

[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 stomping 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~

Revision #1

Created 29 June 2023 03:44:59 by Tenki

Updated 19 July 2023 14:48:20 by Tenki