

[Piano & Forte] Round 1: A Dance in Shadows

[Original Doc](#)

Dawn of Conflict:

Tick tock tick tock tick tock tick tock.

The ever present ticking of the countdown on the monitors surrounding the Cross Colosseum was enough to set everyone in the surrounding business district abuzz with excitement, even as most of them attempted to keep their heads down and busy with their day's business. At 8am exactly, the brackets for the afternoon's tournament match would be announced by none other than Miss X, who had seemed pretty excited at even announcing the time of the announcement, having put on quite a show of it the day before.

As the time of revealing closed in more and more, bystanders began to slow their gait, their eyes, feelers, tendrils, and other sensory organs towards the gigantic screens that encircled the top of the Colosseum, waiting for the sounds of Miss X's voice to ring out from them. With only a minute left until the announcement, the normally bustling Business District of the Crossroads suddenly went eerily silent with everyone's gaze all facing the same direction like they had all been brainwashed to watch the same program.

With a sudden hiss of static, the screen began to shift as there was a collective gasp of surprise from the bystanders. With a few flickering transitions, the blank screen began to show the image of a pink heart nearly filling the screen. There was a cheer from the audience then, as the "heart" began to move around frantically.

“Hello? Is this thing on? Can all of you bea-u-tiful people see me?” The source of the voice began to back up, revealing the tutu wearing, cat-inspired figure of Miss X for all to see. She spun around on her spot on the platform in the arena, spinning her microphone in her hand as she gave a cutesy pose to the camera as her bells jingled with all of the excited movement.

“Can my wonderful fans hear me?” There was a loud cheer from the people outside, which she put a hand up to her ear as if to hear the sound that bellowed from all around her and filled the business district with noise. “Good! That’s the sound I love to hear in the morning! Now, are you all ready to see a heart pounding show today?”

She grasped her chest as she said it, a large, pink cartoon heart bursting out of her chest in a few exaggerated pumps as she said that. The audience gave a loud cheer, though not quite as loud as the first as laughter also echoed from the surroundings from the absurd display she put on. “How meow-verlous! Now, while I don’t have a concert planned for today, I did bring you something even better: the first round of the Crossroad’s Tournament, starting this afternoon!” More cheers as she pointed up in the sky dramatically, holding that pose as the adoration poured in from around her.

“Madame Chief has brought together eight of the best fighters she could find, all vying for a wish granted by the God Eater herself? Isn’t Mom just the best? Who will have what it takes to earn that coveted wish and get whatever it is that they desire? Join me in this purr-fectly spectacular adventure!” She gave a cheerful pose as a fireworks display went off behind her, creating another roar of cheers from the surrounding audience.

“Now, let’s give you all the thing you’ve been waiting for: the name of the warriors who will be fighting for your entertainment!” She gestured upwards with her hand as the camera followed her movements, going to a large screen she projected as eight names appeared on it:

Quan vs. Prince Armus Tu El Kaligos

Piano vs. Angelique.

Volley vs. Vilivian.

Rum vs. Pembroke.

As these eight names lingered on screen for a bit, all the people surrounding the Colosseum began to murmur to each other, each trying to figure out if anybody had heard about or seen these eight in town over the last day or so. Some made note of Volley, the nephew of the bartender Saki, who had a reputation among regulars of the bar. Pembroke also created a stir, many having noted the mech near the beach for storage and the man who maintained it for the tournament. The rest didn't seem to ring any particular bells at the moment, though a few did begin to ring as Miss X began to move and take the focus of the camera and audience once more.

"Ahem. While we currently won't show the fighters themselves until the tournament proper, that doesn't mean you can't all start getting ready to show them that good ol' fashioned Crossroads Pride and give them a hearty cheer of welcome, does it?" The roaring cheer in response was enough to shake buildings, each person giving a bellowing cry of welcome with all of their might as Miss X gave a cheer of her own. "And now, let's leave this off with a quick word from Madame Chief!"

Miss X gestured behind her, to the regal red chair that Madame Chief typically sat on. It was empty when the camera focused on it, but when Miss X said those words, nine tails suddenly obscured the throne from nowhere, each of the eyes giving the camera a wink. Then, with the ringing of bells, the tails parted as the elegant Madame Chief now sat upon her throne, resting her chin on her hand at a tilted angle with a look of amusement on her face. She donned an outfit of resplendent red and gold, her nine tails acting as a cushion for her as she sat with her legs crossed as she gazed down at the camera with her pipe in hand.

"Show me a good time, and I might just grant one of your deepest desires, dear travelers~" She gave a blow of smoke from her pipe, the lens of the camera being filled with white and red smoke. Suddenly, everyone who was watching the broadcast had their vision filled with the smoke as it took the form of a white and red flower that bloomed, then scattered in a brilliant light as people clapped and cheered for the start of the tournament.

With that, everyone was suddenly sent scattering. Some went to begin producing merchandise for the competitors, while others began making bets and wagers both openly and in secret shady corners. Some went off to scour for the competitors or to talk with those who might not have seen, while others went to where they knew they might find one or two.

At the beach, a mech was suddenly seen powering on and taking off, it's thrusters giving off a whitish-blue hue as it flew high in the sky above the Crossroads as people shouted up at the fleeing competitor. The pilot inside just gave the crowd a salute, waving down at them as he flew off to a different section of the Crossroads so he could focus on his maintenance of his ATG.

The Fox's Den, meanwhile, was being overrun with curious customers that were both trying to start the gossip of the fighters, while others began poking around for the whereabouts of Volley, not realizing the boy was already out training for his match that day. At first, Saki tolerated the sudden increase of noise, but as more people came in without getting drinks and started getting more nosy and invasive, eventually even her patience ran out as she set a nice Irish coffee for one of her customers, a tanned skinned demon woman accompanied by a blonde woman that was trying to look small among all the noise looking for her exactly. "Pardon me just one second." the oni bartender excused herself, rolling up her sleeves as she walked to the divide in the bar that let her out.

Grabbing the first four of the intruders she could reach, she pushed them all close to give herself a good front of the group, then bellowed, "If you all aren't going to be respectful customers, then I must ask you TO LEAVE!" With a strength beyond imagining, she began shoving into the group, creating what looked like the most lopsided scrum the multiverse had ever seen. The massive press of people slowly grew as she pushed them back more, the crowd gathering their strength to try and stay in. But as the oni gave another mad bellow, they found that their combined strength was no match for her, and soon the backline of the horde was starting to get pushed through the door at the entrance.

There was a brief pause as the largest section of the crowd were all squeezed together and blocking the door, giving the rest hope that they might stop the furious oni's forward press. But with a crossing of her arms and one last shout with all of her might as she charged forward, the crowd was suddenly all pushed through the door at once and sent flying through the air outside as Saki slashed her arms in an X-formation. The forms of a few dozen people now laid outside the tavern in various states of consciousness as Saki dusted off her hands.

"And don't come back until you learn the first thing about how to behave in a bar!" She ordered, glaring at them all before returning to her position behind the counter, cleaning a glass as everyone in the bar gave her looks of awe or respect at such an impressive display from the former champion. She looked to the next customer she was supposed to help before the interruption, as if nothing had happened. "So, did you need anything from me?"

Meanwhile, at the Kit Inn, one competitor and her brother were about to begin their day of preparation for the tournament...

Initial Discovery:

“So, that is the visage of that which I seek~” Forte gave a pleased hum at the end of the presentation, having finally gotten a good look at his quarry. Piano sat nearby, taking an oiled rag to her ninjato in preparation for the fight she was going to face that afternoon. “She certainly strikes a most stunning figure for such a title as ‘God Eater.’ That moniker is most assuredly deserved having now gazed upon her myself~”

He took in a deep inhale through his nostrils, trying to pick up the last lingering smells of the opium that the Madame Chief had blown in everyone’s faces. In normal circumstances, he would’ve pulled out his cigar as if to match the atmosphere the God Eater had presented. But seeing as he was alone with his sister, he had no need to put up the front of a smoker when he had no need for disguises. Instead, he directed his attention to the seven names he wrote down earlier, of the other competitors in the tournament, tapping each one of them with his wand as he gave a thoughtful look.

The room he and Piano shared was rather sparse, a bare room with two beds and a few bits of furniture. While they had been there a day or so, their presence in the room was practically nonexistent, with only the slight ruffling of the pillows and blanket a sign the beds were slept in and even then, it seemed it was rather light sleep from the pair of them. Neither of the twins kept any of their personal items set up anywhere in the room, as if they were hiding every aspect of their personality in case an intruder broke into their room to gather information on them.

Forte sat near one of the desks, his notebook open in front of him as he consulted his notes, while Piano's weapons and other supplies were on the other table as she prepared them for tonight's battle. They were arranged by type, half made of tempered steel, half made with steel quenched in her blood that gave a dark red tint to it. Forte looked down at his notes, circling the name "Angelique" written down in plain letters, the rest of the words around it written in his usual cipher.

"But first, I suppose we will need to start making arrangements to gather certain pieces of intelligence about the ones arrayed against you in this contest of martial capability. Having said that, this Prince Armius certainly draws the gaze of this humble writer." He shook his head, looking back towards his sister. "But I would scarce say it would be ill of me to focus on my ambitions and not on the pressing matter of your opponent indeed. This Angelique figure shall be the first one who's form we shall firmly take grasp upon before you must render her unable to progress in this tournament hence."

Piano shook her head herself. "It shouldn't be a problem if I have to take care of it all myself. It's what we usually do." She inspected the keen edge of her blade, pulling out a whetstone and sharpening the weapon slightly to make it easier to slash open her enemy and put the corrupting force of her blood in her enemy. She also had a collection of knives on the table nearby, ready to be re-hidden throughout her body.

"All the same, I must already endeavor to inspect each of the warriors to see if they are of great import individually. A paradigm shift to put your priorities over mine is but a trifle for me. Be not afeared, my sister. I shall be the opening cannonadery in bringing down your foes, each in turn. Plus, assuring your victory is the most erstwhile manner in which to place myself within striking distance of the famed God Eater herself~"

Piano just gave him a long look, before nodding and sheathing her blade. As she started to hide her daggers in the various hiding spots she had sewn into all of her clothes, Forte looked at the tourist map of the Crossroads he had found, tapping certain landmarks with his finger. "The Fox's Den shall be the most expedient location for intelligence gathering. I would imagine with some coin, the barkeep lips should prove the most likely harbor for that which I desire."

"Of course brother." she responded simply, the last weapon hidden out of sight. "And I shall keep an eye out from the shadows. If anything goes wrong..."

“It won’t, dear sister. Any chicanery I participate in should go unnoticed by any that would be of consequence. The Crossguards have yet to take issue with my probing inquiries, so I have little doubt my current escapades shall be of little fault. And if it does prove to be of a more troublesome scenario than originally scripted, then we have quite a few alternative ventures at the ready to pursue before danger assails us too greatly.”

Piano looked worried, but said nothing as she stepped out the window, bracing herself on the edge of the ledge as she looked at her brother. Then, without another sound, she disappeared over the roof of the building, climbing up and seeking out the shadows as her brother calmly closed the window behind her, chuckling to himself as he looked down at the list of names with a confident smirk. “And now, to which of you will my gaze land upon first? Shall I find my target on the first outing, or shall it be quite the ordeal to obtain what I desire?”

With a hum, he stepped out of the shared room and locked the door behind him, smiling to himself as he made his way out of the inn. By the time he started making his way out the door, his features were already being altered by magic, his skin now an olive color, his eye a shared hazel, and his more diabolic features hidden from sight. With his disguise in place, he began making his presence known to the locals by beginning to interrogate them about what they might know about the other fighters.

While he had said that the Fox’s Den would be the best place to look for information, he also knew that most people were more perceptive than they gave themselves credit for. And yet, so far, he didn’t get any usable information from anyone on the street. It seems with so many unique individuals running around the Crossroads, narrowing down the likely candidates for the tournament was already a full-on game that even the people who live there all their lives still hadn’t mastered. If he was going to have any hope of finding Angelique or any of the others, he was going to need to turn to an expert in information gathering, such as the bartender of the Fox’s Den.

For a moment, he thought he felt someone move past him, though when he turned back, he saw nothing. Forte brushed it off at first, but then he noticed that he could no longer feel his sister’s gaze watching over him. Assuming she went to investigate whatever he felt and knowing she could catch up with him at the Fox’s Den, he shrugged and moved on to the bar itself.

Though instead of heading straight there, he took the scenic route, both to ask a few more people questions and to give his sister time to finish her own investigation. Despite his confident words earlier, he knew he didn't want to be entirely alone when he had finally caught his quarry.

He knew how much anger his words could draw upon himself, after all.

With all the troublemakers having been forced out by Saki earlier, the bar was now much calmer, though there was still an air of excitement as discussion of the potential fighters was already abuzz. There were quite a few people of various races sitting around talking, including quite a few Crossguards that were off-duty. Though one didn't seem to want to wear his outfit right, the top half hanging off his chest and his raccoon like tail swished behind him while he drank at the bar near a tan girl and her blonde companion.

One woman looked confident, talking loudly to her companion as her teeth showed from how excitedly she talked. The blonde woman, which Forte could only tell from the strands that stuck out in front of her hood, rubbed her arms that were covered in long sleeves as she seemed to quietly respond and looked around the room as if looking for a threat. Her eyes met Forte's and she gave him a glare, but he just seemed to brush it off for now, looking away casually as he strode forward. Forte decided to sit between the two groups, bracing his arms against the bar as he looked out for the barkeep.

He didn't have to wait long. Within the minute, the red oni barkeep made her way down from the VIP Lounge, carrying with her an empty margarita glass as the sound of a woman giggling followed her down. As Saki resumed her position behind the bar, she turned her attention to the newcomer. "Welcome to the Fox's Den. I'm sure you're here for the same reason everyone else is?"

"Ah, I believe my motivations have been sussed out so expediently. Was my intentions so wantonly painted on my visage?" Forte gave a chuckle, tapping his fingers along the bar as if writing a message.

“No. But it’s what everyone’s talking about, since the tourney starts today.” she replied coolly, not responding emotionally to his baited response. “And I’ll give you the same answer I gave everyone else: buy a drink or two and I’ll point you in the right direction.”

Forte considered it for a second, then put down some coins on the bar counter. “Consider this a forward payment for the next few patrons that wish to partake in your potages. Though I doubt with all the festivities, such a kind offering will last until even half till eventide.” He smirked at his joke, though Saki only rolled her eyes.

The man in the Crossguard outfit suddenly turned to Forte, setting down his cup of water as Saki casually walked over to take it away, placing some utensils on the counter in front of him instead as his tail swished behind him. “Why would you do that?”

Forte gave the man a curious look as Saki raised an eyebrow, looking between the two of them. “And pray tell as to what you are referring to?”

“What you just did, buying all those drinks, but not taking them yourself. Are you planning on giving those to your opponents, in hopes of inhibiting them for the match tonight? In which case, I will pass. If you’re hoping to get any information by giving out those drinks, then I’m sure the locals will appreciate it more than your opponents will. Or are you hoping to do both?” The man gave Forte a strange look at that.

Forte, for his part, looked rather bemused for a moment, though his usual visage soon graced his face once more as he recovered and thought up his next line of dialogue. “Ah, that is indeed usually the custom upon most planes I have visited upon. I was hoping to use these potages as a means to ply for intelligence about the warriors. But not because I myself will be participating in the melee. I am but a mere journalist, investigating those participating in the Cross Tournament and encouraging the excitement surrounding them all.”

The man tilted his head, nearly tipping over during the motion.. “A journalist, you say? And you’re interviewing all the fighters?”

Forte gave a nod of his head, pulling out his notebook. "Forsooth. I also intend to interview the proprietress of the entire battle royale herself, Madame Chief. I imagine she would make quite the interesting character interview."

"The God Eater? Is your only purpose in doing all this really to talk to the goddess of the Crossroads?"

Forte gave a thoughtful expression at that, though inside he was already pretty settled on his response while Saki moved down the bar to talk to the two women for a bit. "I suppose if I must conjure a response to that, I would say that while I am interested in the competitors themselves, I would be remiss to say that I'm not supremely fascinated in the likes of a mortal who has ascended to godhood."

"Are you interested in immortality then? Are you hoping she can provide you with the means to obtain it yourself?"

"Not in the slightest, good sir." Forte said, sounding offended. "I'm merely satisfying an idle curiosity of mine regarding such beings. Is there aught wrong with that? Such creatures are rare treasures, anthropologically speaking. To pass such an opportune moment to seize upon an interview with such a being with such a storied journey into the present."

"I suppose not." The man responded, returning to an upright position. "But if that's all you're interested in, then I can satisfy it for you. After all, I am an immortal being forced to inhabit a mortal body for this tournament."

Forte leaned back for a moment, seriously studying his conversation partner. His eyes narrowed, the disguise's brown sparkling for a moment with his natural colors before he spoke. "Is that so, good sir? Well then, I pray you tell me more of such a revelation, for you have most certainly captured my fullest attention."

The man in the Crossguard uniform crossed his arms, his expression unreadable. "I am a shinigami, a death god that guides the souls of the deceased to the other side. In this place, I go by Rum. I suppose it is the custom of mortals to say it is a pleasure to meet you."

If Forte was surprised, he did well to not show it as he pulled out his notebook and wrote something down. "A most interesting admission indeed. And one of the names of the warriors participating in the Madame's tourney. I was seeking out the likes of you. But I think that this was quite the initial greeting. I gathered enough material to establish a preliminary article upon your personage. If you progress any further amongst these fighters, I shall need to conduct a secondary interview. Mayhaps we can settle our little discussion at a later time, in these common halls. For unlike you, time is ever my enemy and this eve's tourney is fast approaching."

As he said that, Saki returned with a plate of food, which she placed in front of Rum as he turned to her. "I suppose. For now, I would like to eat. Having a mortal body is so troublesome."

The barwoman gave a sigh. "I'm sure it is for someone like you. I can't believe the Madame is having me take care of you while you're here. I already have my hands full between the bar, Chifu, and Volley." She then turned to Forte. "And as for you, you wanted information on the fighters, right? Well, you've already met Rum, so I hope that makes you happy. If not, I can point you to one more fighter." She jerked her head down the bar.

At the other end, the two women were discussing quietly among themselves, one with a new tankard of ale in her hand as she spoke, the other looking like she was doing her best not to draw attention to themselves as she tried to hush her companion. Forte gave the two of them a studying look, ignoring the scarfing noises of Rum behind him. Saki produced a glass from seemingly out of nowhere, cleaning it with a rag as she shrugged.

"One of those two girls is the fighter you're looking for. I would tell you which one it is, but you didn't give me enough coin for that after I already gave you Rum. You'll have to figure out which one is which on your own." Saki gave him a look as Forte's confident grin returned to his face.

"This should make for an amusing diversion indeed. I prefer this kind of task than a more simple retrieval mission of intelligence. I must thank you most sincerely for your continued generosity and your assistance in guiding me towards my incoming interview." He stood up from his stool, making his way over to the girls.

As he began to approach, both girls took notice of him. The blonde woman was instantly on the defensive, giving Forte a quick glare. The tan skinned woman, however, quickly turned to block her from sight with her body, giving the newcomer a friendly smile.

“Well hey there. What’s a guy like you doing, approaching two girls at a bar, especially when one has a drink in her hand? That seems awfully suspicious to me.” Her words sounded somewhat hostile, but her smile showed she wasn’t upset with him yet.

Forte returned her jovial mood with a grin of his own. “I happened to notice you partaking in a beverage of a spirited variety not too distantly ago. Perchance you did not depart with any coinage when you conducted your transaction?”

The women looked somewhat confused at his words, taking a few moments to translate his words in their heads as he grinned at them and seemed to jot something down. The blonde hair woman still kept her glare at him, while the tanned woman recovered her smile. “Yeah, I think. The bartender said that this drink was free, already covered on someone else’s tab. Were you the one who bought this drink for me?”

“I am afeared I am merely guilty of a misdemeanor in that regard. While I purchased a few drinks, none of them were patently directed for your tastebuds. You merely took advantage of my more general generosity.” He took a seat near the tanned woman, leaning onto his hand as they talked.

“Well thanks anyway. With how crazy today is going to be, I think this drink will go a long way before the match.” She raised a toast to him, taking a draught of alcohol as he laughed in response.

“Forsooth. This eve will prove quite the exciting event indeed. I pray that all of the fighters prove to be as capable as their selection by the God Eater would suggest them to be.” At that, the blonde woman seemed to wince, though the tanned demon’s body blocked his view of her.

“Well I don’t know, you tell me?” The tanned woman flexed her arm, showing off her impressive muscles. Forte raised an eyebrow, sitting up as he looked at her musculature. The fact that she gave away her identity as the fighter so quickly was suspicious to him, especially since he hadn’t even asked them yet. But he said nothing as he reached forward.

“Would you mind if I assessed your prowess for myself more tactilely? I don’t quite have the keen gaze when it comes to physical strength, so I prefer to use my more finely tuned fingers to make a proper judgement on such matters.” He gave a wry grin, laughing as he did.

The tanned woman gave her own laugh, not seeming to reject his reach. “Normally I’d charge for such a touch. But since you bought my drink for me, I suppose that should be fine.”

Forte took a feel of her arms, impressed by the raw strength she seemed to possess. He didn’t quite have the skill to assess someone’s physical ability like Piano could, but even he could tell just how strong she was. If she really was one of the fighters, she might prove to be a formidable opponent indeed. Though unless she has some other talents that make her strong, Forte doubted she would be an opponent Piano couldn’t beat.

“I must say, I am quite impressed indeed. Whatever implements of destruction you utilize must be equally as intimidating as your strength alone proves you to be. I feel great fear for whomever draws the rather dubious misfortune of facing you as a rather formidable obstacle in their bid for the God Eater’s wish.” He thought that flattery might prove useful against such an opponent.

It did seem to endear him to her, as she laughed and gave him a smack on his back in a friendly manner, though the term “God Eater,” drew a shudder and a shake of the head from the less talkative woman.. “You’ll have to wait till the match to see that. I don’t give up anything valuable on the first date. Good try though.”

“A great shame.” He teased back, winking at her. “Surely I can gleam but a small morsel of your talents just prior to the match as recompense for purchasing your eve’s quenching?”

“Sure. Are you volunteering to be the testing dummy?” She gave him a laugh, giving him a punch on the shoulder. Even though she was being gentle, his arm still felt slightly sore from the bump.

He gave her a laugh as his eyes began to sparkle with mischief as he was ready to move to his next target.

"I had to endeavor to at least make the attempt to get that exclusive scoop prior to the match. Journalistic instincts. Speaking of such..." He leaned around the demon woman, looking at the blonde hiding behind her. "... my instincts tell me that I would be remiss if I didn't address your partner to your far side."

The blonde woman flinched, keeping her arms close to her as she turned to the conversation now that she was being addressed. "Your instincts are wrong. Keep that tongue to yourself if you'd like to keep it."

"Ah, what a fiery maid indeed. I thought I was already discussing matters with the firebrand, but it was in the shadows I should be wary." Rather than be upset, he looked rather amused by her words. He seemed used to dealing with aggressive people, leaning into the conversation as he now had two people to split his attention with.

She rolled her eyes. "Congratulations, you got yourself burned. Not back away before you really get yourself seriously torched." The tanned demon between them just took a sip of her drink, a look mixed between worried and amused by the developing conversation. But she made sure to keep her body in between them literally, ensuring that he knew she was keeping her friend safe.

Forte took note of this, looking between the two women with great interest. 'So the demon warrior is protecting the more humanly maiden? An archetypal relation to point, but that is not like to be the sole facet of this pair. Mayhaps the more solemn one is of greater import than the demon wishes me to circumgather by information gleamed thus far.'

Speaking out loud, he addressed the frailer woman once more. "I do beg your pardon, but if these sparks are the greatest your embers can burn, than I have little to be afeared when it comes to the bite of your choleric tone. I've dealt with harsher hellfires than the small blaze you wish to set upon me as your definition of ferocity. Nonetheless, I should as like begin making my intentions known to the pair of you. I am but a humble journalist sent to the Crossroads to do my due diligence of covering the Cross Tournament. In particular, I choose to focus on exposes of the warriors commissioned to compete to give the audiences abroad a greater appeal towards the ones they wish to cheer for."

The hooded woman gave him a skeptical look, not really believing him. "Sorry, I'm not doing interviews at the moment. You'll need to talk to my agent, and they're sick at home. Besides, I have nothing to do with any of this. So why don't you go take a hike and look somewhere else for your big scoop."

"Well as it just so happens, my darkened companion, that the proprietor of this establishment, after I made the purchases of the spirits your partner currently imbibes so dutifully, imparted onto me the knowledge that one of the eight warriors gathered for this day was seated in this specific location, so I would be rather remiss if I allowed such an individual to leave my area of inquiry without a preliminary conducting of ideal exchange." As he spoke, he began writing down more notes in his little book, drawing the blonde's attention.

"Then like I said, it's got nothing to do with me. She's the one fighting, so go back to talking to her." She jerked her head at her partner, her arms staying crossed near her torso. The mentioned friend gave a polite wave, smiling all the while.

But the writer was undeterred. "Alas, as amusing of a conversation partner your living blockade is to engage with, my instincts inform me that you are the more likely one to engage with. Given the defensive behaviors both of you exhibit towards yourself, either your constitution is that of a far weaker being to gauge as capable, or certain conditions have led you to masking your role in this adventure. And given the amount of gudgeongry you have proven to manifest thus far, I have little reason to trust that it is the first condition that you exhibit. Which leads me to the latter, which seems a much more logical approach."

Both women stiffened for a moment, looking at him with more openly suspicious looks. The demon responded first, leaning onto the bar to further block his view. "Oh yeah? Well as nice as it is talking to you, my friend said she doesn't want to talk to you, so I'd suggest backing off now."

"I pray you give me but a few moments longer. I consider it a duty of a most royal calling to--"

“And what do you know about royalty?!” The hooded woman slammed the bar with her fist at that, surprising the two more demonic individuals and spilling the rest of the alcohol. Forte had to bite back a grin as he jotted down something in his book, though he hadn’t noticed the almost metallic bang of her arm on the bar, nor did he notice her curled up fingers having a more metallic appearance as well.

‘The portcullis has lifted fractionally.’ “Well, while I certainly can make no claims about my condition as a member of nobility, I have conducted quite a few interviews with members of said status back on my plane of existence. As a matter of speaking, engaging in verbal combat with yourself has proven to remind of me of-”

“Don’t you dare compare me to them, you flashy bastard!” she shouted at him, standing up and her hood coming back to reveal her full face. Her blonde hair resting just past her chin swished with the motion, her dark blue eyes in a hard glared meeting his false hazel ones. The shadows around her feet seemed to darken, almost moving, but Forte had no way of noticing that between meeting her gaze and the demon woman going to stand up as well.

“I pray beg your forgiveness, I meant to draw no further ire by the comparison. Though I see little reasoning for such acts to draw offense, no matter how much I ponder it. Your raiments certainly lack a regal regalia’s appearance, though your feminal visage certainly draws one’s thinking towards-” His smirk was unmistakable as she went to take a step forward, the whole bar’s attention now drawn to the shouting match.

“YOU DON’T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT ME! DON’T YOU GO MAKING ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT ME!” She went to move forward, but the tanned woman put her arm out. “Vivi, let me go, I’ll-”

“No Angie, you need to calm down.” Vivi said, rolling her shoulders as she looked back at Angelique as Forte grinned at having finally confirmed it. “You need to save your energy for your match in a few hours.”

Angelique shook her head, still angered at his words. “You heard what he was saying. He knows nothing about what I’ve been through, and he’s making all those assumptions about me! I’m not going to sit here and just listen to him smugly talk about me like he knows anything about me!”

"If it is of any assistance," Forte added, causing both girls to turn to him, "I was not attempting to make any such assertions that were meant to cause distress. I was merely probing into the psyche of my interviewee, hoping to gleam anything worthy of telling a story about. If you wish to relay it to me, I can be more careful in crafting what linguistic communications I impart upon you."

Angelique glared at him, a few spells already on the tip of her tongue for him, but Vivi's touch drew attention again. Her companion shook her head in an attempt to calm her, though she knew at this point, a fight was going to break out. It was more of a question on who would be dealing with this annoying guy.

"I'll deal with this guy." She began to walk forward menacingly, cracking her knuckles menacingly before raising her fist up as she prepared to give him a haymaker he won't forget anytime soon.

As the other patrons in the bar looked on excitedly, Forte didn't even flinch. He simply reached up to take off his glasses, as if preparing to take the blow. But as he started adjusting his clothes nonchalantly, he stood in place as Vivi's fist began to rocket forward towards his face, racing towards him with an alarming speed and the force of a semi as....

Piano was balanced on her heels on the rooftops, jumping from roof to roof after her brother as she stepped with quick, but silent steps on the angled slopes above the street. She wasn't the only one above the others. Various winged beings and other entities that do not wish to be seen were also skulking along the roofs with her. Most didn't acknowledge her presence, but a few attempted to proposition her, which she quietly denied while making sure she didn't lose track of her disguised brother.

One didn't take too kindly to that. He was a man with large ears, tanned skin, and a pair of bat-like wings protruding from his arms. He gave her a wide grin. "Now come on little girl, spend some time with me before the tournament begins. I can guarantee you a good time if you just follow me~"

Piano gave him a suspicious look, not sure why this guy was approaching her. Her mismatched eyes examined him, though she quickly noticed his own eyes all over her. She got a bad feeling just being around him, and the way he smiled at her gave off a feeling of depravity. If she went with him, it was unlikely to end well for her.

So instead, she tried to wave him off. "Sorry, I was busy with something. Maybe later." Internally, she cursed that she wasn't being more forceful in her rebuke of him. This feeling solidified into regret inside of her stomach as he raised an eyebrow, leaning in as her insides churned with disgust.

"Oh really? Running around on the roofs in that outfit is something important?" He pointed at her flashy outfit, especially the lilac heels she was balanced on. "It certainly seems like you're looking for attention. And I have plenty of it to give you~"

Piano gave a shiver of disgust, glancing away to look for her brother's form below, though she noticed the creepy bat man's ki move closer the moment she looked away. She didn't move as she turned her attention back to him. "Like I said, I'm sorry, but I'm busy. I really should go..."

He attempted to grab onto Piano's arm. "Now hold on girlie, we ain't done~"

His words were interrupted by the heel of a palm slamming into his nose, a sickening crack echoing out as his nose broke upon impact. As Piano broke his nose, she reached past his face to grab the back of his head, kneeing him in the face before sending him tumbling off the roof. She knew his wings would allow him to slow his fall, so the light impact she heard below was not a surprise. She glanced over the edge, seeing him slumped in a pile of garbage in an unconscious stupor. Someone else looked over at him, then shrugged. "I'll call the Crossguard to pick him up. They'll deal with that creep."

Piano just nodded, before moving on as her brother finished speaking with a few people and continued his way through the business district. As she watched, she saw a pair of Crossguards move past her brother. As they did, she suddenly felt a ki presence that was moving at an impossible speed. Her head whipped over to the source, her eyes narrowing in focus on the person that was rapidly approaching.

She saw a blur of a man, with pale skin and dark hair with white streaks. She couldn't make out too many other features as he ran through the Crossguards, nearly upending them as he ran by. She noticed her brother looking around, though he didn't seem to notice anything as it happened too quickly for him from his position. Figuring that he might be a fellow competitor, she stood up fully and began to make her way after him.

At first, she did a decent enough job catching up. He was always slightly faster than her, but every time he needed to turn, she would cut diagonally along his path, closing some of the distance between them. Her own parkour skills, stolen from two people of exceptional talent in the skill, meant that her movements had as little waste as was possible, ensuring she remained at top speed at all times as she crossed gaps and roofs faster than their occupants could even realize she was there. She watched his running form, trying to see some of the mechanics of his movements to see if they were worth stealing for herself.

But as it turned out, his technical running form wasn't quite as good as she suspected. If anything, her form, borrowed from a professional runner, was a superior form for a natural runner. The ki within his body also seemed to flow at an almost unnatural rate, providing his body with the life energy needed to operate at an even greater speed than was technically needed to operate at the speed he currently was going. Which meant that his ability was either a natural quirk of his body or it was done by magic, neither of which made them great candidates for her to steal his talent from him. But if he really was an opponent she would be facing in the tournament later, then it was worth observing him to look for weak points to exploit instead.

As she cut a tight corner to try and keep up as he turned, someone almost got in her way. She had sensed their approach and had already adjusted her path to avoid them, but the lady she blew past still gave a shout of surprise as Piano passed by, drawing some attention her way. Looking down, the devil blood saw her target looking up at her. He seemed confused at first, but then he seemed to laugh.

"Oh? You thought you could keep up with me and wanted to go on a run? Well then, how about we have a little race then? See if you can keep up with this!" He gave her a quick wave, then with a slight tensing of his legs, Piano could feel the ki in his body explode into activity. In the blink of an eye, he was already at the other end of the street, turning the corner at breakneck speed.

Piano's jaw dropped slightly. She had expected his speed to be higher than he was showing before, but such an extreme difference was something beyond her expectations. She knew that even if she pushed her body to its breaking point, she could never hope to even trail behind him, much less match him. In just a second and a half, he had already left her ability to sense his ki. In ten seconds, he would likely already be a quarter of the way around the Business District.

Such impossible speeds would certainly make him a difficult opponent, Piano reasoned. She'd have to start planning her strategy to take him on now, if she wanted a chance to beat him in the later rounds. She dropped down to the ground level, landing with a gentle touch, not even a bell on her coattail ringing as she looked at the chaos his passage had caused. Many people were knocked over from the speedster having blown by them, and there was a few carts of fruits and vegetables that had been scattered by the quick passage of someone jumping through the gap. If she didn't see for herself who caused it, she would've thought a hurricane had passed through and wrecked the whole street.

As she began to collect her thoughts and recover her senses, she suddenly felt another powerful source of ki in front of her. Her eyes looked up, purple and gold eyes met emerald, a stern expression on the shorter woman's face as the latter seemed to study the former. The large braid of red hair easily dwarfed Piano's ebony in volume, while the woman's clothes were rather plain in comparison to the outrageous flashiness of the false magician. A sword was at her side, but the moment Piano looked at it, the shorter woman turned her body to hide it slightly, forcing Piano's eyes back up as she began to speak. "...Your blood." The woman's voice was low, so low Piano almost didn't hear it at first.

Piano looked confused, staring back at the woman with a look of surprise. "What are you talking about? What about my blood?" While her voice remained steady, it had a certain timidity to it when compared to the sturdy tenor the woman spoke with.

"Your blood." The woman repeated again, her gaze unwavering in the other's shyness. "When I first met the oni that runs the bar, I thought her blood would be the one that runs the hottest in this place. But yours... the taint that your blood carries is almost blazing in its aggression, on its desire to be let onto those near you. I couldn't let you walk by me without getting a better look at you."

At that, Piano's eyes went from fearful to examining, a reaction the woman seemed to approve of. While Piano didn't think of her blood as something of a big secret, in a tournament like this hiding that fact before the fights would have given her a slight upper hand, a tool her opponents wouldn't expect.

But this woman seemed to have the ability to sense it. The most obvious thought was vampire, but her being out in the sunlight meant Piano had to dismiss that line of thinking. There were several creatures throughout the multiverse that could sense blood after all, most of which also tended to feed on it. So the fact that this woman approached Piano on the subject of blood meant...

Piano tilted her head to the nearby alley. "I think we should talk out of sight. I think people are looking at us weird. It's making me uncomfortable."

The woman raised an eyebrow. "I didn't think it was anything for someone like you to be embarrassed about." Nevertheless, the woman followed Piano into the shadows. It seemed that whoever this woman is, she certainly had the confidence in the strength her ki implied to the martial artist.

"...I'm not used to beings like you being so direct about my blood." Piano explained, crossing her arms in a somewhat defensive gesture. "I have to fight today, so I can't let you have any. I'm sorry, you'll have to wait till after the tournament is over."

The woman looked surprised, as if not expecting that kind of response. "Don't worry, I am in complete control. While the fragrance of your blood is certainly the most intoxicating one I've experienced in a long time and the strength and aggressiveness your body possess interests me, I have no need to drink it, if that's what you fear. Your blood is the most unique I've ever seen, so I'm very interested in seeing how you utilize it, Blackblood. For you are not alone in being a warrior in this tournament."

Piano let her mild surprise show, her mind racing. There were only two identifiably female names on the list besides her own, with Volley and Rum being potential candidates; Angelique and Vilivian.. And one of those was her opponent. If she had found her now, this was a great chance. "...Piano." was all she whispered back, judging the reaction of the older woman.

The woman in front of her listened, then gave a noise of disappointment. Without even saying her name, she had already identified herself as not being Angelique, which meant that this woman had to be one of the three likely candidates on the opposite side of the bracket. "I am Vilivian. It means both of us will have to win two bouts if I am going to have a chance to see what makes your blood so special for myself."

Piano looked away at that, looking slightly embarrassed at those words. While it was what she intended to do, it was weird to hear a potential opponent encouraging her to win. Especially one that was mainly interested in seeing her blood being spilled. "Of course. I have things I want to get-

But she stopped as both she and Vilivian sensed more people approaching. Piano recognized one of them, as the batman from before landed in the alley with them, a small gang of thuggish looking individuals accompanying him, including a large stone man who cracked his rock like fists. His nose was still bent at an odd angle, and his voice was more nasally as he spoke. "So, this is where you were trying to go, girlie. But I'm afraid this is as far as you go without paying your debt."

Vilivian jerked her head towards them, looking at Piano. "Do you know these males, Blackblood?"

Piano shook her head quietly, glancing between the woman and the men. She didn't think he would be this persistent, nor that he'd have this many allies. Her first instincts told her to run and hide to avoid drawing too much attention, but it didn't seem like this guy would let her go so easily. Maybe she could knock him and his buddies out so she could get away from him and meet up with her brother. But with that many, she might start burning through her stamina to do so, which would make the fight with Angelique later that much harder.

The batman meanwhile was looking at Piano's conversation partner with a sneer, looking down at her with his crooked smile. "Ah, so is this who was so important for ya' to meet that you couldn't spend time with me? You should've let me know, I would've invited her too."

The glare she gave him was withering, making the man step back. But he quickly got his nerve back as she shot an equally withering retort at him. "I have no interest in males like you. Leave us now. This is your only warning."

All the men looked at each other, then they all began to laugh. Both women stared as some of the thugs began to double over with laughter. Even the large stone man, who easily towered over eight feet, was chuckling with its arms crossed in front of it. "Now boys, these girls are clearly new to the Crossroads. So they don't know who we are. Look, there's a reason the Crossguards don't mess with us. So you best be coming with us."

"We're not interested, male. We'll be going now to continue our conversation." The red haired woman whirled around to walk away, Piano getting ready to follow her with wide eyes, looking back at the thugs.

"Nuh-uh, where do you think you're going little ladies?" The batman asked, his sneer at its widest as he jerked his head. The stone golem walked forward, reaching forward to grab the red haired woman's arm.

The moment his hand touched his arm, her head spun around, a dangerous gleam in her emerald eyes as she grabbed a hold of his arm. Pulling him forward with impossible strength, she gave a haymaker directly into its face. The large man suddenly went flying down the alley, bits of his stone skin cracking and flecking off its face as he went flying towards the other. Most managed to dodge, but one man was completely crushed under his friend.

All of the thugs looked shocked at the feat of strength. Piano also looked surprised, but quickly sprang into action as well to try and end the fight before too much attention was drawn to them. All of the men spun around, just in time for one of them to receive a right cross from Vilivian, turning his neck at an impossible angle with a loud crack, while another had his leg kicked out before being axe kicked into the ground by Piano.

While they took out the thugs, Piano knocking them out and Vilivian seeming to kill them with single blows, Piano watched her future potential opponent movements to see how she fights. All of the Matriarch's movements were smooth, controlled, and deliberate with no movements wasted. Her impressive strength meant that she just needed direct hits, so she seemed to always aim for

the torso. As she watched Vilivian, Piano came to the realization that what Vilivian fought with wasn't a martial art in the traditional sense. It was more like a proto-martial art, the base upon which other martial arts could be built upon.

For someone of her talents, such a thing was highly sought after, especially one as refined as Vilivian's. Piano had to be careful to put some of her attention on the thugs, choking one of them out as most of the others went to try and gang up on Vilivian, only to get flung away and most of them knocked out from the backfist she dished out on them. The devil blood would have to try and watch most of this opponent's matches, but knew if she really wanted it, she would have to face her in battle herself.

None of the men that were arrayed around them even stood a chance with the combined force of both warriors, Piano's skill and Vilivian's overpowering strength too much for even the toughest of them to handle. Neither woman even suffered a blow as Vilivian killed a solid quarter of them, the others she fought being severely damaged, while Piano did her best to cause as little permanent damage as possible while she incapacitated them.

.As the stone man stood up once more, he gave a loud bellow and charged forward, running towards Vilivian with both hands raised in a hammerblow. But just as he reached her, she leapt up towards his head, jumping over his attack as he cracked the ground. She gave a ferocious punch to the face, fully cracking it with the force as a shockwave emanated from it. She followed through on the blow, using gravity to enhance her already immense strength as she slammed his rock-like skull onto the earth below, cracking and shattering the ground with the blow as the force of it shook the nearby buildings.

Piano, meanwhile, noticed the batman beginning to fly away. Running up the wall slightly, she jumped after him and grabbed his leg, throwing him off-balance as she slammed him into the ground. With a quick blow to the back of the head slamming his face into the ground, he was once again rendered unconscious for the day.

Vilivian stood up from the small crater she had created with her attack, shaking off some bits of rock from her hand before brushing back a loose strand of hair from her face, turning back to Piano. "Tch. Just as I thought, these weren't even worth my attention. Now, back to what we were talking about..."

Piano cleared her throat a little, looking embarrassed once more as she had turned to see people outside of the alley looking in with slack jaws, having been disturbed by what they had heard, especially the sickening sounds of men losing their lives. The talent thief didn't want too much attention drawn as it was, and certainly not by getting into fights alongside supernaturally strong fighters she'd have to take on later. "I, uh, think we've caused a bit of a mess. Perhaps we can continue this later, when everybody isn't looking at us."

Sure enough, Piano could hear them discussing if the two women in the alley were some of the competitors and excitement was beginning to rise where fear or surprise once took hold. Piano's skin darkened as she began to blush, wanting nothing more than to return to the shadows and be hidden. The Matriarch gave a sigh. "I'll let you go for now, Blackblood. But I will take your words as a promise of future meetings." She began to walk away, then looked down at the foes Piano defeated. "...You're too soft. Someone of your pedigree had the right to end these fools for bothering you. I suppose that's something else for us to talk about next time."

The older woman left the alley first, the people blocking the entrance parting ways as she made to walk past them. Despite visually being one of the smaller people on the streets as Piano followed her out, the latter's ki sense showed that she was in fact one of the biggest people in sight. She would prove to be a dangerous opponent for Piano indeed.

As Piano made her way back towards the Fox's Den, she suddenly felt the presence of the speedster's key as she felt a hand on her shoulder nearly as soon as she felt it. "Good try. Maybe next time." Before she could turn to see him, he was already down the street and moving out of sight. Piano gave a confused look, before walking away.

The devil blood moved quickly, trying to reach her twin before he got too into trouble. Just as she was reaching the entrance, she felt the presence of several strong kis. Most were inside, three of them close to where her brother was. There was another source that inside was unlike anything she had ever felt before. It gave off such a strange, almost otherworldly aura, it almost disturbed her.

But the presence in front of her gave off an almost overwhelming sense of strength, even greater than Vilivian gave off. She had only felt a few people of this level of life force, and all of them had been people she wanted to avoid. It was so great, she almost didn't notice the also powerful, though clearly malevolent source that was right next to them, which only made it even more

overwhelming just sensing the pair of them. She began to look for the source of it, just to see who she would need to avoid in the future.

But then she heard a commotion inside, and knowing her brother, it was likely not good for him. Hoping the overwhelming presence didn't notice her, she dashed into the Fox's Den, looking to see what was going on inside.

As Viola reared her fist back to punch Forte, the false journalist just rocked on his heels, presenting his cheek to her. As the tanned demon's fist came rocketing towards him, there was a flash of red and violet raced across the room.

In just a moment, Piano had raced from the entrance to the bar, placing herself between her brother and a threat. As the punch reached her, Piano caught the blow, redirecting the force of the attack into a more circular motion and causing the demon woman to get flung into the air. With the force of her own attack being used against her, Viola was flung halfway across the room and landed with a hard thud, causing drinks on the nearby tables to vibrate and nearly tip over if their owners didn't grab them hurriedly.

Everyone looked at the newcomer with some surprise, Saki and Forte being the exception. Forte looked proud of his sister, while Saki was keeping a careful eye out to make sure the bar fight didn't get out of control. But she had noticed that Piano had carefully aimed to ensure Viola wouldn't hit anything. It would be interesting to see what some of these new fighters were capable of up close.

Angelique looked concerned for her friend, running over to help her up. "Vivi, are you ok?"

Vivi got up slowly, rubbing her back as if it was sore. "Well, I wasn't expecting to be on the ground while trying to punch a nerd. But that wasn't too bad."

Angelique looked up at Piano, glaring at her. "So why did you decide to jump into this? This fight had nothing to do with you."

Piano looked back at her brother, who gave her a shrug and a smirk at everything that was going on. "I was just protecting someone who lets his words get ahead of himself sometimes. I'd like to ask you all to forget what he said and just move on."

Angelique glared at her even harder, pointing at him. As she did, Piano noticed that while ki flowed through her body like normal, her arms didn't seem to receive any. Looking closer, Piano noticed the metallic look on her fingers. Between the expression and emotions she showed, and the damaged her body seemed to sustain, Piano could sense there was something dark involved in her past. 'Prosthetics? I can only imagine what she's been through. The anger and sadness she holds must be great.'

"He just sat there insulting me this whole time! He needs to apologize first, and even that won't be enough." Angelique stood up, as did Vivi.

Piano stood her ground, still in a martial arts stance between them and Forte. She shook her head, even knowing he probably was purposely pushing the pair's buttons. "I doubt he sees anything wrong with what he did. He thinks that to best find out a person's true personality is to see every aspect of them, including anger. Please don't hold it against him."

Forte gave an almost mocking bow at that, smiling up at them all. "A more apt description, I could scarcely manufacture. I must thank you so kindly for such a succinct description of my interviewing process."

Vivi cracked her neck at that, rolling her shoulders in anticipation to continue the fight. "Wanting to see our true personalities, are you? Very well, why don't I give you a close up preview?"

She held her hand out, and Piano grew more tense as a shape started to appear in her hand. A large dark red club with dark gray spikes materialized into Vivi's hand, who then swung the weapon a couple of times as if to test the weight despite clearly being very familiar with the weapon. Behind her, Piano could hear her brother writing down a few notes on what was happening, the sister sighing knowing he was getting his job done.

"You ready, devil girl? I'm not going to hold back for you!" Vivi charged forward, swinging her club at Piano wildly. The acrobatic warrior backed up as she was approached, her brother quickly moving out of the way as they reached the bar. Jumping over Vivi's attack, Piano grabbed the mostly empty drink that the former had just been drinking and flung it in the demon's face, blinding her for a moment as the slither girl leaped over her to get space once more.

As Vivi cleared her eyes and turned to face Piano, the latter began to move to circle... and there were two of them now. The tanned demon rubbed her eyes again to try and clear them, but the illusion still remained. She looked between them for a moment longer, then picked one and charged. This Piano went to dodge, but Viola anticipated it and went to intercept her with the swing, only to pass through air as the illusion faded.

She wheeled around to find the other, only to feel the heel of Piano's foot embed itself into her cheek. Viola barely moved from the blow, as Piano realized just how tough her opponent was and quickly dropped low before Vivi could grab her leg and retaliate. Piano glanced at her brother as he began writing again, seeing his lips moving as he began to cast another illusion to aid her in this fight.

But before he could finish, he suddenly felt a woman drape herself upon his shoulder, the man nearly dropping his notebook as he moved to catch her. He certainly wasn't as strong as his sister, but even he could carry someone as lightweight as this woman, both physically and in relation to alcohol. The woman had red hair and dark clothes, with the smell of alcohol on her breath as she looked up at the man who caught her with a smile. Two pairs of mismatched eyes met, both having a single gold orb, while red and purple separated the similarities between them.

"Thanks for catching me~ I heard a lot of noise downstairs and came wandering down to see what was happening. Looks like I tripped down the stairs. Good thing you were here to catch me before I hurt myself~" As she explained herself, she gave no effort to remove herself from his person. He tried to push her away, but she seemed to only cling tighter to prevent him from letting her go. If he didn't know any better, he would've thought that she was trying to keep him from casting more illusions to help his sister, but he knew that was impossible. There weren't many in town who would

know he had that ability.

As his sister was forced to cede more ground to the more powerful woman as she was chased away with club and fist, Forte turned his attention to his new burden. "Ah, so you ascended down from the heavens above to alight yourself among the rest of us mortals. Shall I take this to confirm that you must be a rather frequent imbiber of this establishment's spirits to be so easily allowed within the hallowed halls of the VIP lounge above?"

The woman nodded heavily, resting her cheek on his shoulder as she watched the frantic fight in the center of the room, people moving out of the way as Piano dived over a table to avoid an attack, only to scramble underneath as Vivi raised the table up to get another swing. "That's right~ I'm the most regular regular Saki's got~ My name is Chifu, the local gossip~ It's a pleasure to meet you~"

"And the personage I go by is Forte, a traveling author who seeks interesting characters of note to utilize as fascinating facsimiles in my tales. With their permission, of course~" He gave a wink, which sent the woman giggling. "And if they protest, I can always manufacture a character of merely passing likeness, so warped by my influences that any comparison is rendered null to even the sharpest of critics."

Forte's sister, meanwhile, landed a couple of blows onto her opponent's torso. Against most opponents, this would be enough to wind them, but Vivi was a more experienced warrior than that. Instead, she attempted to grab Piano's arms, but the smaller woman was too quick to be so easily grabbed by such an obvious grapple. Vivi then thrust her club forward, forcing Piano to create more distance. Vivi looked around at the bar, knowing she couldn't use any of her magic in the bar without risking being kicked out, but this woman was just too hard to hit normally. Getting frustrated, she jerked her head towards the entrance, but Piano shook her head, not agreeing to a situation that would give her opponent an advantage. Giving a snarl, Vivi charged forward, closing the distance once more to finally land a hit.

"Are you really now?~" Chifu asked, a hand on her lips as if to hide her smile. "And would you mind if I got a sneak peek at it before you finish?~"

Forte gave her a wry smile, shaking his head in disapproval. "I'm sorry fizgig. I'm afraid I'm not in the business of giving away my manuscripts to anyone but my editor before it is of a remarkable quality. I would lose what upper hand I have among writers. You'll just have to purchase a copy of my tome once it is of adequate work along with the rest of the multiverse. Mayhaps if you keep as good a company as your reputation at this place of patronage suggests, I might offer such a grimoire at a more reasonable rate~"

Chifu gave a disappointed whine, though she was still smiling. "Really? Oh well. I suppose I might have to get some reading done for once instead of just enjoying all of Saki's wonderful drinks~" She looked over at the fight going on, seemingly amused by the fight. "My my, those two are raring to go~ Too bad we won't be seeing them much during the tournaments. I'm sure everyone would love to see it~"

Forte looked at the woman suspiciously. Something about her appearance bothered him. Her hair and outfit... he swore he had seen them before. But he couldn't quite place it at the moment as he shook his head to focus. "And pray tell how you came to that conclusion? Have you been eavesdropping on the going on of this tavern long before you claim to have investigated the source of this frenetic activity?"

The woman just gave a happy hum, rocking back and forth. "Like I said, I'm the local gossip~ I know things that other people don't~"

Forte gave a small frown, though his smirk returned just as quickly. "That doesn't quite rectify my lack of knowledge. Are you truly leading me to believe you noised about and stumbled upon the knowledge of the competitors so easily, when their announcements were but a mere few hours prior? I have been venturing forth throughout the district since the announcement hence, and I've just barely scraped together but a pair of fighters, much less the full eight figures entailed in the tourney. Your intelligence gathering skills must be on par with all but the most legendary of spycrafters."

"I have my sources~" Chifu teased with a grin. She then pointed at the fight in question. "But we'll have to continue this conversation later. Maybe over drinks~ Right now, things are about to get interesting~"

Piano at this point stood away from Vivi, the former looking barely phased by the combat while the latter took a number of light blows across her body that were starting to wear on her. Growing tired of this, Vivi gathered earth magic through her club, the whole thing thrumming with energy as the very air vibrated from its power. Even if she missed now, the impact of her blow would send vibrations that would disrupt Piano, making it easier to land the next blow.

As Vivi charged with a roar once more, Piano's mismatched eyes grew wide... then turned towards the entrance, no longer paying attention to the woman in front of her. As the club was raised high to strike, a translucent barrier suddenly materialized between them, to the shock of just about everybody. The club met the barrier with a loud clash, the air bursting with a shockwave from the pure force of the two sides. For a moment, it seemed everything froze, all becoming still. But then with a shattering sound, the barrier broke and Vivi's arms were thrown back, the War Beast being driven back by the small eruption. Everyone turned their attention to where Piano's was, looking at the one who finally intervened in the fight as even the Crossguards were caught unsure of how to proceed.

At the entrance stood a tall man with black hair and golden eyes, his gray cloak fluttering in the wind from the outside and his wine colored jerkin showing he was ready for combat, his hand resting casually on the sword at his waist. His other arm was up, having just projected the barrier to stop the last attack as he looked somewhat surprised. He looked down at his hand with some surprise, as if shocked by something as he flexed his fingers under his own gaze.

Vivi turned to him and called out, "And why are you stepping in now? First she throws me across a room, now you're throwing in forcefields. Has anybody here ever heard of a fair fight?"

The man looked surprised at her hostility, though quickly brushed it off. "My apologies. But that last attack of yours looked like it would do quite a bit of damage to this bar, and I don't think anyone would appreciate that, so I decided to protect it. But I must say, you're pretty strong. My barriers aren't that easy to break." Despite how boastful his words were, he sounded rather humble as he spoke as he gave her a big smile. He seemed almost excited at the prospect that someone could break his forcefields.

"What- I- Thank you?" Vivi said in confusion, before shaking her head. "Whatever, you're right, I let the fight get ahead of me." She turned to Saki, bowing her head in apology. "Sorry for nearly breaking things in your bar."

Thanks to Piano and Vivi being careful even while fighting and the quick work of the patrons and staff, only a few drinks were spilled in the ensuing brawl, but no furniture or tables were broken, and with no downward swings till near the end, not even the floor was damaged by the battle. Saki just cleaned a glass, though her sleeves were conspicuously rolled up at this point. "It's all good. Next time take it outside or I'll throw you all out myself, competitors or not." She pointed at the three who were scheduled for the tournament that day.

Piano looked to her brother, who nodded to her slightly, before she turned her attention to Angelique, studying her future opponent. Vivi and Angelique look surprised, looking first at Piano then the newcomer realizing these were two of the people they would need to take down. Angelique focused on Piano while Vivi walked up to the male.

"Wait, you're one of the competitors?" the blonde asked incredulously, looking at the red skinned woman. The two women couldn't be more opposite in appearance. Angelique was quiet, subdued, and darker in terms of clothes, while Piano was bright, flashy, and stood out with her clothes. With each motion the latter made, the bells on her coattails didn't chime for even a second, her movements were that graceful and careful. And she seemed capable of taking Vivi in a fight, who was a strong fighter herself. Something about this woman made Angelique feel... angry? Disgusted? Maybe jealous, that she could wear something like that so openly, without any sort of fear? Whatever it was, Angelique just glared at her opponent, still upset she had intervened when it came to Forte.

Piano just gave a nod. "I'm Piano. And if my information is correct, you are my opponent in the upcoming fight, aren't you?" To the devil blood, the slim woman across from her was reserved and defensive, seeming to keep as much to her chest as possible. While Angelique got a good showing of what her opponent could do, Vivi being the one to fight meant that Piano was going to go in blind to her match that day. It was not the best situation, but one thing Piano could tell was that if Vivi was the better fighter of the two, then Angelique would be easy to physically overpower. Which meant there was likely another trick to look out for. Piano bit her lip, trying to prepare her battle strategy.

Angelique looked surprised, not expecting to run into her opponent before the match. "You? Then why would you go jumping into fights before our match?"

"I wanted to make sure my brother didn't get too hurt. He really doesn't mean any offense with his words. He's just trying to learn as much as he can. It just sometimes comes out in a way that upsets people. Please try not to hold it against him." Piano gave a slight bow, as if asking for forgiveness.

"Brother?" The look of confusion on Angelique's face was apparent, as she turned her head towards the "journalist." He was busy setting Chifu onto a barstool, Saki pouring her another drink as she giggled to them both. Angie turned back to Piano. "How is that your brother?"

Piano just shook her head. "You'll have to talk to him about that. His secrets are his, and mine are mine. Not that I have many secrets."

"I'll pass if you don't mind." Piano shrugged at the former princess' response. Her brother could solve that problem if he needed to. "But since you seem to be in the mood to share, why don't you go ahead and tell me what you plan to wish for if you win. What are you fighting for that that fox woman can give you?" She referred to Madame Chief with some derision, an obvious distrust plain in her words.

Piano shook her head once more. "I don't really have anything I want to wish for yet. There's nothing I can think of that the Madame Chief could give me. But my brother said it would be a waste to let the opportunity for a wish go by, so I decided to participate anyway to see what I can get from it."

The statements were all independently true, so Piano wasn't technically lying. It was true that she had no wish, and that Madame Chief couldn't give her anything. But her brother could certainly get something important from the God Eater, and the tournament held quite a few things that Piano needed. So Piano didn't feel too guilty telling all those half truths.

"So we're the same then." Angelique nodded. "Neither of us knows what we want, but both of us joined this tournament anyway. But only one of us will get the chance to figure out what we want out of this."

Piano gave Angelique a solemn look, her purple and gold eyes looking so sad as she spoke. "Well I hope that either way this goes, you find whatever duty in life you need to find purpose in what you do."

Angelique looked absolutely befuddled by that. "What are you talking about? What do you mean?"

But Piano didn't continue the conversation from there. Instead, she went to one of the staff members and got a mop to help clean up some of the mess, leaving Angelique entirely alone with the words the devil blood left for her.

"What does that even mean?" Angelique asked once more, looking both confused and angry at the farewell she was given.

Vivi, meanwhile, stood in front of the man who interrupted her fight with Piano. She was just shorter than him, and he seemed rather calm as she assessed him. "And who are you? You seem pretty confident, with all you said."

The man was quick to answer, a confident smile on his face. "I am Prince Armius Tu El Kaligos. Back where I'm from, I was referred to as the Strongest Man in the Universe. Though it seems when I came here, some of my power was limited to make it fair for everyone else. I'm still testing my limits, which is why I was surprised you could break my forcefield."

Vivi raised an eyebrow. Meanwhile, across the bar, Forte's ears perked up on hearing the words "Prince" and "Strongest Man in the Universe." He looked to Chifu as she was happily drinking a margarita, sipping some of the salt off the rim as she wiggled in her seat. "Mayhaps we can reconvene tomorrow so that I can enjoy the splendor of your company further~ After all, you seem to be quite the fount of intelligence."

Chifu gave a giggle, licking her lips satisfied with the taste of her drink. "Sounds like fun~ See you tomorrow."

With that, Forte began crossing the bar, moving past Angelique as she talked with his sister. Vivi, meanwhile, motioned outside. “Strongest Man in the Universe, huh? Why don’t I give a shot at knocking you down a peg outside?”

Prince Armius gave a huge smile at that, excited at the prospect of a spar. “I’ll let you try. You’re pretty strong, so it’ll be a good warmup for my match today.”

Both fighters stepped outside, Forte joining them with a notebook in hand. The two stood across from each other for a few moments as most people cleared off the street to give them room for a fight. Vivi’s weapon began to vibrate once more with earth magic, while Armius drew his sword to be safe.

Then both rushed forward, weapons swinging with immense force. The clash in the middle created a shockwave of immense size, cracking the earth beneath their feet as the two held for a minute. The vibrations rattled Armius’ sword, but his arm held steady as he soon overpowered Vivi. With her weapon lowered by the weight of his sword pressing down on her soul weapon, he punched her in the chest, sending her flying down the street.

As Vivi finally slowed down, she coughed a few times, trying to recover her breath from having all the air forced out of her chest from that immense blow. He wasn’t kidding when he was saying he was strong. And if he was to be believed, he was even stronger than that.

The man, meanwhile, was shaking his arm, the vibrations making the tips of his fingers go slightly numb. “Wow, that swing of yours is really strong. Nothing’s affected me like this in all of my life. There are some really impressive people here.”

“Forsooth.” Forte chimed in, hiding his shock at the power of the blow. The strength and speed with which this man fought was almost unimaginable. Even if Piano did her best, even Forte doubted she could take him in a straight fight. If this man made it past this round, Forte would have to do something in order to help his sister beat the Strongest Man. “Though I could scarce say anyone is

nearly as impeccable as you, Prince Armius. You surely live up to your moniker.”

The Prince looked surprised, looking over at Forte. “Thank you, I suppose. And who might you be, stranger?”

“Myself? I am but a humble traveling crier who specializes in the craft of transcribing events onto paper and ink. I am currently on a journey to gather the personas of those that wish to challenge the trials of the wish granting tournament. As such, you are one of the ones I wish to speak with.” Forte gave a bow, holding his hat onto his head as he grinned up at the prince from a distant world.

“Really now? Well, we can talk later. That sounds interesting.” As he spoke, he turned back to Vivi, whose weapon was now wreathed in flames. He gave a smile and a wink. “But first, I have a spar to settle. The first fair one I’ve had my entire life.”

As both powerhouses hefted their weapons and charged towards each other, a flash of pink suddenly erupted between them, sending them skidding to a stop. Large white and red signs advising them not to proceed forward were imposed between them, blocking their vision of each other.

“Now hold it right there, busters!” Miss X shouted loudly, causing everyone around to cheer at seeing her. “Look, I like watching epic fights as much as the next announcer, but a girl’s gotta think about the people that spent money on PPV for these fights! Can’t have you guys giving away free fights on the street like that! Save it for the arena!”

Both warriors looked embarrassed, while the writer on the sidelines gave a low chuckle as the rest of the crowd laughed at Miss X’s jokes. Both weapons were stowed away in their respective sheathes, as the holographic barriers were lowered.

“You!” Miss X turned to Vivi. “You’re not fighting in the tournament, so normally we don’t care if you get into a fight or two. But you’ve fought not one, but two of the contestants of today’s matches before their opening fight today! You’re going to spoil all the juicy surprises for the audience if you keep this up!”

“And you!” Now it was Armius’ turn. “We’re having your promotions lined up as the Strongest Man in the Universe! Don’t go wasting all that young energy on random street fights! There’s a wish granting tournament you can try it all out on!”

“And you!” She wheeled towards the entrance of the bar, where Piano and Angelique now stood, the latter looking at the former as Miss X talked to Piano in a reprimanding tone. “You’ve gotten into not one, but two fights today! And fighting alongside one of your competitors too! Are you trying to draw attention to yourself?”

Everyone looked surprised at the revelation that Piano fought multiple times today. Forte was surprised that Piano would do something that draws so much attention to herself, when normally she’d keep out of sight, out of mind. Vivi and Angelique were surprised that after all of that fighting, Piano still looked perfectly fine, barely a drop of sweat on her after fighting two fights in one day.

“Now, I’m a nice girl, and give all my kittens one free forgiveness. So to help make things up to me, why don’t you all head towards the Cross Colosseum? The first match starts in just a little bit. I bet you all didn’t notice the time flying by with all the action going on.” She winked towards the “camera,” much to the confusion of everyone standing nearby that wasn’t local to the Crossroads.

As everyone began to depart towards the Coliseum, Forte turned to his sister. “Well, I’ll continue gathering intelligence from the audience. It’s not oft I pass the leading role upon you, but it is onto you that the spotlight of public perception lays upon you. I entrust it to you with hope you’ll uphold my legacy with the grace with which you fight.”

Piano just gave her brother a nod. “I’ll try to win. There’s already one person I’d prefer to fight. Her talent might be worth it.”

Forte gave a grin. “That’s splendiferous. I’ve got a quarry or two to pursue myself. May we both gain purchase on our objectives.” And with that, the two twins parted ways, independently making their way to the Coliseum with the rest of the throngs of people.

“Goooooooooooood afternoon my darling little kittens!” Miss X’s voice echoed over the various speakers both around the Coliseum itself and the Business District surrounding it. “I can practically feel the energy all over town, all that excitement over the fights tonight! I know some of the fighters couldn’t wait till their official matches to get things rolling, so let’s hurry things along before these guys chomp through their bits!”

There was a large roar of excitement that ripped through the crowd, as the eight fighters were assembled below. As Piano suspected, the speedster from the streets earlier was one of her potential opponents. He gave her a wave, his crooked smile showing he recognized her from earlier.

To her right between her and the speedster was Prince Armius. He gave her a small nod, recognizing her from the bar just moments before. To her left, Angelique was still looking at her, still trying to figure out what Piano had meant earlier. Just beyond Angelique, there was a boy with red skin like her, who seemed to resemble the barkeep Saki from earlier. He wore a white t-shirt and black cargo shorts, and his two horns were shorter than even Piano’s. He was bouncing on his heels, clearly ready for his first round match as he shadowboxed the air.

Just past him, Vilivian stood with her arms crossed. She looked at all of the competitors with her cool gaze, but her eyes locked onto Piano’s with greater interest, the conversation from earlier still echoing in Piano’s head. Past her, the one known as Rum was just standing around, looking at everything with an almost imperious gaze, his tail slowly moving behind him.

Lastly, and most striking of all, was the fighter at the furthest end. He looked like a military man, with his black undercut, tan bomber jacket, and a black pistol at his side. He stood at attention as the audience's eyes were on him... and the large mech behind him. A large machine of steel and firepower, the multiple guns mounted along it certainly made it an intimidating sight and put him in a league of danger along with Vilivian and Prince Armius.

As the fighters all stood at the center, Miss X started going over the rules while Madame Chief sat behind her in a relaxed pose, smoking her opium as she looked down at all of her assembled warriors. “So for these fights, there are two ways to achieve victory.” She materialized a second her that looked evil, with a necklace with a bell around its neck. She quickly reached forward and

snatched the bell from the evil clone, which made exaggerated swinging motions as it's tag was stolen. "The first is to steal your opponent's tag and hold onto it and yours for thirty seconds. Like a nice little game of tag. Only with explosions!"

She then wound up a punch and hit her clone which made a dramatic motion to collapse on the ground. "The other is to knock out your opponent or otherwise render them unable to fight further. This one's pretty exciting for the audience, so we hope you all pick this one the most!"

There was a loud cheer from the audience in agreement, as the evil clone exploded into fireworks, a heart shaped explosion emanating from it. She leaped through the smoke and slid to the front of her platform, fireworks firing off around her as she got into position at the end. "And now let's get our first match going! Quan and Prince Armius, take your place on center stage!"

The two men stepped forward, facing off with each other as the rest started to leave the arena, Pembroke taking the longest since he needed to climb back into his mech, activate it, and maneuver it back into the fighter's waiting room.

"Now keep your eyes quick and ready for this first fighter, or he'll have already stolen the show! Here comes Quan coming in hot! A rough and tumble fighter, he goes to show that when life's got you down, all you gotta do is pick yourself up and work to make it better! Having superspeed to move faster than the eye can see certainly helps with that! Let's hope his opponents can learn to keep up or he'll be running circles around them!"

There was a smattering of applause, as Miss X presented an animation of a man moving lighting fast across the screen, as a picture of Quan took up the screen. The speedster gave the crowd a wave, smiling cheekily as he did.

"And his opponent needs no other introduction that his name, the great Prince Armius Tu El Kaligos, the Strongest Man in the Universe! And that name's no joke either! He's the real deal! Where he's from, every aspect about him seemed almost made to shape the world to his will! Can anyone hope to somehow match and take down this behemoth of a warrior, or will he be able to prove that he's worthy of the title of Strongest Man in the Multiverse while he's at it?"

Lots of ooohs came from the crowd, as the image of the Kaligos family crest was proudly displayed on the screen, followed by Armius' visage gracing the screen. The man himself gave a humble wave as well, before facing his opponent once more.

Miss X gave a hearty cheer of her own, before setting a countdown to display on the screens, around the Coliseum, and in front of each of the fighters. "Now make sure you guys trade a nice, friendly blow to each other to get the match going right after the countdown! Three! Two! One! Fight!"

As the countdown finished, Quan quickly crossed the distance. Armius quickly swung out a punch, meeting Quan's in the middle as their blows clashed. As they did, an unnatural shockwave radiated out as a loud bell sound rang out from the clash, and suddenly their entire surroundings began to shift...

As the first match began with a roaring cheer, most of the other fighters were preparing for their matches in the waiting rooms. Most were alone in private rooms, doing what last minute prep they needed, but Pembroke required a small hanger to prepare his ATG in. As he performed a last minute tune-up on the mech, he heard a small clearing of a feminine throat. Looking away from his work, he would see Piano beginning to approach him.

"Oh, you're that Piano girl, right?" he asked, more confirming it rather than actually seeking information as he got back to work on his machine. "We're on other sides of this bracket, so we won't be seeing each other for a while. So why are you coming to me now?"

Piano looked a little awkward at first, trying to find the words to say. In truth, she didn't really have anything she wanted to say. She was more interested in what he was doing. Mech repair and mech piloting were two skills she didn't possess yet, so she was hoping to catch him doing the former for what little time she had with the monsters that were the first two fighters going at each other.

"Yes, I am. I just..." She thought for a second, biting her lip in thought. "I just wanted to talk to you. Since we don't have to worry about fighting immediately, we can get to know each other a bit before we get matched up?"

"Why would we do that?" Pembroke asked somewhat incredulously, not looking at her still. "A soldier who gets to know his enemy is a soldier that hesitates at the wrong time."

"A soldier, you say?" Piano didn't look surprised. She wasn't that familiar with mechs, since they weren't common yet where she was from. But she could tell that it didn't look like something a civilian could make. It definitely had the look of mil-tech. "So then you were sent into this tournament as part of your duty as a soldier?"

He gave a sigh at that, shaking his head. "No. No I didn't. I'm doing this for my own sake."

"There's nothing wrong with that. Not everyone can do nothing but serve their duty for all of their lives. Having personal aspirations is normal behavior. Especially when one is being offered anything they desire."

"Sure, that's fine when you don't have responsibilities to anyone or anything else." He shot back. "But for those of us who hold the line of duty, this could be seen as pushing my luck. It's just..." He gave a sigh. "There's so much I want to do, but I've had to put my duty first. This is my first time really doing something for myself."

"That's good, isn't it?" Piano said, though she looked pretty guilty herself. She could see lots of similarities between his duty as a soldier and hers as... with what she does with her brother. She'd never had a chance to do anything for fun herself, always putting the needs of survival or her work over her own happiness. "People aren't made just to work. They need recreation to keep themselves sane."

"I suppose that's true," he conceded, "but why do you care? We're possible enemies in the next couple of days."

Piano gave a shrug as there was a loud cheer. "I don't know. Perhaps I'm looking for something myself and was wondering if you could help with that. Maybe we can talk another time to figure it out. But I have a match to make it to, so maybe another time."

And with that, she began to walk away as Miss X announced the winner of the first match, leaving yet another contestant confused by her motivation.

Battle of Darkened Warriors:

“Alright everybody, who thought that last match was super exciting?” There was a loud cheer of agreement. “Madame Chief sure knows how to pick a good start to a match! Now, we’ve got a bit of a calmer one, but I’m sure these two beautiful girls packed a few surprises just for us!”

Standing at the center of the arena was Piano and Angelique, standing apart from each other as they looked at the other with some determination. Piano was starting to focus herself into mission mode, while Angelique was still looking at Piano with suspicion from her comments from earlier.

“For our next match, we’ve got a warrior that looks like she’ll be putting on quite the show for us all! Let’s welcome Piano to the Colosseum! While her looks might be flashy and her personality might be timid, I wouldn’t take my eyes off of her! Otherwise, she’ll have you reeling on the ground faster than the Saki Special on an empty stomach with her martial art moves! Will this Violet warrior have what it takes to bloom on the field of battle, or will she wilt away under the pressure?”

The image of a purple flower began to bloom, revealing Piano’s face as people began to cheer. Piano didn’t even react, her usual timid demeanor being pushed down for her combat demeanor.

“And for her opponent, a regular to tournaments like these worlds over, we have Angelique! An experienced veteran at fighting opponents from all walks of life and forms of existence, her experience and skill are sure to lend themselves well to a bout in our humble Colosseum! Whether through crushing blows or devastating magic, there’s no doubt this silent warrior will prove to us all what it is that keeps people like Madame Chief clamoring for more from her!”

There was a passage of shadows across the screen, before Angelique’s face peered out from the darkness as people cheered for her. She tried to keep small, not wanting too much attention on herself as she steeled herself for the first round of yet another tournament for her.

“Now, onto the main event! Fighters, ready yourselves!” The countdowns appeared again, the audience priming themselves to count down with it. “Three! Two! One! Fight!”

Both women ran forward at roughly the same speed, meeting in the middle of the circular arena. Both planted one foot and spun around into back kicks, both of their legs meeting up high. As they clashed, the same strange shockwave and the ring of a bell chimed out as the environment went

into a metamorphosis

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The ground beneath them became soft and muddy, pockets of water beginning to form around them. Dark trees encroached above them, darkening their surroundings even more as a slight fog began to settle over the arena.

“Looks like we’re going to a dank, dark swamp everyone! Hopefully we all brought our bug spray to keep away any nasty mosquitos!” Miss X commentated, the holographic woman not being in any danger of that.

The two women split apart for a moment to assess their situation, adjusting themselves to the softer ground. But that time was plenty for Piano, as she suddenly broke off her heels. As Angelique looked over just in time to see lilac projectiles hurtling towards her. She managed to block both of them, kicking one away and dodging out of the way of the other.

But as she went to look for her opponent, Piano was no longer in front of her. Looking around, she suddenly took a punch to the face as Piano snuck up the side to strike her.

“Ooooh, hidden weapons in the shoes! Piano knows how to turn any part of a women’s wardrobe into a weapon! Talk about femme fatale!”

As Angelique recovered, she threw a kick out towards Piano, who easily matched the kick with one of her own. The two women exchanged a series of kicks, each one switching back and forth between legs with ease with each blow. Piano was utilizing kickboxing techniques from multiple styles to change up her angles, forcing Angelique to try and counter as she kept switching things up.

“We’ve got a mirror match folks! And what a reflection it is! I don’t want to look away, and I’m sure none of you guys do either!”

But despite Miss X's words, it wasn't quite the mirror match it seemed to be. With each blow they exchanged, Piano's strength proved to be just a bit stronger, pushing Angelique's leg just a bit aside with each one and recovering her attack just a bit faster. After one particularly strong kick, Piano managed to transition from a back kick into a full body spin and a haymaker across the former royalty's face. She swayed back and forth into a rolling combination of punches, getting a few good hits in before Angelique could start blocking. The moment she crossed her arms to provide herself some safety, Piano gave a straight kick that pushed Angelique against a tree.

At this point, it was obvious that Piano was the physically stronger warrior. If the fight continues as it does, there's no way Angelique would win. She would need to switch up how the fight is going if she wanted to win. She lowered her arms to begin taking on the lilac shadow... only to find herself alone.

"Uh oh! Looks like our flashy friend is really good at hiding! Guess the mind games begin now! Look out in every shadow for devil bloods!"

Piano, rather than lying in wait to attack, was instead running from the middle towards where she remembered one of the exits was when the arena was normal. She had a few things she wanted to test when it came to the arena for future rounds. And if it made Angelique more stressed or angry doing so, it'll make fighting her easier. After all, Piano could sense her ki from any point in the arena, so approaching would be easy.

After a couple seconds of running, she reached an invisible wall. 'So, the arena stays the same diameter, thirty meters to any side from the center it looks like. Now to test this wall.' She stepped back, and gave the wall a kick. There was a soft ringing of bells, the solid impact of the invisible wall taking her kick with ease. 'Pretty solid, but could break with some force. Let's see if it changes in strength on the part that should be a solid wall'

She walked about a meter to the left, where she figured it would be a wall again and gave another kick. There was another ringing of bells, though this one was much softer in volume. Which confirmed to Piano that there was a difference in the strength of the walls. 'It's like they want us to fight out of the arena at some point...'

"Looks like Piano is testing out her new fighting space! Smart, but she's given her opponent too much time and her location! Watch out, danger!"

“Take aim, my shadow archers!” The incantation of Angelique began to emanate from the mists of the swamp. “Notch the might of darkness for your target is in sight!”

For a moment, there was silence once more, then suddenly the area around Piano was bombarded with sharp knives and arrows made of pure shadow. Piano quickly drew a pair of throwing knives and deflected some of them as she dove behind some cover. The bark of the trees were being torn off, limbs being severed and ripped asunder by the barrage of projectiles as the wall behind Piano began to ring with the sounds of bells going off repeatedly from the impacts.

Normally, her opponent switching from blunt force to sharp implements was of benefit to Piano, but with the distance between them, it would be ineffective to start bleeding now. She’d have to get close again if she wanted to damage again.

As the storm of blades finally dissipated, Piano rushed out of her hiding place and closed in on Angelique. If she had to chant to use magic, then all the devil blood had to do was stick close and give her no chance to chant anymore. Within a second, the blonde was in sight and Piano prepared to attack. But with a wave of Angelique’s hand, a tendril of shadow erupted from a nearby tree and struck the martial artist in the shoulder.

Piano whirled away, unable to toughen her skin from the unexpected blow as she quickly tried to recover as Angelique closed once more. Piano quickly lashed out with a back kick to meet Angelique’s front kick. At the last second, Piano noticed the purplish energy surrounding her opponent's foot, giving her just enough time to brace for her mistake as their feet met. With an overwhelming force as gravity suddenly shifted itself to her opponent’s whims, Piano’s kick was blasted through and the thin red girl was sent spiraling into the swamp, tumbling on the ground with the ringing of her coattail bells as she did her best to protect her head and horns.

“Piano may have been winning earlier in the physical department, but now magic’s on the field! And with all this swamp, she’s got enough mana to blast away to her heart’s content! Looks like the magician is putting on quite a show with her new assistant!”

Angelique chased after her opponent, who suddenly leaped from the ground onto a nearby tree, before springing forward back towards the foe who sent her flying. But as she charged forward, Piano swung her arm, sending three steel projectiles towards her now surprised opponent. With a swipe of her arm, Angelique sent another tendril to deflect the three projectiles, only to be met with a fist to the face as Piano closed in during the opening to get a punch in.

Now Angelique was sent rolling as Piano quickly went to hide once more. Direct confrontation was no longer an option, as Angelique's magic was both versatile and powerful. 'Looks like she uses shadow magic.' Piano began to break down her opponent's magic. 'And it looks like on her world, shadow and gravity are intrinsically linked. So she now has power, range, and options on her side. I'll have to be careful how I-'

Her train of thought was interrupted by the sight of a small bubble floating to her right, as deep a purple as her natural eye color. Her eyes widening, Piano quickly ducked and scrambled out of the way as the bubble touched the tree where she was. With a sound like a shotgun blast, part of the tree's trunk was blown off, sap oozing from the gaping hole in the tree.

Piano quickly rose up, only to see two more bubbles making their way towards her as she heard a pair of other blasts from different directions. She could try to avoid them, but she had a feeling Angelique would just keep sending them until they either hit or she learned Piano's location. So instead, she drew two throwing knives and flung them at the bubbles, popping them from a safe distance as two explosions erupted back to back in the middle of the air. The knives were bent, rendered useless from the strength of the bubbles.

"Looks like Angelique was holding a bubble blowing party with nitroglycerin in the bubble formula! Too bad Piano keeps popping them with those sharp knives of hers!"

Angelique soon came to investigate the rapidfire popping, and was met with Piano rushing her once more. Both women started clashing with kicks, though now with the knowledge that at any point, the magic user could enhance her blows to get the win. She was, in fact, giving herself a bit to cooldown after using so much magic back to back, welcoming the physical match for a bit. But any moment, before Piano fully overpowered her again, she would use another gravity kick to set up her next move to finish off the devil blood.

But Piano didn't let it go that far. After a few blows, Piano drew a pair of red throwing knives, different from the purely steel ones she had thrown earlier. At this range, there was no time for magic, so Angelique had to block with her arms. As the blades grazed her arms, there was a soft hissing noise as something about the weapons began to burn away at her clothes and some of her arms.

"A close range blade attack! Wait, what's this? Something's happening to Angelique where they hit! Looks like Piano's blades have got an extra nasty surprise on them!"

Angelique, put off slightly, quickly prepared another gravity enhanced kick to create some distance to think. But this time, Piano dodged the blow, catching the leg with one arm. Holding her securely in place, Piano then swept up the veteran tournament fighter's other leg and caught it too, holding her in perfect hammer throwing position. Piano began to spin in a circle, disorienting Angelique with the centrifugal force before flinging her into one of the thinner trees.

The impact looked painful, as Angelique was slammed in the center of her back into the tree. As she opened her mouth to let out a small scream of pain, Piano suddenly closed in and slammed her open palm into her opponent's diaphragm, muting the scream into a painful exhale as all the air was driven out of her. Piano let Angelique hit the ground gasping for breath, then kicked her in the stomach to send her flying a bit away.

"Looks like Piano's got the upper hand again and she's getting brutal with it! Looks like she wants to end it before Angelique can use her bigger spells to really get the win here!" The audience gave oohs of sympathy for Angelique as Piano hit her opponent hard.

Piano moved forward to try and finish the fight, but a shadow tendril wrapping around her ankle put a stop to that real quick. With a quick whipping motion, Piano was flung away from Angelique, hurtling towards a tree some distance away. Piano couldn't recover control before she hit, so she figured out where she was going to be hit. Manipulating the ki in her body, she toughened the skin and muscle around her chest and arms, crossing the latter over the former as she suddenly made impact. It still hurt, but it was nowhere near as damaging than if she had just taken the hit. But as she went to stand up...

"Sdoulc fo dica, dnecsed! Nrub yawa hself dna enob ekila litnu enon sdnats ni ruoy yaw!"

Between Piano and Angelique, a cloud of green suddenly began to form. In an instant, all the grass and trees in the area began to corrode away, until there was nothing left of them as the caustic cloud burned away all within its touch. It then began to slowly roll in the direction of Piano, who was forced to beat a hasty retreat.

“Madame Chief! It looks like someone’s pissed! A cloud of acid is filling the arena, burning away all those good, solid, oxygen producing trees! What’d they ever do to you, Angelique, besides hit you just now? The barrier Madame Chief put up should protect all of us, but in any case, it looks like Piano’s in a really dangerous situation!” The whole audience gave a gasp at the cloud of acid, some people in the front row still fleeing higher as a safety precaution to ensure they didn’t get hit.

Piano ran in the opposite direction of the cloud as quickly as possible, though she quickly ran into an issue: the edge of the arena. Despite looking like a swamp, they were still in the Cross Colosseum, and she just hit where the wall was. She knew there was no way she could break through it before the cloud reached her, and she doubted even with her blood, she’d survive direct contact with the caustic barrage. As her options slowly dwindled, she began to breathe very quickly, as if she was beginning to hyperventilate as...

After about a minute of having the Caustic Cloud spell up, Angelique dispelled it before the wind could pick up and carry it back towards her. Where once there were plants and wildlife in half of the arena, there was now nothing but mud and water, all living things in its path were completely wiped out. She had heard the sounds of bells ringing, surely from her opponent trying to escape, but those had stopped halfway through, which was a good sign for Angelique.

“That should’ve taken care of her, right?” Angelique asked out loud, visibly frustrated and angry. She had pushed herself near her limit, and she was getting tired and frustrated. She didn’t think her first opponent would push her as far as she did, and she wasn’t looking forward to dealing with the others.

“HMMMMMMMMMMMMMM.” Miss X gave a loud hum, looking at Madame Chief. The regal goddess, flanked by her five Crossguards, merely gave a coy shake of her head, laughing to herself with her pipe. Miss X turned back towards the “camera.” “Sorry, but it looks like your opponent’s still kicking! Guess you’ll have to find her and knock her out or take her tag!”

“Are you kidding me?” Angelique roared with frustration. “There’s no way she survived that! Just let me go and I’ll-”

Her tirade was interrupted by the sound of a bell ringing off to her left. Her head whipped over, to the section of the arena where the treeline still existed. Did she really manage to...?

“Alright, let’s get this over with!” she roared, racing over to where she heard the noise. As she passed by one of the ponds, a hand suddenly grabbed hold of her ankle. Before she could even comprehend what happened, she was suddenly dragged under the water.

When she could see again, she saw a horrific scenario: she was now underwater with Piano above her holding her down beneath the surface. Of course Piano escaped the spell by going underwater, it was the only possible explanation. But surely she must be running low on oxygen right? It would have to be a breath holding contest, though the punches Piano was raining down made that difficult despite their weakened force underwater.

In truth, Piano had prepared her lungs to hold her breath for as long as possible. She couldn’t set up all the way, so she only got a little over forty minutes of air in her lungs before she dived under the water. She thought the spell would last longer than it did, but when Angelique ended it early, she knew what she had to do. This method would both put the battle into an endurance race that Piano easily won and render Angelique’s magic unavailable.

“An underwater battle! This fight has everything! Let’s see who can hold their breath longer! Though it looks like Angelique is already beginning to struggle!”

Sure enough, Angelique was already starting to run out of air, while Piano was still taking control, starting to wrap her hands right around the magic user's neck to speed up the process. Panic began to set in as oxygen levels were getting low. 'No! I'm not going to lose this early! I can't lose like this again!'

Getting her foot under Piano's stomach, gathering as much mana as possible. Powering the strongest gravity spell she could, she shoved up with immense force, blowing both Piano and almost half the water out of the pond, the ground appearing dry now as the devil blood was sent sky high with a gasp of pain. A good portion of the excess moisture was even blasted off of her from the force, her damp clothes flapping in the wind as she reached the apex of her launch.

"Hrrraaaagggggghhhhhhhh!" With a roar of anger as she regained her breath, she used one more gravity spell to hurtle Piano down to the mud, the red skinned woman bouncing from the force of impact with a low thud before slamming back onto the ground as the gravity spell forced her back down. A trickle of black blood began to trickle down from the top of her head, a good portion of her body now bruised and injured as she lay unmoving for the moment.

"What a turnaround! She sent Piano flying high like a firework, only to slam her down like a meteor back down to earth! Will that be enough to finish off this intense battle?" The audience was beside itself in excitement, people screaming like mad at the exciting turn of events.

Angelique did not seem to think so. As she stumbled out of the now half empty pond, she made her way over to Piano's prone form. Standing next to her head, Angelique put a gravity spell on Piano one last time as she lifted up her foot. This is the end...

Piano's golden eye suddenly shot open, shooting up just as Angelique's foot slammed where her head was. Standing up on her hands even against the force of the gravity, the lilac clad woman gave a kick to the black clad woman's face with a blow that was much harder than any that had come before. As they both got back onto their feet, it was clear something was different with Piano.

She had been lucky to toughen her body at the last moment before she slammed into the ground, which was the only reason she was still conscious. But she was fast burning through her stamina, so she couldn't take anymore damage like that. And she hadn't achieved her objective, so she had to go on the offensive. Getting her blood pumping through her body at a much faster speed, doping up her body to act at a much faster rate was her last resort to win. Piano's skin was now darker

from the increased blood flow, her veins bulging on her skin as they worked much harder than they usually did. A blood vessel on her forehead also pulsed, her eyes looking bloodshot with black veins as she got into a fighting stance.

Angelique, meanwhile, had already pushed her mana to its limit. She needed time to recover, so she'd have to fight kick to kick with Piano. But the moment she moved forward to attack, Piano had already reached her, slamming a fist into her chest, before kicking her side and sending Angelique stumbling away.

"Uh oh! Looks like Angelique is looking tuckered out, while Piano's putting on a desperate last push! Who's gonna run out of steam first? It's all coming down to the wire! I can barely keep on my stage with all this excitement!" The audience was completely silent at this point, everyone at the edge of their seats as they watched closely to see who would come out on top.

Piano comboed attack after attack on Angelique, her power and speed much faster than she had shown throughout the whole fight thus far as her opponent was put fully on the defensive. But the wound on her head was bleeding quickly, and she could feel her heart and lungs tightening from the intense strain doping her blood put on them.

'Come on! Come on! Show me what I need!' Piano begged in her mind, punches and kicks coming out faster and faster. At last, Angelique lifted both of her arms to block. But this time, she angled her block to ensure she covered both her head and chest, having learned from Piano's blows earlier in the match. 'There! Objective complete!'

Drawing a throwing knife while she faked another punch, she barely grazed Angelique's arms as Piano placed the knife on her forearm. Her pronounced veins made it easier for her to surgically slice open her vein and aim her pressurized blood.

Nearly a liter of black blood shot out of her arm as an intense spray that completely splattered both of Angelique's arms, her sleeves already being corrupted into nothing. At this point, Piano was pushed to the edge of her endurance, but as long as she held out for just a few more seconds, she could win. As the blood soaked into the metal of Angelique's arms, they began to sizzle and smoke, the connections keeping the arms together beginning to fall apart as they were being corrupted and damaged.

“What’s going on?” Miss X was beside herself, as was the audience as they all screamed in horror or excitement at the gout of blood. “Piano’s arm sprayed blood like a fire hose! And what’s this? Angelique’s arms are made of metal? And they’re beginning to melt? Who knew Piano had acid blood in her? I guess Madame Chief invited a xenomorph into this year’s tournament!”

Piano charged forward while Angelique looked confused at what was going on. She attempted to summon shadows to save her, but Piano was too fast, planting in front of her opponent and spinning around into a back kick directly onto Angelique’s arms. Both limbs shattered from the impact, scattering into pieces around the veteran tournament fighter as she was slammed into a tree. As she slid down into the pile of scraps that were her arms, Piano made her approach towards her fallen opponent.

The blood vessels throughout her body began to calm down, the skin lightening up slowly as the veins stopped bulging as Piano got close enough. Angelique looked rather disturbed at the whole turn of events. As she looked down at where her arms were, her damp blonde hair covering her face, she let out a noise of sorrow and anger. “It’s really not fair.” She said in a low voice. “You’re strong, you’re pretty, and you’re confident to wear stuff like that. We couldn’t be any more different. I guess I’m just a broken girl after all.”

Piano hesitated with her hand hovering near Angelique’s neck for a moment. “That’s not entirely true. I can’t tell you how to make yourself confident to do what you want. That strength is for you to find. And I don’t think you could’ve ever found it here.” And with that, she reached forward and took off the tag. “Just sit there and let the match end. I don’t want to hurt you anymore than I have, physically or emotionally.”

“And Piano has taken Angelique’s tag! Let the countdown begin!”

As both women in the arena stared at each other, one with a look of defeat and one with a solemn, but somewhat comforting smile, they both listened as the audience and Miss X counted down till victory. Madame Chief simply looked down at the proceedings with an amused smile on her face, already giving a light clap even before the countdown ended and fireworks began to erupt as the arena returned to normal, all of the damage to the swamp vanishing as bells rang once more.

“And there you have it folks! The winner of the second match of round one, after one of the most intense mirror matches I’ve ever seen, is none other than Piano! Be sure to give her a Crossroad’s Cheer as she moves on to round two to face the previous match’s winner!”

As the crowd began to cheer, Piano walked around and picked up all of her weapons. After putting the heels in her shoes back on, she walked forward and bent down to Angelique as the latter looked confused, before picking her up in a fireman’s carry.

“Hey!” the woman complained, trying to look over her shoulder at Piano. “I already lost, you don’t have to embarrass me anymore! What do you think you’re doing?”

Piano gave a shrug as she began walking out of the arena to the applause of the audience, noticing Vivi’s ki beginning to go to meet them at the exit. “Well, you need new arms after I broke yours, right? There’s a blacksmith that can handle that for you in town. And besides,” she adjusted her grip of Angelique on her shoulder, “I heard from my brother you don’t like being treated like a princess. So this was the only thing I could think of.”

As Angelique looked mighty embarrassed by the whole affair, Piano couldn’t help but feel a little guilty. After all, from the moment she had noticed the arms, she had instantly thought of the ever grouchy blacksmith Nephro she had met the other day. She had known he could build prosthetics, such as his own, and that was a skill she highly sought after. But he wouldn’t show her his skill just on its own. He kept turning her away, saying he didn’t have time for apprentices and would rather deal with actual paying customers if he had to deal with other people. But if she brought someone who needed a new pair of arms...

As Piano began to exit through the doors to acquire a new talent with Angelique’s unwitting aid, Madame Chief watched the two leave with a smirk of satisfaction. Her eyes twinkled with mirth as the tail on Angelique slowly began to fade, and a second tail grew on Piano as the tails on each of the God Eater’s side seemed to “blink” in response.

“My my, that was a rather amusing match to say the least~” The Madame commented to her guards, the six of them all standing at attention near her. “I look forward to seeing how the rest of this tournament proceeds~ And to see which wish I get to fulfill~”

As she spoke, the Crossguards all were busy dealing with a crisis, as there were only supposed to be five guards guarding the God Eater at this time. But they seemed to have an extra for some reason. But they knew not to interrupt the Madame Chief while she was being amused, so they stood at attention and waited to deal with it later.

Meanwhile, the disguised imposter did all he could to contain his own smirk, glad that his sister's match proved to be a big enough distraction to allow him to infiltrate the God Eater's personal guard. The next steps in their plans could continue without a hitch, as the next two days were sure to prove to be an exciting affair...

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