standing up all on its own, and it seemed to rise higher every time the little fox approached closer.

Soo curious~

He had stopped eating and has been just listening now, looking about ready to run at the slightest sound..... Chifu giggled at his serious expression and tried to mimic it, scrunching up her eyebrows and pursing her lips, throwing herself into a fit of laughter.

With a pop, the fox teleported in front of him- the kebab went flying, he went flying, and the little fox perturbed by all the commotion, trotted over to the boy stuck in the wall, delicately handing him the letter and sitting as Chifu howled with laughter above their heads.

“He- he- Oh wow- he really just flew into a wall- Oh my goodness what a *dumbass-*”

She watched a few minutes more but huffed. Boring, boring, boring, just another kind, dumb, naive little kid, with more power than he deserved. She'll be watching him in a bit anyway~ Now off to go finish her preparations for her *epic* battles!

Quan could have *sworn* there has been someone watching him. There's always someone watching him, yes, a scraggly fae with an accent and a penchant for destruction and stealing, who's definitely not from around these parts, but even with all his peculiarities, he shouldn't feel like he's being *scrutinized*. There are enough scraggly, thieving kids around here, he shouldn't stand out as much as he feels he is.

This all, he contemplates as he skulks around the market, tugging his scarf up to his face, tugging the ends, pretending he just got lost- likely picking up food for a traveling family, perhaps, for the lawful ones in the crowd. He can sense the wary gazes of the stall keepers hoping to keep their wares and money intact- but what he's feeling feels more like a god. Someone with power, someone who's laughing at him, and that is far scarier. He pauses at a bread stand- hmm. Not in the mood... He moves on to something that smells far better.

Like that meat stand for instance.

He watches the crowd go by, pretending to inspect the wares at a nearby jewelry shop- he's very appreciative of the luster of the gemstones set in metal- and in a flash, he spins on his heel to swipe the skewer from the fire, meat intact, so quickly that the vendor doesn't even have time to shout, before dashing away down the road, quicker than greased lightning across half the city, dodging anything and everything in his path-

Quan skids to a stop glancing around- hm. He didn't manage to lose them- he wishes it weren't so obvious he has been scared, but he can feel his hair standing on end, stiff enough to stab any potential danger.

Breath. Breath, Quan. He looks around once more- and resigns himself to the ever-there paranoia and-

FUCK-

Quan throws himself as hard as he can away from the noise and from the pop- it could be anything-

And finds himself embedded in a brick wall- *again*.

A little white fox looks up at him, and Quan struggles to keep the scared look on his face. It's probably a minion of some kind and he shouldn't let his guard down- in case its master has been watching.

And he knows. He can feel it- the master is watching. It's like all the times people have approached him with offers- of safety, food, warmth during the winter. All things he can get. What they really wanted has been *him* in body, spirit, or soul, and there has always been a higher power watching their minions try and get him. Sometimes they were afraid, sometimes simply lazy or dismissive. But there has always been *someone*.

Quan extricates himself from the wall, yanking himself out so he flopped on the ground like a bird shot out of the sky, and he laughs. If you can't laugh at yourself, how can you laugh at anyone else? The fox- probably a familiar, based on its looks with its bright red ears and special markings- has been apparently tired of his shit, and drops the letter at his hand, and Quan lifts his head to read it.

Something, something, god, something uhhh wish? Cross?? Roads??? Chifu.....

He squinted and struggled, and tried to remember the shape of the letters on the note with the script Alexandra had taught him before she died. God. Wish. He has to travel somewhere, and he can be granted a wish by a god? Well, it certainly sounds like something someone would offer a homeless kid- but.

The power he can feel behind it feels legit. Feels similar to the gods and demigods he's passed before- not unusual. But a fox can make themselves feel much more powerful than they truly are, however, it's the power *behind* him, not in front of him that proves it.

Quan nods enthusiastically, tugging at his scarf with pent up energy. "Um!! Yes, I want to get a wish from the god-"

The fox bit him, and he cursed and kicked the fox as his world dissolved around him-

His world fell in place around him again. Somewhere different. Not the cityscape he has been used to, not the countryside or even the ocean.....

A bridge surrounded him, and someone smacked into him from behind as he looked around- a picturesque river flowed by, much like the sea of people weaving around him, barely sparing a glance. The wind through the air alerts him to the clinking at his fingers, and he spares only a thought for his new accessory.

To the left was the town, all reds and browns and cobblestone, while on the right was a large green field, the perfect place to hide.

He runs to the left in a blast of speed, shoving off the ground and leaving only a poof of dust as he moves with a swish. The views of the town blur together as he runs, but he catches a few glimpses of his new location. A colosseum, fancy complexes and plainer ones, a tower, gates, a spring, an ocean- one he observed after scaling a house and sliding down the roof- He takes a few sharp turns so he can see more. This time, a town with green tipped roofs, and trees. Back the other way- the ocean he had seen earlier, fancy houses enclosed into a wall, and a port. Possible escape route! He takes just a few moments to test the water- streaking across it as though it were dry land laughing at the white foam he leaves behind.

This all, of course, happens in a few minutes of a cackling *ghoul*- someone so pale and thin and bulging- from his clothing- and fast all at the same time sprinting around and annoying all the

people in the town, weaving through crowds and stands as though he were born there.

Until someone staggers in his path- both with an unusual speed and unusual swagger and he knocks them over. His eyes bulge out. Rich lady? Between the clothing, her ears, and that.. Flute? It looked like a flute. He was pretty sure. Probably.

She smelled drunk.

He's just about to leave, when he hears the woman start giggling behind him. "You're not even going to help a lady- *hic!*- up?" She giggles again.

"Uh-" He sighs, then turns around with a bright, apologetic smile. "Yeah, I'll help you up. I got distracted, here!" He offers a hand, in which she limply places her own in- until Quan yanks her up easily.

They awkwardly stare at each other for a few moments, Quan holding a smile in place, and the woman looking like she was staring over his shoulder in a daze.

He's about to leave with a wave when the lady grabs his arm and starts talking with a slur. " Mm... your tail is so pretty... hehe... I'll tell X about that- We should, mm, go to the bar!"

"That uh-" He's trying to yank his arm out of her grip, even though his strength wasn't enough? When she starts moving, dragging him along, despite his attempts to escape. "That sounds like a fun idea!" He concedes. Quan can focus on escaping later- it seems a lot better here than anywhere else.

She cheerfully drags him along with an iron grip, her sharp nails digging into his jacket, until they arrive in front of the bar he passed earlier. "And here *hic* we are! The Fox Den! The best bar in town...." She finally releases him, and beckons for him to follow. He shrugs- it seemed interesting, and the competition probably wasn't going to start without him.

“You coming?”

“I’m coming-” He follows in with a bounce in his step, any trace of doubt erased. “I’m coming, hold on lady- speaking of which, what’s your name?”

‘I’m- *hic*- Chifu! The prettiest lady in town! And you must be one of the ugliest.” She announces proudly, before snorting, as though it was a grand award. Really, she seemed to speak like she was the most important person in town at any given moment, he notes with distaste. “Who are you? I don’t- *hic*- recognize you. You’re so *little*.”

As he always did when in a new area, a precaution Alexandra taught him so he wouldn’t get his name stolen- “You can call me An! And yeah, I’m new here, and 16 isn’t little!”

He grumbles a bit. “I’m here for the whole competition thing- have you heard about it? I can’t believe I have the chance to get a wish from a god- a god of kitsune even! It’s always so nice to see that a lesser god gets to be recognized by so many people, they must be incredibly grand, can you even imagine being granted anything you want-” He’s interrupted by her giggling.

“Can you even *imagine- hic!*- The competition! Ehehe, lesser gods are so cool, right? I mean like- a *wish*?” That seems to be the part that throws her into the worst hysterics, as she clutches her stomach and leans on the table, her cheek pressed face first into the wooden table’s surface.

“ I don’t know what I would wish for! Maybe money.... or more booze!” It throws her into another fit of hysterics, and this time, Quan joins her.

“Right? I mean-” He pauses and thinks. If he could wish for *anything*? “I think I’d wish for endless entertainment- everything is always so boring! Or I’d ask for something like-” He notices Chifu’s eyes on him and ramps up his energy. “Ooh! Or something like immortality, a glimpse of the future- anything! I’d like to be able to do anything, that way I’ll never be bored or hungry or sad again! Wouldn’t that be cool?”

She nods enthusiastically along with him. "Yes! Your wishes are so interesting, everybody else's just *aren't*, and it's so boring..." Chifu pouts a little.

He laughs as if embarrassed, and tugs on his scarf. "See, I don't even know how the competition works! I think that's kind of important, huh? I have these things-" He holds up his hands with the chains, and tugs up his scarf.

"But I don't know what to do or who to meet- do you know? You seem like- super smart and you feel like you have a lot of magic and stuff- and like! Really experienced- I've been through a lot myself, but I guess I don't live in a place like this." Quan says sheepishly.

"Well, silly!!! You flatter m- *hic!* I can explain anything about the tournament! It's like- A fighting match! And you have to win- Or else, you don't get to compete anymore, *hic!* I think it's called a tournament! And you won't, like, die, or anything. And I think-" Yet another word she draws out.

"Everybody gets these tokens!" She grabs his hand and shoves it in his face, the metal smacking him as the chains swing. "But they're not *all* the same. And you have to steal 'em! Yeah! You gotta steal 'em or, or... Knock them out, I think, I can't remember!" She dissolves into another fit of giggles.

Quan ponders over this for just a few seconds before he snaps back to attention. Chifu looks sleepy, and he should probably ask a few more questions before she falls asleep- and based on the way the bartender is eyeing them, he should probably make his grand escape before he has to pay for a beverage he didn't even drink.

"Do you know what kind of god is granting the wishes? I don't wanna be scammed here, y'know." He nudges her playfully. He bets she doesn't even know what it means to be scammed.

She hums, and sits bolt upright, her chest puffed. "A god just like me! Someone who's just as pretty an' smart an' clever, I bet *she* hates getting bored just as much as I do! You won't get *scammed*, everybody knows she's very super reliable- except when she's at the bar! She hangs out a lot at the bar."

“.....” No way. “I can’t imagine ever running into her- if she’s just like you, you might be the god, huh?”

She stares at him, and it’s as though the world falls away for just a few seconds. Then, she cackles. “HAHAHAH- no way you’re so silly! I’m not strong enough to be a god, I’m a lil old regular kitsune-” She bops his nose, and laughs at his cringe. “Don’t mistake my beauty for power, silly! I like you, kid. I’ll see you later- I can’t wait to see you win! Toodles~!”

Then with a sway and a thunk, she passes out on the table. Quan blinks. If what he thought was true, a god just passed out in front of him. He looks around.

Oh shit. The bartender. And with that, he makes his way from the boozy smell of the Fox Den, and back onto the streets, wandering while he waits for his summons to the Coliseum.

Quan glances up, down, and to the sides, taking in the Coliseum for the first time, and then more importantly the heavy weight on his hands. Quan raises his hand and tilts it from side to side examining the newly found chains on rings wrapping around his fingers like a mockery of jewelry. It has certainly been *beautiful*, but.....

Heavy. Encompassing. Just like the larger, proper chains he used to wear when he was younger.

The intent has been different- but ultimately, both seemed to try and hold him back, he noted with disgust, seeing how the chains were so long someone, most likely him, could get grabbed and swung- strangled even, it could be used as a noose. And they could slip off so easily- he tilts his hand down and watches the rings start sliding down before he closes his hand in a fist, keeping the rings firmly on his fingers.

He has his advantages, a cover for his plans. A young face, a scraggly looking body, and the proof of his brand of honesty.

Honesty is how you speak, not your actions. No one can blame you for sneezing at the wrong time- but they can blame you for having a cold you didn't tell them about. Simple as that.

It's not his first time being mistaken as a child but it's proven to have worked against Chifu. They treated him like a child, but a child he was not.

He's fast and strong- and as much as people hate to admit it, he's smart. He's smarter than *anyone*, because he can think through the information and formulate plans that much more quickly. He's the clearest winner. He hasn't lived through scuffles and destruction for the past 4 years without a plan. Those plans involved running yes, but it had been using his terrain to his advantage. Definitely.

Quan clenches his hands together, and ducks his face into his brightly colored scarf as he watches others explode into being around him, playing up the scene of a scared teenager.

He's going to win.

[Quan Hyun] Round 1: Underestimation is a Two- Way Street

The massive Coliseum rises above his head, and gathered at the very front of the building are the competitors- far fewer of them than he expected! Quan huffs a laugh quietly as he ducks his head.

He'd always wanted to be somewhere like this- full of noise, full of attention, excitement, and everything in between. He relishes the confusion and the determination in the others, and he *breathes*.

This is nice.

A cheerful voice echoes in the streets above his head, causing heads to turn to the- lady? Girl? With pink hair, a poofy skirt, cat ears, a teensy little cape thing- it must be awful to try and steal something from her, considering how *tight* everything is to her body. Damn. Quan's eyebrows furrow as he starts thinking more coherently. *Is that a girl?* It's always questionable, it's not like he can tell. "Alrighthttttty guys! I'm Miss X, your faithful commentator and judge, and today is our first! Day! Of! Matches! Our tournament is not only full of the best competitors from the multiverse, but also contains a grand prize! A wish from our lovely leader, your Madame Chief!" She waits a few seconds for applause- eagerly given by the people in the streets, and are quickly joined by the competitors.

"To start, we'll announce the rules of the competition! Each of you special little competitors have a tag, something small to signify you being here- I'm sure all of you know what yours are." That much was obvious. "And to win your match is simple! Get your opponent's tag for a full 30 seconds, and you win!" She smiles with a slight teasing grin. "And yes, knocking out or killing your opponent is perfectly fine. Nothing is too much for the best tournament in the multiverse!!"

That seemed to raise people's attention. Quan could see creased eyebrows and downturned lips all over the place- sure signs of being worried, or displeased. Though, he had to agree. Killing? That

seemed a *bit* excessive, especially for the level he wanted to play at.

She starts rattling off names, none of which were much of interest, except for the fact they were all pretentious as *fuck*.

Pembrooke? Angelique? Man, if he had to fight anyone with *that* kind of name he'd win the tournament in about an hour. Those prissy rich kids with stupid prissy names. And then he hears his name- and possibly the prissiest name of them all.

"Quan Huynh, our resident speedster, seen roaring across the entirety of Crossroads in the span of a minute- versus Prince Armius Tu El Kaligos, the proclaimed strongest man in the universe!" He frowns slightly at the use of his real name, but there was little he could do to prevent it now.

Quan quickly scans the crowd for his competitor- checking faces for reactions and- ah, there he is! With the black hair and gold eyes and an awesome cloak Quan is certain is hiding something cool- aw, he's taller than Quan. Sad. It's quick enough- in a flash, while X still babbles above their heads- he rolls his eyes, this lady was *slow*- up he zips, straight to Armius's side, tapping him on the arm.

"Armius, right?" He dodged the delayed flinch of an arm in his direction. It *looked* like this prince guy was trying to smack him, but honestly. Too easy. "I think I'm fighting against you! I'm not so sure what I can do against you considering-" a pantomime of a sword, whilst also gesturing at Armius's sword at his waist, resulting in a flailing from Quan- just to double check that the flinch was real, considering this guy was supposed to be the "strongest man in the universe". "-Swords are really not fun to be stabbed with, or so I've heard- you can call me An!"

Ooh yeah, from the impact against Armius's skin, he seemed at least a *little* above average. Quan studies him, and waits for a response from the tall man- who was simply blinking at him. Quan opens his mouth to reassure him that yes, Quan is very stupid and clumsy when the prince's face widens in a giddy grin transforming him into the face of a little kid.

"I didn't quite catch all of that- but yes, I'm Prince Armius." His eyes shine with what Quan is vaguely certain is happiness and relief- and Quan flinches back from Armius's hands reaching towards him, causing that glimmer to fade. "And I suppose you're right! I wouldn't know, considering a sword has never pierced my skin, and I am surely cursed in this place, but maybe if you grab ahold of it, we can both have experiences we've never had!"

Uh. What a weirdo.

Even with that, Quan doesn't miss a beat. "We definitely will! I mean, I've never been in a fighting tournament before but I've won most of the fights I've been in in the past- From the sounds of it, I might just be a real underdog if you don't get me out of the first round! I think we have some time before the matches start- why don't we get to know each other? I mean, around here, it's really boring-"

"Yes! Yes it is-"

"- unless you're doing something, and I don't think anybody is going to take a kid like me on for a job or anything soon- plus, the people here are all so thorny! Except for that one lady with the red hair- she was so drunk but it was fine- what?"

Quan can see Armius nodding along with his admission so far- hand moving away from the sword holder thing on his hip, and into his pockets. He holds up a hand for silence though- an incredibly condescending move, but it didn't seem intentional. If anything, it seemed instinctual, and Quan supposed he could forgive that.

"Dark hair, right? And big fox ears? I believe I met her too."

Quan tugs on his scarf, trying to think of the name. "Chifu! That's it, Chifu. Yeah, I'm pretty sure she's the little god of the world or whatever that's supposed to give out the prize. Maybe."

"You really think so?"

"I think so! I mean, she's exactly how I imagine an arrogant god would be like- but you didn't hear that from me." That pulls a laugh out of Armius, and Quan mentally pats himself on the back.

"Well Qua-" a pause. "An, I think it would be entertaining to spend some time together before the match- what do you say we explore the town?"

"I already did!"

"You already-" His eyebrows pinch together and he frowns slightly. "Ah, right- the announcer *did* mention something about that- at my full capabilities, I could do something very similar."

Quan starts walking, gently pulling Armius away from the crowd as well. Best to keep his enemies closer, and away from other people. "Oh yeah? Strongest man in the universe?"

"In my world, yes." he says with a softness that seemed uncharacteristic. Maybe he was sad about something? "I think I may have even been faster than you."

Oh, a challenge. "I don't think so! See- can you go as fast as *this*?" And that's all the warning

Armius gets before he's yanked by the arm through the streets and with a blur of light and dizziness and faint laughter, Armius is deposited on the beach where he arrived, lungs heaving from exhilaration- and there's Quan, skidding to a stop before the surf- who as soon as he smiles, falls over with a plop, face first into the sand.

..... and there are some Crossguards disgruntledly brushing themselves off from the wave of sand that just hit them.

"Kid! Watch where you're going! Our esteemed Madam Chifu may have invited you, but you are not forgiven for the mess you caused in town! It was nothing but an extreme public disturbance and the next time-

Quan raises his head and waves them off before laughing and spitting out sand. They're still ranting when Quan playfully speaks up.

"Whoops! I think I might have missed the target by just a bit~"

... and yeah, they just flipped him off. Whoops.

Armius is sat wide eyed and grinning on the sand when Quan finally gets himself out of the sand, carelessly spraying sand everywhere. "That was *incredible*. I cannot imagine the sheer scopes of your abilities with this display! However...."

"I still bet you couldn't have gone that fast."

Armius is hesitant to speak. "Well..... I could go probably faster than that." And then he almost seems to wince at the slight pout on Quan's face- that shifts into a large smile.

"You've gotta tell me more- faster? Are you also stronger? What about how long can you go? Or can you go through walls? I ran through a wall one time! Ooh, or could you run over the ocean? Is it only your physical strength? Or are you also super magical like me? Or is it both? Or-"

Quan smirks a bit internally as he continues to ramble- it's always a little funny to watch people try and keep up with how fast he speaks. But to his surprise, Armius simply nods and seems to be listening carefully.

"I was fast enough to be able to travel to other planets in seconds-"

"Planets? What's that?"

"Like the sun, but it's solid. Another world, sort of."

"... right."

"I killed Yvrius, a god threatening to end our entire universe, I could be stopped by nothing, I had to train myself to hold back, actually!"

"Oh me too!"

Armius gives him an unreadable look, complete with a wrinkle of the nose and a slight narrowing of the eyes which Quan does *not* understand beyond telling that Armius seemed annoyed, according to the bite in his tone.

"And yes, I am the strongest man in the universe- I've been informed it's because there's so much extra magic in my world. I am not nearly as strong here- but far more skilled than most of the other competitors, I think!" He finishes with an odd puff to his chest, and Quan just nods before he plops down on the sand besides Armius.

"I had to control my own powers too. I even have fancy- rings? Bands? To hold me back! I've been trying to get it off but I can't figure out how, no matter what I do!" He tugs down his scarf just a bit to show a piece of gold wrapped tightly around his neck. "I think I could beat anyone if I only had the ring off..." He sighs quietly, tugging the scarf back up.

Armius pauses. Quan is willing to wait just a bit longer for him to speak.

A little bit longer...

Armius speaks up finally, curious. "You said you had multiple. And you cannot get rid of any to lessen the burden?"

"Can you break curses? Or can you take the amount of power on these stupid things?"

Armius shifts carefully. "I may, yes, as far as the second option goes. I would be willing to try. But there is nothing I can do for the first one."

Quan raises an eyebrow skeptically. "Here." He slides another gold ring out of his pocket and tosses it to Armius.

He watches coldly as he watches the man freeze up, body going tense as if prepared for a fight. He scoffs.

No one's ever dealt with it. Nobody but him.

He plucks it out of a shaking Armius's hands and frowns, feeling yet another layer of magic suppression wash over him, feeling more of his energy and power drain away to simmer under the surface. "Told you."

"I- I did not- Was that your tag?" Armius manages to get out finally, hair still on end.

"Nope! My tag is *these* things-" He taps on his hands with the ring-chains on his fingers, easily picking up the desperate change of subject Armius had thrown to the floor. "Aren't they pretty? I've never seen such long chains on an accessory like this! I think because they're so like- long and you would trip over them and also maybe use them as a weapon to choke someone to death, I mean, it seems like a good idea and it might happen to you during our match but also it wouldn't make that much of a difference, because it looks like it might break! I think it'd be super sad if that happened! I mean, can you imagine losing something this valuable-"

Good, Quan was starting to lose Armius's attention to the predicament of his utter powerlessness granted by Quan's rings. Good riddance, thinking he could take something like that. Weak. Maybe he finally distracted him enough to make him miss the threat in his words.

"- ANYWAY, what's your tag?"

Armius hesitates, before speaking. Possibly a lie? “My tag is my belt, I believe it was replaced when I arrived here.” He clears his throat, and looks away slightly.

An awkward silence descends for all of two seconds, before Quan starts blabbering again. “I want to see how strong you are now! If you’re still the strongest man in the universe- I mean, the title has to carry over at least a ‘lil, right? We should race or something-”

“That is an excellent idea! Last one to the end of the beach, perhaps?” he says, pointing towards a small cropping of trees at the end of the shoreline. “On three? One-” a slight shift of weight, while Quan kinda stares at him. “Two- THREE-!”

Quan is off like a rocket, and he doesn’t turn back to look at Armius. If he’s racing against- he’s already there. He looks around for a trace of Armius- a smoking trail, perhaps, or falling sand. He can’t find *anything* and he’s about to concede defeat when Quan sees Armius trailing in the Quan’s wake- fast, yes, faster than most, but not nearly fast enough to keep up with Quan- and he even has to stop in the middle to breathe! Jeez..... His world must be incredibly wimpy if that’s all the strongest man could do. Instead, he waits impatiently for Armius to finally catch up, which he does, panting and wheezing like he had run a marathon instead of a short three or four mile run across the beach.

Quan zips over to him, consolingly patting him on the back. “You okay? I thought it shouldn’t have been that hard.”

A few gasps and coughs later. “I may- be- more out of shape then- I realized-”

“Let’s try something else then- c’mon! It’ll be fun!”

Quan waits for a few more minutes, pulling out a bag- which is evidenced to have dried cicadas inside, quickly eaten like chips, which Armius carefully avoids.

“Maybe we can try hitting something? You might not be fast-”

“How about magic?”

“I can’t do magic.”

“Oh, nevermind then-”

"You should try and punch me or something- I can probably take it!" He stands up tall, and offers a hand to Armius- which he refuses, to Quan's distinct distaste. What, too good to touch the dirty kid?

"I don't think that would be wise."

"No?"

"No. I might kill you." He pauses again. "And your magic is blocked, yes? It must be difficult for you to defend yourself."

"I don't think you will! I'll even smack you first so it's fair!"

"Well..... Alright."

Quan gently whacks Armius in the shoulder- or he thought so, and it's enough for Armius to stumble back a bit. But his mouth is a thin line, and his eyebrows are raised- he must be thinking about something. Maybe how strong Quan is?

"Interesting... you pack quite a punch for someone so skinny." He remarks, before winding up just a little bit- about as much as Quan would-, and goes for a light punch.

So light, in fact, that when Quan braces himself, squeezing his eyes shut, waiting for a burst of wind, or a sonic boom or something instead of the slowly moving punch, all he feels is a very light tap-

A very, very light tap.

Neither of them speak for a moment.

"Uh."

"..... You're alive!"

Quan tilts his head with a frown, and nods. "Yeah? Of course I am?"

Armius had ducked his head a bit. "In my world- that would have killed you instantly, I'm afraid. My new power levels are just a bit more difficult to handle."

He rolls his eyes. *My world* means nothing when he clearly wasn't in Armius' world. It's just an excuse. "Well, we're not in your world."

Armius' face twists in distaste.. "I think it might be a good idea to move on." he mutters.

"Will Armius Tu El Kaligos and Quan Huynh please report to the Coliseum for their match?"

Quan perks up. "That's our cue!"

He grabs the prince once again, and they zoom to the entrance, separating at the door. "May the best man win?"

"May the best man win." He says tightly, brushing off his clothes. "Good luck, An."

"Have fun Kaligos!" He says with a large smile before waving and walking through the hallways to the place he was supposed to report to.

There's no "good luck" for someone who's about to lose.

It's all a blur before they arrive in the coliseum. Empty and flat, not even weapons scattered around- nothing but a muttering audience high in the stands above, and the announcer from earlier, Ms.X, entertaining the crowd by commentating on the round before them. Quan doesn't think about that. It would be simple enough to focus on Armius before he starts moving.

He snorts, tilting back to lean his head up to wave at the crowd with both hands and a sheepish smile- as though he's simultaneously cowering and appreciating the attention.

"Alright competitors, do your best! This round's terrain will be~" A drumroll echoes from the speakers scattered around the arena.

A little screen pops up, with a symbol of a palm tree surrounded by water. "Island style! Hope you brought your floaties!" She giggles, before the ground Quan is standing on slowly rises, water rushing to fill the spaces between his island and Armius's and the many other islands scattered around, connected solely by slim wooden bridges.

"On go!"

Quan tenses and from far across the water, he sees Armius doing the same. Quan smiles. There's no way Armius will be able to get across the bridges before Quan does. He wraps the chains around his fingers in a tight fist.

"One." He makes eye contact with an audience member and winks. They sniff at him and tuen away and- ah shit, yeah, that's the lady who's fruit cart he knocked over. Whoops. Anyway, there's not any way he can lose, so why not have some fun?

"Two." Ooh, there's the crossguard he knocked over. She's wearing Armius merch. Oops.

"Thr-" Quan shoots off, halfway across the arena, ready to make the best of his headstart and if he fails, well-

When he finds himself on his starting platform, Miss. X floating in front of him with a disapproving look on her face but a glint in her eye. Huh?. "No, no, no! I said on go- I'm glad our wonderful Madame Chief was able to stop you- but I'll let it go just~ this~ once~ you clearly don't quite understand yet. See, you wait till the whole word is out of my mouth, and then you can go. It's very simple, alright? You should have told me you don't understand these kinds of things!"

Quan smiles sheepishly. "Sorry about that-" No headstarts allowed. And it looked like his acting had paid off- treated like a child? Check. Treated like he doesn't have any thoughts in his head? Double check. Subtle insults relating to his stupidity? Triple check. He's on a roll.

Well, that was entertaining, boy.

Quan jolts. Or maybe not.

She clears her throat and turns back to the booing crowd, and a very uncomfortable looking Armius. "Let's take it again from the top, now that the instructions are all cleared up!"

"One- Two- Three-" Ah, here we go again.

"GO!" Quan shoots off- not across a bridge, but across the water leaving a high arching wake in his path to the delighted roar of the crowd.

He basks in the attention- but Armius isn't rushing to meet him, sadly. Maybe he would have if Quan hadn't run at him earlier. It would have made this such an exciting match. But perhaps...

Quan has whipped out a single small knife- a pocket knife- from his pockets, while Armius leans forwards in a guard, catching Quan's knife barely before the knife hits his belt.

He shakes his head. "It won't be that easy, I'm afraid."

Quan only smiles more, and goes for another swing- once again, easily predicted and caught by Armius. "Wait, wait- How about this? You can try out my sword- I mentioned that earlier, yes?"

Quan backs up. A trap perhaps? But no, Armius is offering the sword out, hilt first. "Here." Quan barely hesitates for a second before his curiosity wins. The chains fall from around his fingers as he reaches out- and the sword is simply placed in his hands-

That's heavy. That's really heavy. He grimaces.

Quan looks up and around. The crowd is hushed, and Armius is looking at him with a patient smile, much like how Rian-

He almost misses it.

He jams his fingers shut with a yelp. Quan's suddenly pinned on the ground, a knee resting heavily on his chest, Armius trying to pry his hand open.

Oh no. Oh no, no, no this can't just be *happening*- Armius was supposed to be weaker than him-

"Open your hand."

"No." He lashes out, trying to- he has to try something where's his knife- "Get *off* me-"

"Once you give me your tag." Armius says softly. "I know you thought you could beat me- but I outrank you in skill level. Give up now, I don't want to hurt a child. Especially not one like you."

Quan keeps yanking. Yanking harder, and harder in *rage*- and Armius isn't distracted from his task at *all*, besides muttering a "Stop." at Quan when a particularly hard yank starts tearing it.

He's almost there- Quan's grip isn't *that* strong and- his rings- they're slipping off his hand and Quan's still making a fuss-

Seconds before the rings come off his fingers- Quan kicks *up*-

There's a loud tear as Armius is forced away from Quan- And his belt.

Armius stares.

Quan runs.

Breathe. Breathe. He's stronger than you realize if you get caught again-

He doesn't think he could pull that off again.

Quan tears across the water in a blank haze. He doesn't hear the ringer go off. He doesn't hear the crowds roar in disbelief. He doesn't feel the water recede beneath his feet, and he for sure doesn't hear Chifu's giggles in the crowd.

"And there's our underdog turned winner, taking his victory lap!"

Huh?

He skids to a stop, still clutching the belt. He scans the audience, trying to spot Miss. X and instead makes eye contact with the lady with the wine red hair. She smirks, and slowly raises her hand in a thumbs up, holding it deadly still, until she bursts out into laughter and waves him off.

Quan shudders.

"And there! Is! Our! Winner! After a close match with "The Strongest Man in the Universe," He pulls out a close win, using clever tricks to steal Armius's belt while he was distracted! Talk about a tough match!"

Armius approaches, sopping wet as he sticks out a hand for a handshake. "Good match, An. You fight well- you even saw through my ruse! That was quite clever of you even if your opening move was a bit dirty."

"I mean, it's one that won! So I think it still counts!" Quan laughs off, ignoring the hand. "Besides, I didn't know you were going to do anything. I didn't expect you to do something like that against a kid like me, heh."

Armius blushes a bit. "Well, an opponent like you deserved it! And I was paid back by my deception by my defeat."

“Oh really?...”

The conversation ambles on, a conversation between friends, rather than one between adversaries, and when all is said and done Quan stands by himself, looking up at the Coliseum.

Too close.

[Quan Hyun] Round 2: Together, Better

[Original doc](#)

References:

- [Summer League Round 1: A Dance in Shadows](#)
- [Piano and Forte Reference Sheet](#)

Piano is sitting on the bed, quietly tending to her wounds when her brother comes in. Even Piano could tell something was off- she carefully eyes the way her brother comes in with furrowed eyebrows, still dressed in the uniform of a cross guard. This was meant to be a simple respite to quietly celebrate Piano's win, but it looked like it would be something more, the way he muttered and paced as though someone was stepping on his heels.

And then he stops, carefully drifting his attention back towards Piano. "Sister, I am afraid that our fate dances to a different tune than we hummed. Our melody was of Prince Armius, but her notes are discordant with his. I admit, the atrocious melody she hums... It is most bold and catchy." He resumes his pacing, his shoes tip-tapping against the floor. "I put much faith behind your indomitability in combat, and even though you've failed today, my trust remains as an unweathered stone. The stone is not to blame for the strength of the wind, and I fear for the mighty gust of this... Boy. I would watch for wear, as it seems this breeze might attempt to weaken your unbreakable ore."

He stops once more and looks her in the eyes. "Your pain is mine, sister, and I would not wish upon you harm for all the world."

"I don't think I will be hurt, brother. When I met him, he seemed to be far more playful. Like Madame Chifu." She says, carefully applying salve to her many bruises.

"My ear and heart are yours, you know this, do you not? Quan moved as a gale, called to existence by the great lord of the waves. He was the unjust arms of the depths, tossing the ship Armius back and forth for his amusement. A god who taunts with bright skies only to crush with howling winds! His face was a twisted mask of amusement, or did you not see? It was like beholding a muse, his face forever locked in the grimace of comedy." He rubs his forehead.

"Perhaps we are not the omniscient gods we thought, perhaps this, this boy is the eye we considered ourselves to be. But even gods will fall, as we must suppose from the name of our appointment, with the so-called God Eater. But I fear for the speed of this zephyr, for he has proven himself swift in the past. My heart lies with you, but the speed of the sunlight does not lie with your feet as with his. Nary a round matched its breadth, save the diplomatic briefness of Pembroke's and Rum's. I fear I must embark on a pilgrimage to find what I can of this unnamed force."

Sensing her brother's unease, she spoke lightly. "The people of the town will probably be able to speak on his behalf. Perhaps you can find out something about him? I watched him, and he just sped off. There is no talent or skill in his speed, it's only *ki*."

"I declare, it will take all the cunning and wits we've between us to best this breeze." He clasped her hands, earnest. "You will have to channel this unknown boy as you face him, matching him turn for turn in your humors. I will not be there for the feat, but I will return as the crow flies, with all the expediency of the traveler god himself. But I must ask, in this twisting web of people, pray, have you seen the strings he is knotted with? The faces he knows?"

She considers for a moment before speaking again. "Try his opponent from the last round. I saw the boy drag him out somewhere to talk."

After approaching the prince, who had thoughtfully given a description of Quan as simply, "Excessive. In both personality, and in power."

When questioned (with a smile!) about who else Forte could go to to ask about Quan, the response was simply, "Talk to anyone. He gets around."

“I have come to inquire a few questions about the contestant, Quan. I am but a reporter, soon to egress the location in search of a new story, and I would like to know of his impressions upon the esteemed town of the Crossroads.” Always with a smile, always with a notebook out, Forte authoritatively asked the opening question to his interviews.

“Quan? That darn hedgehog... He shoulda thought twice about stealing from my wares! I got a good whack on him before he ran off... Maybe. I’m real good at driving those damned weasels away from my stuff but you should have heard the time I beat off a whole pack of wolves from comin’ after my meat! It all started when...” An old man ranted as he flipped skewers on a grill.

“Annoying.” A huff from Saki. “Reminds me a lot of my nephew, Volley. Too much energy and more words than he knows what to do with. He causes trouble on purpose, and that ain’t happening in my bar.”

Angelique turns, her hair flipping over her shoulder. A slight frown at Forte. “Who? He must’ve gone before me, I wasn’t paying attention to that match at all. The kid with the scarf, right?” She shrugs. “He’s fast. That’s all I’ve got.”

“Oh yes, the little one. I assumed he was a human. He was not.” Vilivian only just looks up from her bucket full of fish. “He strongly reminds me of the pixies in Graal. Chaotic but.... Very friendly.”

“Quan, Quan, Quan... Oh yeah! He’s really cool! He showed me how to stab people properly-” Volley demonstrates with a little swipe, startling people into hopping backward in the immediate vicinity. “And he knows a lot of *really weird* things. Like *really weird*. How did he figure out how many crossguards were here in the span of like, a day? Or two days? Like, c’mon!”

“The boy.... Yes. I haven’t seen anything like him before. He just so reminds me of... “ Rum snaps his fingers. “Champagne. Bubbly, strong, and tasteless, I believe are the words I am looking for.”

Pembroke shakes his head. “I thought it was crazy, meeting that fox. And then the shinigami. And then the crazy fox lady. And then I met a self-proclaimed hedgehog fairy, who proceeded to literally run circles around me to show off. I don’t know what to expect anymore.”

“Oh, you mean that sweet little boy from the first match? He told me about his power, yes he did- say, I feel like I’ve been seeing you asking around far too much about that child. If you’re a competitor’s friend....” The woman says with a frown. “I can’t tell you anymore. If you know too much about your opponent, you’ll have too much of an advantage! And that’s no fun.” She shoos him away from her stall.

He sighs deeply and pockets his notebook and pencil. "I am most gracious for your additions, miss. Goodbye."

Forte strolls along the street, now changed out of the crossguard uniform, politely waving at the competitors he had greeted and interviewed earlier. Excessive, annoying, friendly... How strange of a combination. But most of all, they simply said *fast*. Too swift to catch. Always out of arm's length, and besides *talkative*, no one ever managed to learn anything about him, it seemed. A loner, then, he scoffs. Loners were always far more vulnerable compared to a team.

With this information under his belt he heads back to his sister's side... only to find her already speaking to their quarry, how wonderful! He picks up his pace, approaching close to his sister's side.

"Have a nice day, Belue!" Quan said cheerfully, before speeding off. When he runs, his thoughts flow like his steps, simple and fast. It's his favorite way to think.

He thinks about all the different ways he could spend his time in the Crossroads, maybe he could try and rile Saki into a fight- He hums as he runs right past someone's stall and steals a meat skewer. Or maybe, he could figure out exactly how many crossguards are in the city, and see what happens if one of them disappears or something. So many things to do here, and so little time- Ms.X had already put out the announcements, and *damn* he has to go up against the scary demon lady, somehow the one person he hadn't managed to go say hi to *just because he couldn't track her down*, like, ever.

And he had tried, too. She wasn't in the bar, she wasn't at the inn, she wasn't walking around the streets as far as he could tell, and she wasn't even staying near all those merchandise stalls near the colosseum, so she was probably just staying in her room. Or someone else's room. Or something.

Quan was getting frustrated. Being frustrated was *annoying* and if he could do something about it, he should. He curses internally as he accidentally knocks over another person. He stops. A thought

had dropped into his mind like a rock in the river.

His wish! It would only be two more days of not getting murdered or defeated. He high-knees above some rolling apples from a barrel he knocked over- He might not win, but he beat the Strongest Man in the Universe, he deserves some credit.

What could he possibly wish for? It was easy to think of things for *now*, and it would be really, really funny to see the other competitors' reactions if he wished for a sandwich or something. He flips over a passing cart and starts munching on the stolen meat skewer. A sandwich, food, food *is* life, long life, oh yeah. He'd mentioned immortality, endless entertainment, and a glimpse of the future. All things he could have used when he was much younger, but it was still fine now, he guessed.

Or to make things a little more fun- Maybe he could challenge the goddess herself to her godhood- if she wouldn't grant it, he would fight for it! And he would win! It's not like it would be har-

Maybe think a lit-tle bit quieter, boy~

He refuses to startle like he did the first time she spoke into his mind, and he doesn't really stop. Don't want people to think he's insane or rude by talking to thin air. He's faintly certain it's bad manners to talk to ghosts and mind readers and spirits over live people or-

Are you done? Your mind runs like the wind. It's annoying, how loud it is in there.

He skids to a stop in the alley, still eating. "Yeah, for now. Something wrong?" He wipes his face with a sleeve, hiding his smile. This- He can think smug thoughts a little later.

There was a slight edge to her mind-voice, although it was amused as ever. *You wish to steal godhood from me? Or the Crossroads?*

"I'm not really sure yet!" Quan rocks back on his heels.

You should be sure before you decide to challenge me~ Just imagine what could happen to you, in my town. Nothing so good, eh?

Quan scoffs. "Don't worry, I'm only thinking about it right now. Imagine all the things you could do with a wish *other* than be a god. Though I'm not sure what I really want. Wouldn't it be funny to wish for a sandwich?" Chifu was so much fun to talk to, really. She was cocky, and her banter made everything better. Maybe he shouldn't steal from her if he could keep talking to her.

He can hear her cackle, the sound echoing in his mind. *Think about what you really want. I'm not so sure godhood is it, and a sandwich might not be it either. But what can I say? I'm just a little fox~*

Quan feels the presence lift from his mind and smirks. *Now* he can think smug thoughts. This is good. He can work with the ire of a goddess, and with any luck, he'll be just a bit more entertaining for her!

He strolls out of the alley, back onto the bright main street and far, far across the streets he sees.....

Her.

With black hair, red skin, and yet another outfit it would be really difficult to steal from, is the person he's been looking for for the past... maybe six hours. Ish. It wasn't that important for him to find but either way- it's his opponent, Piano, wearing bruises as though they were accessories.

He laughs, and speeds up, sliding in front of her. "Hello! I've been looking for you- Piano, right? I heard about what you looked like and I watched your round, it was really cool using swamp to hide! I don't think I could have held my breath long enough to take down my opponent! I have absolutely no idea where you've been because you haven't been anywhere I've checked, and I hope I haven't interrupted you on your way to anything because I think I'd like to talk for a while~"

Quan keeps blathering as he watches her listen to him talk. Surprisingly, she's still listening intently- her eyes haven't glazed over once, and she hasn't started looking away at something or

someone else. But he can only do this so long, and Piano doesn't seem the kind of gal to interrupt him, so he finishes, without wasting a breath- "Anyway! So how are you?"

She responds slowly. "I'm fine. I've just been recuperating in my room from my last match. Thank you for your kind words- you're Quan? The speedster?"

"Yup! At least, that's what I'm known for in the tournament."

"Then it's nice to meet you too, Quan." She smiles at him, folding her hands together. But her eyebrows are twitching so... maybe annoyed? Instead of pleased? Or polite?

Quan draws a huge smile to his face. It would be nice if this was like his thing with Armius- an easy way to read someone and learn what scares them, or a way to connect the two of them, sympathy, he thinks is the word. "Yep! I've just been wandering around the Crossroads. See, I've been meaning to talk to you because you're so cool-"

Piano is nodding along as Quan talks, and he *still* hasn't lost her attention yet. She's sharp, he'll have to watch out for that. He almost pauses when someone appears on the street behind them, someone unfamiliar, not unusual, but...

... Why's that guy coming over here?

"Piano! I see you have encountered your opponent, how exciting!" The... man? says loudly. He approached with white hair and a winning smile, similar in stature to Piano, but not in looks- and certainly not in equipment. He carried only a small bag and a notepad.

"Hey. We-"

Quan interrupts her before she can finish, turning to the man with a big smile and his hands tugging his scarf. "Are you two friends?"

“With all the surety of the stars above! It is only by the great love fate has for me that I was blessed with a glance from the lady; who, do I dare call a bosom friend? But I came here not to sing the praises of my close companion, but rather to hear your tale. How did you come to be here, cradled in the spiraling grasp of this madness; this tournament of a goddess whose own madness is sung behind closed doors. By what twists of fate are you but a maple seed on this distorting wind of cheers and screams?” Quan nods, on the outside. What the *hell* was this guy talking about? Friends, tale, how did he get here?

Quan opens his mouth to respond, a spiel about friendship about to spill off his tongue, but Forte’s mouth rises in a tiny smile. And then his chin raises just a bit to disguise a smirk. A smirk, surely directed at Quan’s obvious confusion.

Quan instantly dislikes him.

But he has to be at least a *little* subtle because, in his experience, people don’t like it if you insult their friends, because most people don’t have that many. Or maybe that was just him. And he doesn’t know anything about Piano- she might just try and get rid of him before their round, which he is *faintly* certain isn’t illegal.

“So, I don’t exactly understand what you’re saying but-”

“Ah, fear not, my friend! Do not worry your heart with these trite things.” He smiles at Piano as though sharing a secret, and Quan is getting closer to strangling him. Stop being so smug and showing off your damn relationship! “The turtle is never to know the heights of the eagle, and I find myself so often the soaring mind above. But I must not blame the chelonians for their ignorance, as the world is so steeped in its sweet, sticky molasses.”

“Oh no, I’m not worried. I guess I just can’t say for sure you aren’t saying anything that important. Or smart.” He says brightly. This is going to be a shitty conversation. He has to analyze every word he says, *and* all of his facial expressions. Give him what he wants, and let it go. Get out fast, let him spend time with his friend. Whatever. Turtles and eagles, soaring mind, plus being a prick... if he can give it, he better be able to take it. “So, it doesn't really matter whether I can understand you or not. So what’s your name?” Quan widens his eyes just a smidge and tilts his head to the side.

He hesitates- it's almost unnoticeable, but it looks like it worked. The man can't tell whether Quan was insulting him or not, and Quan burns from the inside out with smugness. "But what a delightful point, and such a turn of phrase! I will swoop low, perching low upon the mulberry to hear your fribble. How delightful, to be so low in the atmosphere! But ah, I must seem foreign to you, as more than a circling shadow. They call me Mezzo, for this, is, ah, my moniker." A false name, Quan deduces, from the way "Mezzo" had looked away when he said his name. He can't really judge- he's been doing the same thing.

Mezzo seems to relax back into his groove, a winning smile playing across his lips. "Quan, the rabbit! The eddy in the dust! The fleet of foot and milky of bread! I would grovel if I didn't fear that I could not reach your eyes even by doing that. But it is with utter penitence that I ask your story. I have been told of your temperament, that you were an unlicked cub and a spoony, but also that you were one who could weave the threads of magic but do little else; a pony of one trick, if you will. Did I hear wrong, or is all you've told to be the truth, or perhaps with your parlor tricks, but the chattering of the birds?"

He interrupted any response that might've been forthcoming with a grand gesture hindered by his cloak, making him look a bit silly, in Quan's humble opinion. "Or perhaps are you a man of the grift, one who draws strength from the shadows and those who hide in them? No doubt, a man of your malefactory stature would have strings to pull?"

Quan makes a mental note to find out what those other words mean. If they were an insult, they better be one hell of a good insult. He spends an extra second thinking over the questions. One trick pony, some kind of short insult... milky of bread? Magic? What the hell was grift? Maybe his powers? He speaks and hopes he gets lucky.

"I was born with them, I think! Unless my Ma put something into me when I was too young to remember. She might've, she's the kind of person who would do it, but really- it's all-natural! And y'know-" Quan doesn't think Mezzo would put so much emphasis on tricks if he had a natural magical ability of his own, so he refuses to give Piano another advantage by showing her the gold rings. "I could be even more powerful if I really wanted to. I have to work to keep myself slow enough for you guys. Don't want to give anyone whiplash!" He waves his arms around when he's speaking- Piano hops a little bit out of his space and Mezzo simply leans back until he's properly out of the way.

Hm. Good reflexes.

“Most assuredly, most assuredly.” Ooh, he does not get the right to look that smug if he’s not even fighting. Or is Quan imagining it? He could be- he’s always been bad at reading people.”You have been most helpful, with these bits and bobs you’ve given me. I’ll be quite sure to adorn the front page with them! It is a lovely little tapestry I am weaving, like spiders of old, all full of the secret threads of this auspicious tournament. It is so full of character, color, and texture! But I fear I must admit preference in my weaving, for I have rather a propensity for the story of the man, and there are many a man in this story. It will be quite sensational, a tremor they shall feel through time immemorial!” He winked at Quan, with the playful manner of a friend sharing a secret. “Perhaps you, my little rattlecap, will be felt in that earthquake.”

Quan stares unamusedly.

“I’m not so sure about that.” Quan proceeds to turn back to Piano, to try and strike up another conversation before Mezzo tries to grab their attention again- only to find her nowhere to be seen. Shit.

Mezzo flourished his pencil with gusto. “Ah, but my dictation is not nearly at its final curtain yet! What other yarns have you denied the scarf of my story, little tortoise? I find myself longing for every fiber I can get for my craft, every past and present thread that can be grasped at. Have you any lovers, any squeezes, if you’ll pardon the peasant colloquialism? Perhaps some employment, or heroic adventure? What is your tale, oh mysterious one? Surely there is some great novella of success and victory behind those feet of yours, hidden in your footprints in the sands of time?”

“What’s there to tell? Let’s see... I ran away from home when I was twelve, I’m known for fighting things and exploring what I shouldn’t, and I’m homeless. That’s about it, I think. Also, I’m a hedgehog, not a tortoise.” Quan lists them off with a casual counting on his fingers. That’s about it, if you cut out and simplified a very large portion of Quan’s life.

“Ah, mm, I see.” Mezzo wet his finger and flipped over the page, before looking back up at Quan once more. “What of your forefathers, the ones most immediate? I’ve heard it said your matron was the one who gave you your speed, the tricks and magic you claim to have? Perhaps, did she teach you restraint, leashing in the dogs and demons of Hell? For surely, you must be exercising the control you do have?”

Quan hesitates. Control. He knows a lot about control, thank you very much. “She gave me the things to teach me how to manage it.”

Wait, Piano was gone. And it wouldn't hurt to tell him just a little more information. Along with a few other things Quan wants him and probably Piano to know. "And I have these gold rings." Quan pulls down his scarf to show a seamless gold collar around his throat. "They stop me from going too fast. But they also stop me from healing! She also told me to never take them off on pain of death, but y'know. She could've been lying. Not like me, I never lie. That came from my dad."

Mezzo's forehead creased in... concern? "How tragic, indeed. What a great sorrow must Atlas have felt, to be so shackled by the world! And you, little Atlas, must feel this same weight. But how does your world weigh you? Does it threaten your end at her hands, or perhaps that without it, you would be but a crumbling pillar of salt in the wind? Pray, has your tongue sung only the truest of songs since that day? It is such a thing of ease, to slip betwixt your lips the words of the fairies, all white and yet untrue. And worry not, as my sir bids, I will follow, if you so wish for none to hear the next little white lies from your lips. I am as able to withhold as I am to give."

He closes his eyes, tugging his scarf back into it's wonderfully safe feeling cocoon around his neck. It looks like he was starting to catch on to this! Hah, beat that, *Mezzo*. "She did both. But I think she specifically said I would die if I took it off. But it's impossible. I've tried for way too long to figure out how to." His eyes flare open. "And no, first of all, I've never lied. Never. It's mean and horrible. And people trust you more when you don't lie- and I need every ounce of trust to get by like this. Second of all, it is not a fae thing, that's kind of shitty of you to say, huh? It's like saying all demons are sadistic, are gonna steal my soul, and should be banished with a nice dash of holy water. None of which are true, by the way." He eyes Mezzo for a reaction, but the only one is the slightest quirk of the lips, and quick swipes of a pencil across the sheet. Quan can't get anything out of that, no emotional reaction in regards to Piano. "I wouldn't lie to save my life."

"Ah, but how hidden can a lie be among the truths! For even the statement of truth can be a lie, and perhaps even those were wolves among the sheep, lies among your truth..." He notes this almost offhandedly, as though he didn't mean to.

Quan snaps. "It wasn't."

Mezzo looks up. "Hm?"

"You said it might be a lie. It wasn't." Quan points out coldly.

“Ah, and therein lies the folly of the wordsman! My leaps from platform to platform of words oft leave my balance amiss, and I see that I did not land with grace this last time. Forgive me my blunder, and pardon me my queries.” Mezzo isn’t sorry, fuck him. “But if you will allow another, pray, can you see the morrow? How do you see your bout with Piano, your tet a tet, tomorrow? How might the poets describe it?”

“She’s really strong, but I think I’m stronger. And everyone here is more skilled than me, but it hasn’t come down to skill yet. It’s been all reflexes and quick thinking because nobody has the same skills. So. I think I’m going to win. Unless something really bad happens, like our match gets sabotaged or something. I’m going to make sure nothing will mess with us by making this fight *fast*.”

“With haste you say?”

“Of course! And with any luck, it’ll work. For me, of course.”

“Ah, my thanks for your assistance in my journey to the truth. Do you see pain, that red hot regret of the mortal form? Do you feel your body burning with it, or perhaps hers as such? How will you fight, with the shackles constructed of entertainment by Madame Chifu, or unfettered and ferocious? Will you draw it out for the cheers, or end it quickly to their disappointment?” Forte leaves his pen poised over his notebook, posing his question.

Quan raises an eyebrow. “I don’t need to drag it out to be entertaining. If it’s entertaining, it’s gonna be because Piano is really strong. Which she is. But don’t worry about her! She should be fine, and if she isn’t, she has you. Not a huge deal.” His voice grows a little bitter at the end.

Unlike Piano, Quan won’t have anyone to fall back on. That’s why he *has* to win.

“Ah, your kindness knows no bounds, sir, as you have shown with your indulgence of my curiosities. I am most grateful for your time, and your patience with this simple wordsmith.” Mezzo gives a cheeky salute, and off he goes.

Quan waves goodbye. Wasn't he forgetting something?

Dammit! He was trying to talk to Piano!

"Ah, the Artemis to my Apollo, the Pollux to my Castor, I have returned!" announces Forte, with all the pomp and circumstance of a ringmaster at a circus, vibrating with gleeful energy. "I announce with the croon of a poet and the battle cry of a warrior, I have obtained the truths and stories of this fleet-foot boy! Our victory is assured by the fates, with this intervention! Like the kitten, you must go for his scruff and lift him, or failing the separation of his feet from the great earth, simply tell him he has the tongue of a deceiver, to raise his ire and collar for easier grabbing, or simply to bring his reign to a close. Or, as you are so skilled in doing, simply see into the dance chart of his steps and be ahead of them by two or three. It will not tire you so as to defeat, and it shall be but a simple task to outwit the mouse who thinks so much of himself. He plans to move with the speed of the sun's own rays, for he rightly knows of your skill!"

Piano patiently waits for Forte to stop monologuing. He still hasn't changed out of his disguise, white, glossy hair moving around like a cloud, his dark cloak working against his efforts to gesture. "I know. I was right around the corner, if you don't remember."

"Your wisdom knows no bounds, does it not! He is small, but you have the eye of the hawk and must simply swoop upon him. He will be quick, but is not also the gazelle? You must be the cheetah, my sister, as I know you will. He will be an easy catch for one so powerful as you, so long as you do not lose your faculties." He laughed. "But I trust you will not, in your infinite knowledge!"

"I know what to do. Have a little more faith in me." She chuckles a bit. Forte's been nervous about her matches when he truly doesn't have any reason to. It's sweet.

"Claim victory, my kin. There is no doubt in my mind, my heart, eyes, that I will be here to celebrate your victory and his defeat. Take my courage, my cunning, and show to the birds why they must not sing so brash when there are cats around!"

She stands, and the two of them smile at each other. A matching pair, brawn and brains, a left eye and a right eye.

Together.

Piano was approaching the colosseum, quietly walking. She didn't want any more attention drawn to her before her match. In fact, she needs to prepare to fight against Quan as long as possible, and accidentally initiating a brawl would do her no good.

Quan was.... Quick. And not dumb, unlike what Forte thought. But Quan sounded like he wouldn't be planning at all. And he likely wouldn't be able to do anything against her blood, from the sounds of it. If she went for the collar.... She just had to come at him from the side, and not the front. And she needs to make it fast. If it comes to an endurance match, she won't make it to the end, unless she initiates the final blow quickly. Which is likely, if she wears him down enough...

"Piano! Why'd you disappear like that earlier?" She turns to see Quan, suddenly at her side again.

She jumps a little, before composing herself. "Ah. Hello Quan. I just needed a break from him. And I didn't want to interrupt his interview." And people tend to put down their guards around Forte, when it's just him. "I knew I would meet you again, anyhow."

"Well, I just wanted to ask you- what are you doing this round? I don't want to get hurt too badly or anything, and from the sounds of it, you're a much better fighter than I am." He has since turned to walk backwards, still facing her as they go down the street.

"You'll find out. Don't worry so much, I don't plan on doing anything that'll leave lasting harm." She says with a smile.

“I don’t either! But I guess we need to keep it entertaining for Madame Chifu!” He laughs, and spins, before continuing his walk backwards. “I’m sure you heard by now from Mezzo that the match is going to be fast. How about we both promise a fast match?”

She thinks about it. Quan’s fast is probably faster than she could manage. But it would also make him sloppy, and that’s the real thing she needs. He’s inexperienced, and she doesn’t want it to come down to power. “Sure. Let’s make it as fast as we can.” Although, she would likely drag it out... but the boy looks so hopeful about it that she doesn’t dare to break that hope. He must have been really nervous about her.

“I told him we’d make it fast. But it won’t really be fast, if I have anything to say about it.” Piano explains to her brother.

“I know, I know, Piano said she should make it fast... I should probably watch out for my neck a little bit more, huh?” Quan says to himself.

Amid the cheering roar of the audience, equally shouting Quan’s name and Piano’s name, a microphone screech reigns supreme and quiets them to a low rumble.

Miss X in all her pink glory, now reappearing in a slightly spiced up outfit, waves to the crowd, floating high above the arena. “Welcome! To round 2 of our lovely fighting tournament! Are you guys ready to rock?!” She cups her hand to her ear in an exaggerated listening motion as the crowd whoops. Miss X waits for it to die down before continuing.

“You all know him, you all love him, here’s Quan, who bested the strongest! Man! In! The! Universe!” A spotlight shines down on Quan, while a round of applause sounds, with also a fair bit

of booing. He'd become infamous in the past few days for causing trouble around town, whether that be from stealing wares, or from knocking over things in his rush to get places. He doesn't care, though. They'll forget Quan soon enough anyway. After all, it's not like they ever asked why Quan was stealing food, did they?

"On the other side, we have mysteriously powerful Piano! She beat the intense warrior armed with acid rain and metal arms, one of the most experienced fighters we've got! Let's see how well she can do against her next opponent, eh?" When the spotlight illuminates Piano, she stands unsmiling. She's stoic, a paragon of solidity- but when she hears some voices from the crowd swooning at her, she blushes, and looks down.

"This match is going to be simple and easy! You know the drill- take your opponent's tag for thirty seconds, or knock 'em down so they can't get back up again. And today, we're going to have no changes to the arena- except for some elegant ole moving pillars. Powerful *and* unpredictable, my favorite. Keep your eyes on the ground, or keep your eyes on your opponent- and make sure you wait for me to say go." She says, winking at Quan.

"On your mark~" Piano seems to be... hopping? That's weird.

"Get ready~" Quan watches her carefully, as she moves.

"GO!"

He almost misses it, it's just that fast. A knife whizzes past his face and embeds itself in the slowly rising stone pillar behind him. He swings back in time, totally prepared for a frontal attack from her, but she's nowhere to be seen. He frowns. He expected her to be a head on fighter, using her wiles only when it was necessary, much like in her first match- and the whole entire point of this was so she would underestimate him.

But Mezzo *ruined* that.

He curses loudly when he hears the slight whoosh of another knife cleanly dropping from above him- saved only by his reflexes jerking him to the side. He looks up, and sees a shadow disappear from one pillar falling to another one rising, and he decides to do what he does best.

Run.

He goes directly to the pillar, and with a combination of a solid jump, a knife, and climbing skills learned from all those years of climbing buildings to find a place to sleep, he's face to face with Piano, who promptly stabs him with a knife.

He's about to fight through the regular stinging of a stab wound when it suddenly flares in agony. His eyes glaze over for just a second, just long enough for her to go for another stab-

He can't see much through the pain, but for fuck's sake, he can see the red blob against the sandy background of the pillars. He growls, and he sees her hesitate for just second-

Before they're both tumbling off the rapidly lowering pillar, Piano thoroughly tackled by Quan. He slashes her with the knife- there's nothing in his mind now but *defenddefenddefend*- By the time they land, Piano's arms, used to save her body from the knife are bloody, and so are Quan's.

It hurts. It hurts so much- this isn't *fast*- and she's still not down, why is she not down and what the hell is *that*-

Another knife, this one a solid red, slashes open his cheek. A long cut, a deep cut, and it wasn't healing. It wasn't healing, and it hurts more than the time he got thrown into a bonfire- He scrubs furiously at his cheek to try and clear away the blood and it only hurts more-

Piano was getting closer again, and Quan had to dodge out of the way of one of the moving pillars. He wasn't healing, and every movement hurt more than he could imagine. If he's honest, he's never really been hurt before. Not by anyone except those close to him.

For once in his life, Quan decides to stand his ground. Running into a wall wouldn't work, and if he got himself trapped in a corner he would be so doomed- He doesn't even know what her tag is, why hadn't he asked? Because he was too distracted by her stupid friend ugh-

Quan's eyes focus just barely on the swinging sword, and he can dodge something that big at least, especially since it was going for his neck-

Please don't get the collar, please don't get the collar-

- but he missteps a lunge with his knife and slashes not her thigh, but her knee- and she doesn't seem to be bleeding at all! What the fuck!

He grunts as she stabs him in the leg, and it just adds to the building amount of pain that's getting to him. He pushes himself to run- and he gets only a few steps before Piano gets to him again. He's not in control when he hurts this much and when he's not healing- each movement is jerky, but faster than the way he's moved before.

But it means he misses when he goes for her leg.

It means he isn't hit by the sword swinging for his neck.

That doesn't mean nothing happens, though. Each time Piano misses his upper half- she simply redirects it into a strike somewhere else- one of his limbs, a slash that got dangerously close to the bare skin of his torso. Each time Quan tries to disable her with a knife, he misses the important things- but he would still hit flesh. Her outfit didn't do much to protect her.

Piano was in the worst case scenario. Quan had managed to get them to an endurance match somehow? He seemed to be panicking? But about *what*, she wasn't really certain. He hadn't

panicked like this in Armius's match, and he had certainly looked completely ready to fight through the pain of a stab, and probably through the pain of her blood.

And she was preparing for more quick swipes, to make him lose so much blood he would pass out. But he had started standing *still*, in his panic. She thought he was a runner, not a freezer.

All of the blood loss was starting to get to her, and she knew if she waited any longer she would lose her opportunity.

It's back to her backup plan. Go for the finishing blow, and pray Quan will move just jerkily enough to get in the way of her sword.

It's a stalemate. The battlefield is bloody, and the pillars had stopped moving a while ago, and Quan can only barely hear Miss X.

"It looks like we're at a stalemate, folks! Let's see who's the last one standing."

Piano's heaving with effort, and it looks like she's using everything she has to stand, before launching herself one more time at Quan.

Who stands. And waits. And waits. Until she's in his face and stabbing his chest with her sword having given up the idea of denting the collar off his neck, and Quan had ducked under to deliver a slash to her forehead- with a bit of wobble that causes him to lose his grip and punch right at her head, knocking her out.

And this time, she stayed down.

Quan's sleeves dripped with blood, his knuckles made ugly cracking noises as they tried to heal, and he collapsed to his knees. His vision swam. He had never lost quite so much blood before, and he had never felt this dizzy before, or quite this hurt. Not since he was younger.

"Quan is our winner for this round! Cheer for him folks, that was one rough and tumble bloodbath!"

Does an audience really matter to him anymore? All he really wants is to not be hurt, right now. He can see Mezzo running onto the field, carefully holding up his friend. He can only wish to have someone like that to rely on.... It would be nice.

He closes his eyes and flops onto his back. All he needs is a second- a second to stop bleeding, a second to stop thinking, and he only opens his eyes when he hears shouting.

It gets closer, and when he opens his eyes, he sees Mezzo, carrying his friend, glaring, stuttering insults instead of eloquence. "You- You- You were so cruel to her. You promised fast. You truly are a liar."

He blinks slowly, and a smile spreads across his face in a daze. He didn't lie. He only said he would make it fast. No one ever said anything about blood or pain. Delusional, but sweet. "I didn't lie. I won. Suck on that."

He flops back to the ground, and ignores more angry cursing and concerned noises from Mezzo. If only he could have someone like that in his life... Someone who could take care of him, who he could take care of.... There wasn't anyone like that that he had met, huh. Could he even wish for it? Would it be worth anything if he wished for it?

Chifu laughs, as much of a triumphant sound as ever. *Of course not, silly boy,*

Even a wish can't save you from your loneliness.

Quan closes his eyes.