

# [Piano & Forte] Round 2: Violet Winds

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## Dance of the Fox and Snake:

“And that was our last fight of the day folks!” Miss X’s cheery voice rang out over the speakers, drawing some boos from the audience as they were disappointed that the fights were over. “Settle down, settle down everyone! After all those intense matches, our fighters need a little cat nap to recharge perky and ready for tomorrow’s fight! And plus, now that you’ve seen some of their stuff, you can go buy their merch at one of the many stores in the business district to show support for your favorite fighter! Twenty percent of all proceeds go towards the Rescue Fox Foundation, so that no fox goes unfed!”

There was a mixed applause at that as people began to stand up and leave, talking about the day’s matches. While they were used to some of the fights being brutal in the past, most had seemed to underestimate this year’s fighters, thinking all of them were looking softer than previous years. But after the first couple matches, the crowd’s lust for blood had been more than sated, and the latter half also kept it up. Many who hadn’t picked their favorites that morning were now more sure of which fighters remaining they would root for.

“Alright my kittens, good night! Sweet dreams! I love each and every last one of you! Hearts for all of you!” Miss X gave a cheery wave, before fading from view. At the same time, the curtain to the God Eater’s private booth was drawn to a close, the snow haired goddess giving a look down at the audience below with great amusement as her view faded.

As the room darkened from the lack of natural light coming in, Miss X reappeared with a wave, approaching the goddess. “That was such a good group of matches, Mom! All of them were absolutely amazing! I can’t wait for tomorrow’s matches!”

The God Eater gave an amused chuckle at that, giving a languished wave at her holographic daughter. "I'm glad you're having so much fun~ You did such a wonderful job entertaining the audience today, as you always do~ Maybe I should give you a bigger allowance as a reward for your hard work~"

Miss X laughed at that, going to elbow her mom as her limb phased through the God Eater. "Yeah right, like that's going to happen! We both know you'd want to spend all that money on more bo-

The white haired fox simply raised a finger up to Miss X's lip, silencing her in an instant as the announcer looked confused. The kitsune goddess merely waved six tails, causing the hologram to examine the guards in the room carefully. Seeing the problem, she nodded her head in understanding.

"Well, I believe today's been exciting enough for me~ I think I'll go rest in my room~ You four," The God Eater pointed to four of the Crossguards in the room, who all stood at attention for her command, "you all gather the palanquin and bring it to the Fox's Den, as usual~ You two will come with me~ Daughter, I take it you'll ride on the palanquin back home and say hi to all your adoring fans~"

"Of course Mom! Operation Placating Palanquin is a go!" Miss X then disappeared in a cloud of pink hearts, presumably waiting below for the four Crossguards who likewise made their exit. The God Eater then turned to the last two guards in front of the sliding door at the back of the VIP room.

"Now then, shall we retire in my suite?~ Kindly get the door for me, would you boys?~" She gave them a languid smile, as the two guards reached for the edge of the door. As their hands touched the slight opening simultaneously, the sounds of bells filled the room. When the doors were opened, a luxurious suite appeared before them in an impossible location, since the only thing that should've been on the other side of this door was the opening towards the arena.

The bed was made with soft linens, with several sets of large, fluffy pillows like curled tails curving from the head around the sides. A large gathering of pillows sat right in the center of the crook of

tails, looking perfect for a goddess to lounge comfortably upon. There were several other large pillows scattered around the room to lounge in, all with a perfect view of one of the many windows that looked out towards the four corners of the Crossroads. As the sun was beginning to set outside, it cast the whole room in a brilliant orange light, coloring the various amounts of white and darkening the red as the God Eater entered her abode with her two Crossguards.

She sat down on one of the large cushions sitting near a small kotatsu, a bottle of sake and a pitcher of water already waiting for her there along with two small cups. She gestured to one of the guards, signaling him to come forward and pour her a drink. As she did, the other Crossguard gave the indicated one a look that was hard to read through the blindfold, but the body tension indicated some hostility as he then bowed and stepped out of the room.

With just the two of them alone in the room, the Crossguard grabbed the bottle of sake and poured one of the ceramic cups full for her, being rewarded with a soft chuckle of amusement as she gestured for the guard to sit. "Please, have a seat for a bit~ I know you were standing around for quite a bit today~"

"... And what, pray tell, gave up my ruse?" The "Crossguard" asked, lifting up a blindfold to reveal a golden iris looking back into her golden ones as she gave him a knowing smile. She watched as his features shifted from a more generic humanoid into the familiar figure of Forte, his tail seeming to reappear in the gap in the Crossguard pants as it curled behind him with some amusement, before moving out of the way so he could sit. The God Eater's own tails swished behind her, the eyes on them almost seeming to look down on him when she no longer could, given his taller stature. All the eye iconography was certainly making him wonder if she could see through all of the eye motifs throughout the town, which would make his work much harder. "I had imagined that my visage was impregnable to scrutiny and my thoughts masqueraded perfectly. I did not think there was a singular flaw in my trick for you to exploit."

"Nothing silly like that~ I simply know all of my Crossguards very well, from their names and personality, to their family life and hidden desires~" She explained, pointing one of her tails towards the door. "For example, the man that just walked outside has a daughter with an interest in mechanics~ He's hoping working will give him enough money to get her through school~ So the moment I didn't recognize you, I was interested to see who you really were and what you wanted with someone like me~"

"'Someone like me?' What curious phrasing indeed." Forte mused, leaning into his seat as he watched her take another sip of sake. "I would not expect such humility from the goddess of the

Crossroads, a multiversal hub of travelers and those of great power. Someone who can maintain order and guidance for those beneath you cannot truly feel fit to have such humility and submissiveness about her position. Nay, I would expect one in such a position to be more regal and prominent.” He gave her a flattering smile, as she started waving it away.

“Me?~ All of that?~ That’s not possible~ I’m just a little fox that likes to have a little fun that everyone’s making a bigger deal about than needed~ Keep putting all these expectations on me and you’ll make me blush~” She laughed at that, refilling her cup with sake as Forte drew out his notebook. His wooden pen was in his hand, the golden eyes of Madame Chief following it as he spun it in his hand before putting pen to paper.

“And yet here you preside, the hostess of a cross-dimensional tourney of powerful warriors that you’ve managed to collect with the promises of a wish beyond imagining and yet you dare say you are not worthy of regard? Surely you see the folly in that?” Forte challenged her with an inquiring look, while she merely shrugged it away.

“I just give people what they want~ Just like you sister, Forte~ I’m sure there’s something she’s looking for by coming here, don’t you think?~”

Forte looked somewhat surprised for a moment, before quickly recovering. “I’ll pray leave the manner of your intentions for inviting my sister to your tourney for a moment. What sorcery did you utilize to acquire knowledge of my name without my granting it to you, either via verbal audition or mentally thievery?”

The God Eater gave him a wink, swirling her alcohol in the small cup in her hand. “I know the names of every person within my domain~ I hope you don’t mind me knowing that~”

“As it happens, I have a preference for giving myself a proper introduction. But I suppose for one of your position, you had no ken of such a restriction, so I shall provide you some grace in this instance. But mayhaps in return, I can receive some small manner of recompense.” He gave her a sly grin, which she matched in kind.

“Oh really?~ And you don’t think getting to talk to me alone is a good enough apology?~” She gave a chuckle. “I’m even offering you some of Saki’s best~”

“Are you implying that what the bartender uses below to cater to her clients is not her most refined potables? That she serves second rated brews to those that grace her with coin?”

His teasing was met with an amused chuckle from the goddess, who didn’t take his bait. “You’re avoiding my question from earlier~ Why did your sister want to get a wish from me?~ What could she possibly want that her brother couldn’t get for her?~”

Forte gave an expression of annoyance, but inside he was practically leaping for joy. He had successfully ensnared her in his conversation. Just a little while longer and his fangs would be ready to bare themselves towards a goddess and he could ascend to greater challenges. It took some effort to keep his expression from showing too much of his inner thrill as he responded, “While my sister and I are but one soul divided among two vessels, that does not grant me a greater insight into her inner motives than anyone else can hope to glean. You’ll have to seek that answer for yourself when she comes to you to have her desire granted.”

“Confident she can win, are you?~” The God Eater mused, her tails swishing behind her one at a time with amusement. “She’s got some tough opponents ahead of her to beat if she wants to get her wish~ Maybe you should try and wish her some luck~”

Forte gave her a wry grin, leaning back into the cushion behind him, his tail flicking to his side. “I have little need for such advantages. My sister has proven herself martially again and again in our travels. I only pray that she doesn’t feel too guilty at bringing harm to her opponents to surpass their threats. She is a sensitive soul, you know, and such harsh actions take a considerable toll on her psyche.”

“I see~ Well, Saki has plenty of alcohol to numb the pain if she needs it~” Madame Chief gave a laugh, taking another drink of said alcohol as she got more comfortable in her cushion, seeming to lower her guard around him.

Forte grinned to himself, writing down something in his notebook. "Unfortunately for her constitution, she's developed a strong tolerance for any foreign substances that attempt to influence her bodily functions or mental faculties, so imbibing of spirits is a trial truly too difficult for her to overcome."

"Oh?~ Well that's a real shame~ I would've loved to see what she looked like wasted~ Maybe I'll ask Saki to look into making something strong enough to get even Piano drunk~" She gave an almost evil sounding chuckle at that.

"And what intentions do you have with my sister? Needs I keep my gaze upon you to make sure you have no ill acts to direct towards my sister?" He teased the goddess, raising a suspicious eyebrow at that.

"Oh, you don't have to worry about what I'm going to do~ But after today's matches, there's going to be lots of merchandise and other memorabilia of your sister and the other contestants~ You'll need to keep your eyes on all the men buying stuff of your sister~"

"I have a keen eye for men of that baseborn caliber. They shall not even get within the same locality of my sister's presence." Forte gave an almost smug look at that, straightening up proudly as he did so. "And if they did, I'm sure what blackguards managed to make their way towards her would quickly regret such a chance misfortune."

"Is that so?~" The God Eater seemed amused at that as well. "Maybe I should direct some people her way to see how she deals with them~"

"Don't force my hand against you either, Miss God Eater." Forte teased, before seeming to "realize" something. "But I am afeared we have strayed towards topics that are otherwise ill-needed. Mayhaps we should bring this little interview to a close. And to draw these curtains hence, I suppose I should ask for a proper name to put down for your entry, if you would be so kind?"

Forte's grin externally was friendly and conversational, but internally, there was a wicked amount of pleasure at what he was about to steal from her. His wand was in his hand, ready to take down her name as she looked at him with slightly pursed lips, as if thinking about her answer.

“Hmmm~ Well, if you have to write down a name, the God Eater should work~”

Forte gave her a long look, his grin plastered on his face before he wrote in his book. But as he finished writing the name down, his golden eye seemed to dull slightly, losing some of its glimmer as he looked back up at her. His tail froze in place at his side, anger welling up inside of him at having been tricked at the name. He went to open his mouth, though not even he was sure what he wanted to say right now.

But at that moment, the sliding door reopened and two Crossguards entered the room. One of them pointed a syringe gun towards Forte, the loaded syringe dripping with tranquilizer as the writer looked his way as he composed himself once more. “Intruder, the Madame might have allowed you to enter her room with her, but now I must ask you to leave. Immediately.”

Forte looked at the man with a long look, as if wanting to object. But then he looked behind the threatening Crossguard to the three behind him, and merely shut his notebook, shaking his head. “I shall permit this abrupt departure for the time being. But I little doubt this little interview between us has ceased but for the shallowest of descents of Time’s sands. We shall have to reconvene, mayhaps after my sisters success is assured for all to bare witness to?”

“Maybe~ We’ll have to see~” Was all the response Forte got, which he seemed to accept. He strode forward between all the Crossguards, who watched him carefully as he left, before looking at their goddess. She merely took a sip of saki as the elevator doors opened and closed, sending its lone passenger back down towards the Fox’s Den below as Miss X appeared in the room now.

“I wonder what was up with him?” Miss X asked, tilting her head as a number of question marks floated around her. “Isn’t he Piano’s brother? He seems to be following you around like the woman that’s with Taleus in the other tournament. They both even disguised themselves as Crossguards. The similarities are almost spooky!”

“Popularity is certainly a curse, isn’t it?~” Madame Chief giggled, as she began to shift her form from her goddess form to her more casual Chifu guise. She then turned to the Crossguard with the syringe gun, the yellow skinned humanoid putting away his weapon as his antennae twitched. “And what made you all run in like that?~ Did you sense something up with him?~”

“I sensed a great surging of anger, along with the feeling of a wounded pride.” The man said calmly, the empath bowing his head as he spoke. “While I’m sure he couldn’t hurt you seriously, we felt it was best to keep the competitor’s brother from doing anything rash to avoid disrupting the tournament.”

“And that’s why we employ you~” Chifu complimented, reaching up to rub his antennae. This caused the Crossguard to blush, before walking away to take a stiff stance to continue his guard duty. “Well, if we’re worried about what he wants, I’ll try to figure it out tonight~ I’m sure I’ll be having some interesting drinking partners tonight~”

Miss X just giggled as well, looking at Chifu. “Well then, I’m going to have to keep an eye on things too!” Both women looked at each other with a grin, knowing that tonight was going to be an interesting one.

## Mounting Pressure:

“Ok, now I just need you to flex your elbow at first. Start from there, then we’ll go to the wrist and then the fingers.”

Nephro, the local blacksmithing expert, currently had Angelique sat in a seat in the back room of his shop, a new pair of prosthetic arms attached to her as the mechanical prodigy tested the connection with the blonde magic user before sending her off. In the corner of the room, Piano sat watching, her golden eye seeming to glitter with a mysterious light as she watched the proceedings.

She had brought her opponent to this place partially to assuage her feelings of guilt at having broken Angelique’s metal arms, and also as a method of finally getting Nephro’s prosthetics-making talent. It had taken quite a bit of convincing on her part to convince both Nephro to let her watch and Vivi not to smash her face into the wall for what she did to the demon girl’s friend. But eventually she was allowed to do her job and she successfully pulled off her theft. Now all she had to do was find the perfect time to make her leave without causing a scene and she would’ve done a perfect job.

Angelique flexed her fingers, the former princess having been silent nearly the whole time Nephro worked. Once he gave her the green light that her arms were working fine using his machines and knowledge, she walked over to where Piano sat. The devil blood looked up at the blonde, which gave the latter the perfect opening to grab a hold of her neck. Piano did nothing to fight the grab, trying to remain calm as Nephro gave a cry of protest.

“You have no idea what it is you did to me today.” Angelique stated coldly, looking Piano in the eyes as she lifted the latter onto her feet. “The memories you forced me to relive. Another pointless tournament where I’m left lying on the ground, armless and broken. And for what? You don’t even know what you want, yet you’re willing to go so far as to destroy my arms? What are you hoping to get by doing all this?”

Piano stayed silent for a while, the glimmer in her eyes now gone as regret was clear on her face. Vivi stuck her head in at this point, looking at the two women while Nephro huffed with annoyance at the distraction. Finally, Piano gave an answer in a quiet voice. “I thought based on how well you fought around your arms, I thought you had that wound for a while. I didn’t realize it was so fresh for you, nor that it was so deeply rooted. If I had, I would’ve looked for another way. I didn’t intend to hurt you, I was just trying to ensure the fight ended as quickly as possible, and that was the only way I could see without drawing my sword. All I can ask for is your forgiveness.”

“My forgiveness?” Angelique asked in a dangerously low voice. “You think you can just blow off my arms like it’s nothing and then turn around and ask for forgiveness? You’re going to have to do a little more than that.” She let go of the thin martial artist’s neck, Piano instantly recovering having made sure to hold her breath before being grabbed.

The moment she was free to act, she let Angelique back up, before the young devil blood went on her hands and knees, bowing before a now surprised Angelique. “Of course. Words can only do so much. And while I can’t offer to give you my wish, this is the only thing I can think of to show my sincerity in wanting your forgiveness. I’m not asking you to be my friend or anything, but all I ask is that you don’t treat me as an enemy for what I did to you. Could you find it in your heart to do so?”

Angelique took a step back, as if unsure how to react to this. She looked to Vivi, who only shrugged to show that it was all up to Angelique how to respond. Eventually, she gave a slightly annoyed huff and responded with an equal measure of annoyance. “Have you no shame? Or did you lose it all so you could dress like that?”

Piano was sort of glad this position made it impossible to see her face, for she looked plenty embarrassed at Angelique’s words. “I don’t know what my clothes have to do with this, but I feel plenty of shame. I just don’t think it should stop me from doing what needs to be done in situations like this.”

Angelique just rubbed the back of her head with her new hand, before putting her hood back on to hide her expression. “Just stand up already, would you? And if your annoying thesaurus of a brother waiting outside to ambush again? Should I send Vivi outside first to send him running?”

Piano stood up quickly at that, brushing off her dirty, damaged, and somewhat bloodstained clothes as she straightened herself up. “No, I think he said he had other work to do. He should be busy with that for most of today, so he can’t talk to you anymore today.”

“Lucky me. Well Vivi, let’s go back to our room. I think I just want to take a nap until our boat comes to pick us up.” Angelique brusquely strode out the door with but a moment’s wave to the two remaining occupants of the room.

Viola looked back towards her retreating friend, looking worried but slightly relieved, before giving the two in the room a wave of her own as friendly as she could manage. “Sure thing Angie. I’ll bring you your food tonight, but tomorrow, we’re going to go out in the town while the fighting’s going on and everyone else is busy.” The pair quickly left the store, leaving the young prodigy and the talent thief alone.

Nephro gave an annoyed huff of his own, bothered by all the distractions that were going on today. “Was there anything else you needed from me today? I noticed those daggers of yours were bent pretty bad. Did you want me to fix them or did you bring them in to admire the damage under my lights?”

Piano looked at the couple of bent throwing knives she had set down nearby. Angelique’s bubbles had bent the blades facing completely backwards, the points practically buried in the hilt at this point. Piano shook her head. “Sorry, I didn’t mean for these to take up space. I just brought them with me as a memento. These are just tempered steel, so I can easily replace them. Don’t worry about it at all.”

“Ok then. And what are you going to do about your clothes? I doubt you’ll want to walk around with all those holes in them?” He pointed at her clothes, which were torn in places from the attacks Angelique had leveled at her with magic. It was also covered in some of the black blood of the devil woman. “Not that I do much with clothes. Although I was working on an electro-polymer bodysuit lined with nanomachines to enhance the physical capabilities of the body, but that’s more of a side project. Otherwise, clothes are off limits as a job.

Piano looked down at it, and then shrugged her shoulders. “I guess I’ll just sew this outfit up the best I can and prepare another one for after the tournament. Looking at every other fighter ahead of me, I don’t think it’s worth burning through that much material for a new outfit every match.”

“And what sort of material would that be? You said the other day that most materials couldn’t hold your blood for long, and the ones that did wouldn’t be enough to hold blood for quenching. And yet your clothes aren’t being destroyed by your blood. So what’s it made of?” His metallic claw closed around his hand and opened with a snapping sound, the click of his bladed feet as he adjusted his position to look at her.

Piano gave a slight flush at that, as if embarrassed by the information. "Well, this is normally just plain silk, the kind you can find in any dimension and world. But there's a certain alchemical process that you can treat the bolt in that purifies it in a way that lets it resist the corruption of my blood. You wouldn't happen to know anything about alchemy, would you?"

Nephro just gave a disappointed look, shaking his head. "Sorry, I don't deal in magic. I prefer things grounded in logic, reason, and science. Something that's consistent, not up to the whims of the universe it takes place in. You'll have to look to Saki for something like that."

"The barkeep? Got it." Piano nodded, taking that information in. While it was certainly a surprise that the bartender of the Fox's Den was talented in alchemy, that was unfortunately a talent that Piano possessed, so there was no point trying to steal it. But having an alchemical lab was not possible for Piano on the road, so borrowing Saki's would be appreciated so she could fix her clothes.

"Is there any other reason you're standing around here then, or can you go now?" His metallic claw whirled as it shut around his robotic hand, his impatience to get back to his many projects apparent in his body language as he snapped her out of reverie.

Piano shot to her feet, grabbing everything that was hers. "No, sorry. I'll leave now."

"Good. Get going." He hurried her along as she quickly stepped outside, apologizing the whole time for taking up his time as she retreated to outside of the store. With a quick motion, he slammed the door shut, putting up a sign to indicate he wasn't accepting any more customers for the day.

Piano looked back at the building with a sigh of relief, glad she could get something she was after today. It was only at that moment did she realize there was the ki presence of someone nearby that she recognized. One that went at a remarkably high speed, high energy and full of life.

“Man, it sure looked like you guys were having a good old party in there? Were you girls having a special talk with no boys allowed? Oh wait, I guess that one kid was there too, so I guess it couldn’t have been too girls only if he was allowed to be in there. So I guess you guys were making up then? My opponent and I left on good terms cause we didn’t really hurt each other, but I suppose that’s cause we didn’t really fight, cause that would be crazy! I was fighting the Strongest Man in the Universe! There was no way I could take him on in a fight to the death! Thank goodness there was this whole tag thing, right? Otherwise it would be hard for people like us to win against some of these monsters, am I right?”

If Piano hadn’t spent all of her life listening to her brother’s ever evolving barrage of language, such a lightspeed interrogation as the one she received from Quan would’ve been overwhelming for the wallflower of a warrior. As it was, she had to grapple with which parts of his verbal assault was meant to be responded to or not as she formulated her own words. “I was just making sure she could get a new pair of arms. The blacksmith here did a good job, so everything’s good. And the tags are nice, they mean we can end the match on our own terms.”

“Yeah, I think I’m going to need it again this time.” he admitted, moving up to get near Piano’s face and causing her to flinch and take a step back. “When I signed up for this tournament, I didn’t expect to run into anyone with acid blood. Then again, we’ve also got a chick who can transform into a horrifying monster and a guy with some giant scary metal monster with him, so I was hoping you’d be the least horrifying of the group. But I guess a kung-fu fighter with acid blood is probably the least intimidating look of the three.”

“Thank you?” Piano said with some uncertainty, trying to decide if he was complimenting her or not. She certainly didn’t want to be seen as scary or imposing. Especially because that would draw too much attention to herself by being intimidating. “I just use what I have, same as everyone else. There’s nothing that special about me.”

“So you’re saying I have a chance?” Quan shot back, giving a wiggle of his eyebrows and a cocky grin at that. Piano could only respond by looking somewhat bewildered, backing up slightly as he moved forward to keep the distance the same.

“I mean... doesn’t everyone have a chance of winning?” Piano asked, unsure herself. “I wouldn’t think the God Eater would set up a tournament where only one of the contestants has a real chance to win? All of us should, while not equal in power, be able to win with some skill and quick thinking?” Her tail curled around her wrist in a comforting act, tugging slightly and applying light pressure to soothe herself.

"I suppose that's true." Quan agreed thoughtfully, rubbing his chin. "But she is a trickster goddess. You never know what sorts of schemes they can get up to. I remember one time I met a fairy queen that offered me a place to sleep, only to realize she meant that I was the place for others to rest! I just barely managed to get out of there before I became a spider hotel! Luckily, I was able to convince her that unfortunately, I have a strict no tarantula policy for my body, so she was forced to look for someone else to set up shop somewhere else."

The face Quan had was one of delight, having just shared what he thought was a funny story. Piano, on the other hand, had an expression of immediate concern as she thought about what he said. "I'm sorry that almost happened to you. I hope the Madame Chief doesn't do the same to us. I would hate for those little foxes to try and live in me. They might get hurt by my blood."

Whatever response he had been expecting, that was not it, as the young speedster began to laugh in response. "Yeah, I suppose they would have to worry about that. The rest of us don't have that to protect us though, so we might be in trouble."

"I suppose that's true." Piano said thoughtfully, adopting a thinking pose herself. "Well, I know foxes hate the smell of garlic, so maybe you can just eat more food with garlic in it so they don't want to live in you?"

"That could work." Quan admitted. "But I don't think I could do that. I'd get tired of eating garlic after enough time."

"That's true..." Piano agreed, looking concerned at this. "But I suppose the tournament is only going to last another couple of days, and there are dozens of recipes that include a decent enough amount of garlic, so there should be enough variety for you before anything could happen."

"Huh. Guess I'm going to be snacking on some garlic then." Quan snapped his fingers, pointing at her. "Thanks for the advice, uh, Piano, right?"

“That’s the name I go by here.” Piano affirmed with a slight nod. “And you’re Quan, right?”

“Call me An. I like it better. So, since we’re opponents, we should get to know each other better. For starters, we should talk about your match. Your moves were incredible! And the way you kept her from getting your tag... actually, what is your tag? I don’t think I ever saw it in your fight with that girl with the prissy name. Can you show it to me?”

But before she could open her mouth to speak, she suddenly felt her brother’s usual presence returning to her side. At the same time, she noticed Quan start looking in his direction as Forte strode up back in his usual attire, interceding between the two future fighters before the scene could continue further.

“I must sincerely beg your pardon, dear lad, but I’m afraid if one is hoping to obtain such vital intelligence, then it would be most generous if one were to offer the same level of intelligence prior to ensure an equal sharing of material. Mayhaps you could procure us with this information post haste, if it is of great interest to you?”

Quan gave him another look, as if trying to read Forte, before smiling and pulling out a knife. “That was a lot of words, but if you’re asking me to share first, check out this knife! They gave it to me when I came here. Doesn’t it look pretty cool? Makes me glad I signed up for this thing to get one of these!”

Forte examined the knife with some apparent curiosity, though his sister noticed a certain stiffness in him that was abnormal. The only other times she saw it was when his targets had lied to him about their names. Which to her meant that’s what had just happened and he was highly irritated. Hopefully he doesn’t do anything in his anger to her future opponent....

“My, what a charming apparatus you’ve managed to procure.” Forte complimented falsely, a charming smile on his face as he spoke. “And pray tell, from whence did you obtain such a dagger? Mayhaps you perused the wares of the humble blacksmith we stand afore and made you acquisition thenceforth, whether by legitimate means or by falsifiable trickery and peddermantry to forestall such funding necessities?”

He gestured at The Iron Claw, to which Quan just gave him a blank smile in response. "Yeah, I'm just going to pretend what you said made sense. Anyways, this place is pretty cool! Look at the flashing lights on the outside! It must take a lot of magic to maintain all of that!"

Forte looked at the neon lights on the building, and on the ones around it. "The lighting is certainly an aspect of the Crossroads that captures one's focus upon any manner of examination. But the lighting of the noble gas neon to produce such fluorescent displays is but a cheap parlor trick to entice the baseborn into the meager shops they adorn is a classic trick for civilizations possessed of more modern technologies. You certainly are not so easily swayed by such simple pagentries, as a moth is drawn to roaring flames?"

"Are you calling me a moth?" Quan asked, tilting his head to the side with his arms crossed. "Cause I'll have you know I am a hedgehog, thank you."

"Forsooth?" Forte questioned, reaching forward towards Quan's hair. "Then if I were to probe these protrusions upon your brow, I can expect to feel a pricking sensation upon my extended appendages?"

Quan instantly backed up, creating the desired distance from the twins that Forte was aiming for, as well as finding a weak point. "Don't touch me!"

As Piano relaxed now that Quan had backed up, she turned to her brother. "Thank you. Talking is more your strong suit, so I'll let you talk to him. I've got things to take care of before tomorrow."

"Of course dear sister." Forte assured her, even as his tense body language did nothing to reassure her. "Your brother Sharp shall handle such niceties normally expected of you." He gave her a bow, sending her on her way.

Putting a mental note of the false name he was going by for now, Piano gave a polite wave to Quan as he quickly got himself back to a normal state, before quickly vanishing into the shadows.

“Wow, it’s crazy how easily she can disappear without magic!” Quan remarked, pointing to where he last saw the devil blooded woman. “That would’ve been useful when I was running away from those killer sword bees a few months back. I think they can lock onto you by smell, because I had to go sewer diving before they finally left me alone. But I got to meet a sewer naiad that was able to show me all the cool things she collects from people flushing it down there.”

“Well my spirited cadet, I would scarce imagine she would have provided you some other remedy to such a malady if she were still present, but I am afeared that today’s performance has siphoned what energy she possesses for social events. She shall need eve’s touch to squander up another dosage of charisma for tomorrow’s bout with you, Mr. Quan.” Forte’s performative language was followed with a gesture to follow.

There was a bit of suggestive magic in Forte’s tone, but Quan just shook his head for a moment, frowning slightly. Forte frowned in response as well, wondering why the magic didn’t take hold. But even without the arcane persuasion, Quan soon caught up and they walked down the neon lit streets as the sun began to set beyond Ume Bay.

“Just call me An. I don’t like being called Mr. It makes me feel old.” Quan corrected, looking at the various shops like it was his first time down them. “And you said your name was Sharp? Does that mean your blood can turn into swords? Or does it smell like cheese? Oh oh, or maybe it tastes bitter? What does Piano’s blood taste like? I’m sure it must be sweet, before it melts your tongue off.”

Forte gave a chuckle, shaking his head. “I’m afraid I do not possess such fantastical properties within the sanguitas portions of my physicality. All of our ken possess the same corrupting qualities in the black ichor we spill. Such a state is both highly feared and desired by those that differ from ours.”

“Interesting. Hey, they sell rings like mine over there!” The fae boy pointed to a nearby stall, which directed the diabolic man’s mismatched gaze towards a nearby stall, where a stout man with a tangled beard. In front of him was an array of rings for both fingers and necks on the counter in front of him, which a number of interested passersby were examining for themselves.

His was not the only stall on this street that had paraphernalia of the Cross Tournament fighters. Nearby, a long haired woman had a stall of figurines of Pembroke’s mech, and a blue skinned man

sold red and gold hair ribbons for Vilivian and Piano respectively. There were even a few shops that had the costumes of all the fighters for people to cosplay as. There were a few Vilivians and Pianos walking around already, and there was someone walking out of the shop in a Quan outfit, with a fake forehead scar stickered onto his forehead.

“It certainly seems that this tourney provides not only a spectacle within the hallowed fields of the Colosseum, but upon the streets of the Crossroads itself.” Forte commented wryly, looking at a pair of men leering at a woman in Piano cosplay with more causticity than his blood could ever hope to burn them with. “Mayhaps the God Eater puts on this tourney merely to give the mercantile class extramaterial products to produce for such a splendiferous event for her own amusement? For the performance of the fighters certainly does not cease the moment the Colosseum empties its stands at eve’s fall.”

“Uhhh...” Quan seemed confused with the way Forte talked, trying to process all the words he just heard. “Well, there’s quite a lot of cool looking people around. Look, that one looks like the lady that’s running this thing!”

Forte looked to where the young fae was pointing, where sure enough several women were dressed very similarly to the God Eater, wearing a similar dress and tights with the ornate design on them, and a singular fake fox tail that bounced behind them. Their hair was styled similarly as well, with two ear-like protrusions sticking out the side, though the total length of hair varied by woman. They were all milling outside of a grand building, with flashing lights drawing attention to it and a large fox mascot curled around the top above the words “Faux High Inn.”

As the two men looked, one of the workers noticed them and approached, a dark haired woman with light black scales along her face and arms as she leaned in seductively to address them. “Good evening gentlemen~ You two look like you could use a little more excitement after those matches earlier~ Why not join one of our lovely little foxes to cozy up against at the Faux High Inn, run by one of the very mayors of the Crossroads itself, so the quality is guaranteed~”

Both men gave her looks of interest, though it was Forte who spoke first. “My dear madam, did you say that one of the fine established leaders of this province? What makes such a political leader run such a fine establishment such as this in his free time?”

“Oh?~ An educated gentleman?~ I appreciate those~” The woman complimented, moving to his side and grabbing his arm. “And you’ve got it backwards dear~ He became a mayor because of how he ran the inn~ After the Madame’s lodges in the Fox Den and the Kit Inn for the fighters, the Faux High Inn is simply the best place to lay your head~ If you’d like, I could show you why~”

“A most generous offer indeed~” Forte replied, graciously removing her arms from his with a gentle touch. “But I’m afraid I agreed to be company to this young cadet for the eve, and must decline your offer at this time. But mayhaps when I have a free opportunity I might rejoin your number, so that I might get a chance to greet this enterprising owner of such a luxurious establishment.”

She then looked to Quan, giving him a smile that he easily shot back. “Oh, that shouldn’t be an issue dear~ We’ve got plenty of special offers available during the tournament, including group rates~ I’m sure I can get a good deal for you two~” She gave them both a wink, gesturing to the other girls around that were talking to other people passing by.

Quan looked eager to say something, but Forte just raised a hand dismissively. “I’m afraid my young companion here might not have quite the experience to handle such temptuous encounters. I was merely seeking to speak with him upon the ordering of food and beverages at the Fox’s Den. He seems to be quite the store of divers tales to tell.”

Quan finally spoke up, looking offended at Forte’s words. “Look, I might not know what all your fancy words mean, but I know when I’m being underestimated! I’ll have you know that one time I went on a date with three different water spirits all at the same time. Compared to that, this will be nothing.”

Forte gave him a raised eyebrow, looking amused. “Oh? You hear that fair maid? The cadet sees you as of little challenge. I’m almost tempted to bestow upon him the opportunity to test his romantic prowess against your occupational experience~”

“I think he is.” She replied, leaning over to talk to Quan, running a finger through her hair. “And looking at you more closely now, you’re one of the fighters in the tournament aren’t you?~ You’ll get a special rate as well~ So what do you say?~ Care to put those water spirit seducing skills to work on me?~” She reached forward to give his arm a squeeze playfully, trying to draw close to him.

Quan quickly ran around to the other side of them before either could react and gave Forte's back a pat. Forte raised an eyebrow at the younger man, but said nothing. "Sorry, but he was right that we wanted to get food! I haven't eaten since the match began, so I'm going to have him treat me to some good ol' bar food. Maybe afterwards we'll come back!" He shot her a pair of finger guns, his rings flashing in the multicolored lights emitted by the pleasure bar.

She gave the two of them a pout, as Forte helplessly shrugged. "Fine, I know when a girl's not wanted. You two enjoy your boy's night. If you need a girl's company, you know where to find us~" She gave them a wink, putting on one last show for them before beginning to walk away. But then she turned back to them. "Oh, and tell Chifu I said hey~ And that she needs to stop by again soon~ It's been ages~"

"I'll be sure to pass on your regards~" Forte gave her a deep bow, holding his hat to his head as he did so. Quan gave a friendly wave and a "Bye bye!" before the two men walked on into the coming night towards the towering Fox's Den.

As they walked along, Quan's hands behind his head as he did so, he gave Forte a curious look. "Why didn't you stay to talk with them? You seemed interested in that place. I wouldn't have minded going by myself. Or I would've gone to look at all the lights around town once it's dark out, I'm sure it'll all look better at night, you know?"

"I've certainly got my reasonings." Forte replied casually. When this clearly did not satisfy the younger man, he went on, "From my initial findings and postulations, I imagine such an establishment is unlikely to lose either workers, leadership, or clientele in the nearest future. As such, I see no immediacy in partaking in that particular maiden's company. What's more, I intuited that the proprietor of the business was not available at the current time. As the most highly stationed figure among the staff, it would be of great shame to spend time there without seeking the value of their conditioned time also. Overall, there is little opportunity to be gained by seeking a venture there at the present moment."

"So basically, you're saying nobody there was worth your time, right?" Quan replied after a moment of thought.

Forte gave a slightly displeased look at that. "That's a rather unflattering manner to phrase it as, but I suppose there is a measure of truth that could be gleaned from that. But to say that was the whole truth would in fact be a lie of omission, a crime I imagine neither of us truly wishes to commit."

Forte gave a smug smile at that, which Quan missed as he looked away almost casually. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"But of course. My profession involves a certain deal of perusing, both of the inken intention of others and the verbal conveyance. I do tend to have a habit of delving deeper into either on both accounts. But in this case, it has led to certain discernments I've made as to your demeanor."

"You're saying you know something about me?" Quan asked, clearly confused.

"Most certainly." Forte confirmed, nodding his head as he adjusted his glasses. "You are an itinerant wanderer by nature, are you not? You only reside in a destination for as long as the novelty remains, before departing the moment your interests begins to wane and the looming specter of boredom rears its fangs toward you. Such a free-spirited individual would be unlikely to linger long in even a locale as mystical as this one if there was nothing to tether him strongly to such a place."

"So you think your sister can beat me, huh Sharp?" Quan shot back, though whether that was to dodge Forte's assessment or not was hard to tell.

"That is beyond any reasonable doubt." Forte said with a level of assuredness that showed there was not a trace of doubt in his mind. "Unlike my sister, who spent the brief interlude during which your match took place to converse with the machinist, I took the liberty of viewing the fullest extent of your bout. And I must say I am not terribly afearred for my sister's chances of matching you in combat, much less overcoming you in such a trial."

"Ok, now I know you're calling me weak." Quan gave a big pout, crossing his arms and puffing out his cheeks. "Look, they put me up against a guy called the strongest man in the universe. What'd you want me to do, fight him fair?"

“That wouldn’t have been quite the necessary action, no.” Forte conceded, smirking down at the shorter man. “But presenting at least the front of a capable warrior might’ve made my presumptions harder to come upon. Especially since you were first matched with such an imposing figure, one might presume you would at least put up the pretense of presenting a challenge. The fact you went straight for circumnavigating your opponent indicates that your fighting prowess is likely less than my sister’s, who would’ve been able to confront such a formidable opponent.”

Quan’s mouth dropped in shock, looking at Forte unbelievably. “Wait, you’re telling me that quiet girl could take on that strong guy? She could barely hold a conversation with me, but he could beat that guy? Wasn’t she all beat up after her fight?”

“Which only serves to exhibit the fortitude possessed by the martial artist known as Piano, that she was able to fight despite such formidable odds against her. In comparison to a man that took the simple man’s solution, it’s impossible to fathom a scenario in which she does not come out on top. With motivations as fickle as yours, the moment my sister proves more dominant and more challenging to overcome, you’ll quickly cede the match to avoid the trouble.”

As Forte gave that prediction, the boys had arrived at the Fox’s Den, the older man holding open the door to look at the younger one. The fae looked at the devil with a look that said he was about to give him a piece of his mind, only for the two to be interrupted by a voice from inside.

“So here’s where you two were!” The cheery voice of Miss X greeted them as she stepped out of the bar, looking at the two with almost pulsating heart eyes. “I’ve been looking for you two! Come on, get inside before it gets really dark out!”

She gestured for them to enter, which both men did with false, but convincing smiles on their faces as they followed the announcer into the building. Inside, the building was full of people excitedly talking about the matches earlier that day, which were still being played on various tvs throughout the bar as people wildly gesticulated at them to prove their points. Various specials were being served tonight, each themed after the eight fighters originally hosted, but with the four semi-finalists being the more popular drinks. Over at the bar, Saki was serving a glass of milk to Volley, with Vivi talking to him and seeming to give him advice over her tankard of ale.

“You said you were seeking our company, were you not?” Forte asked as they walked in, giving Saki a nod as they walked by. “Was there anything of notice you wished to impart upon us? Any alterations to the ceremony that might inhibit or enhance the enjoyment of those partaking in the festivities?”

“What? Oh no, nothing like that.” Miss X waved away his question, before giving a pop idol wave to one of the patrons that noticed her. “Everyone’s here celebrating the matches from today and there were a few of you missing. Where’s your sister F-”

“My kin is taking care of certain affairs prior to her match tomorrow.” Forte interjected before she could reveal his true name. “I would imagine she’ll make a passing appearance in due time, but I harbor little hope that she will linger longer than it takes to accomplish her desires. Her social faculties are also strained from today’s proceedings, both for the duration and the preceding times of combatual engagement. She will likely perform a spiritual cleansing throughout the night to permit her to engage once more upon the sun’s grace returning.”

“Really? That’s a shame. I was hoping to talk to her after that exciting match she put on today! And I’m sure Chifu would love to talk to all the contestants before the next match!”

“The local gossip?” Forte asked, amused. “I had some business to attend to her about, courtesy of the Faux High Inn. Might you assist me in reaching her?”

“Yeah, sure!” Miss X agreed, directing them towards the stairs. “She’s up in the VIP room. As a competitor and a supporter of a competitor, you two are allowed to follow me up!”

“Most excellent.” Forte bowed, stopping near the bar to address Saki. “I would request a brandy brought up for me. And for my younger companion...?”

Quan shook his head and waved his hands, protesting exuberantly. “Nah, I don’t drink. Not after I had some Ogre Brew and lost a whole week to it. But I will take some chips and salsa.”

“Oooh, Chifu will love chips and salsa!” Miss X commented, halfway up the stairs already. “And she’ll probably need another margarita to fill her up!”

Saki nodded, sliding another glass of Demon Blood down the bar as the trio ascended the stairs to the lush and well decorated upper floor of the VIP lounge. There weren’t many people up there, but there was one in particular that Forte recognized: the lush Chifu, who was leaning against some cushions with her opium pipe in hand and letting a lazy trail of smoke rise from her.

As she saw them approach, she waved, slowly sinking off the cushion until she was fully on the ground, before standing up with a slight sway. “Good evening everyone~ It’s so nice to see everyone after such exciting matches~”

“Did you even get to see any of them?” Miss X asked, going to “sit” on one of the cushions. “Or were you passed out during my amazing commentary?”

“Well...” Chifu trailed off for a bit, rubbing her head and giggling. “I might’ve slept through the first match... and the second match, and the third and the fourth... But I was awake for the last two!~”

Forte and Quan both laughed, but the faster boy answered first. “There wasn’t a fifth or sixth match. Maybe you were dreaming a little too much while you snoozed!”

That got a laugh out of everyone as Chifu gave a big pout, crossing her arms and sitting down near Miss X with a huff as she looked away from them all. Forte and Quan sat across from each other, just as a server with a lizard-like appearance walked up and delivered the orders from earlier. Chifu gave an excited squeal, forgetting her anger as the lizard woman put the margarita and chips in front of her, as well as the brandy in front of Forte.

“A most excellent and timely service. Though I would expect no less from an establishment that wishes to house a goddess.” Forte’s comments were paired with a quick raising on his glass before he seemed to take a sip. Quan and Chifu began to dig into the chips, both getting generous dips of salsa with each one.

“Wait, you mean that white haired woman lives here?” Quan asked, surprised at that. “I would’ve thought she’d live up in the mountain or some other mumbo jumbo. The gods I’ve seen had all these elaborate set-ups that made seeing them hard, and then they’d always talk down at you like you were stupid for bothering them. It was always annoying whenever I accidentally ended up in one of their places.”

“Yeah, Mom lives upstairs!” Miss X supplied, as Chifu put her lips to the salt-covered rim of her glass and took a deep sip of margarita with a pleased smile. “She’s probably resting up after everything that went on today so she can look her best for the matches tomorrow! Like your’s and his sister’s! I’m sure you two are anticipating that match first thing tomorrow!”

Both men kept quiet for a second, though it apparently seemed to be Forte waiting for Quan to respond, who himself was munching on some chips. But eventually, the young fae spoke up. “Yeah, I think it’s going to be a lot of fun. I think this fight’s a little more fair for me than the other one, so maybe I’ll get to show off all my awesome moves I couldn’t pull off on the other guy!” He made some karate chops in the air, sending a chip flying towards another table and nearly hitting one of the wait staff.

Forte gave a slight bow of his head. “I’m sure then that my blood can utilize more of her martial arsenal that she held at bay out of fear of harming an opponent as physically ill-suited as an arranged opponent. But surely the male specimen of physical prowess that could stand so mightily against the Universe’s Strongest Warrior must surely be more formidable and thus more worthy of her greater strengths. Mayhaps we should refer to this cadet as the Prince’s former title in his stead?”

Quan thought about that a moment, before flexing his arms like a strongman. This got a laugh from the two girls, with Chifu laughing the hardest as she was only just able to keep a steady hand on her glass while she covered her mouth with the other. “I think I’m ok with that. Give me something new to share the next place I go.”

“And if my sister proves to be the conqueror in tomorrow’s bout, you will be forthright in bestowing your newly obtained title upon the one who seizes victory over you?” Forte asked with an amused smile, lounging on a hand while he swirled his brandy in front of himself.

“Sure, no problem. Names come and go, but fun never goes away.” Quan looked unconcerned as he shrugged. “And this place has been fun so far. There’s so many interesting people that I haven’t met yet! Like all those women at that one place!”

“Forsooth. The fine women of the Faux High Inn send their regards to you, Mrs. Chifu.” Forte relayed with a nod of his head.

“Ah, it’s been a while since I’ve seen those girls~” Chifu purred, lounging back in comfort. “I should stop by once the tournament is over~ Their boss owes me a few drinks as well~”

“Mayhaps I can accompany you on such an expedition?” Forte offered, adjusting his glasses. “I do have an interest in some of the finer individuals this section of the multiverse has to offer~”

“Why am I not surprised?” Quan said “under his breath,” causing Miss X to laugh at that. Chifu gave her own giggle, looking at Forte.

“I’ve never gone to meet escorts with an escort~ It should be something fun~” Quan ate another handful of chips, before waving for one of the wait staff to bring more.

“And what’s your sister going to do while that’s all going on?” Quan asked, leaning back in his seat. “She’s not going to stick around waiting for you to finish all this stuff you’re going to be doing, is she?”

“She can manage her affairs while I manage mine.” Forte explained, turning to Quan. “When we are ready to depart, she and I can reconvene at our leisure and venture forth back to the lands we alighted on prior to our sudden but fortuitous invitation to this gala of carnage.”

“But what about what she wants to do?” Quan asked, seemingly confused.

“And by what are you insinuating from such a statement?” Forte asked, in a more neutral tone from before.

“I mean, it sounds like she’s not going to have a say in it and is just going along with what you want. It just seems a little weird, you know?” Quan explained as both women looked between them. “Are you sure that she’s doing what she wants or is she too scared to ask for what she wants?”

Forte kept a cool gaze as he set his glass down and pulled out his wand, spinning the pen-like device idly. “Piano is a woman grown, with her own means of reasoning and parsing out what actions should constitute her interests and ideals. If my engaging in the local populace should prove to be troublesome to her desires, then she is free to set her own itinerary. We have our methods to reconvene at a later date to resume our partnered journeying, so it’ll be a trifle for her to depart on her own.”

“And if she wins the tournament, I’d be happy to talk to the winner of the tournament while she waits for her brother!” Miss X chimed in, waving her holographic arms as the women reasserted themselves into the conversation. “Assuming she’ll talk to me, given what you guys have said!”

“Speaking of winners~” Chifu added, her eyes going to Quan. “What do you think you’ll wish for if you win?~ And what do you think your sister will wish for if she wins instead?~” She addressed the last sentence towards Forte.

Quan perked up, giving a big smile. “I have no idea what I’m going to wish for. Maybe I’ll ask her to send me somewhere fun once I’m done here. Think I can put getting my wish on hold until I need it or do I need to cash it out right after I win? What’s the interest rate on a wish? How long would it take for me to build up to a second wish?”

“That’s not quite how it works...” Miss X corrected, rubbing the back of her head. Quan shrugged with an “Oh well,” as the woman turned back to Forte. “And does your sister have a wish in mind too? Have you guys talked about it?”

Forte gave his own shrug, as if it wasn't an issue. "She is still undecided as to the exact nature of her desires of which she will make her request of the God Eater. But regardless of that lack of fulfilling knowledge, we have certainly enjoyed our visitation of this proud section of existence. I'm sure by tourney's end, I can scarce imagine she will fail to manifest a meaningful manifestation of desire to have bestowed upon her."

Chifu tilted her head for a moment, taking another sip of her drink. "Well, have you given her any ideas?~ I'm sure she'd grant your wish if she can't think of one~"

Forte kept a straight face as he turned to the smiling drunk, though his hand went to his books hidden within his jacket. "I have no desire to perform any chicanery towards my own blood. Her efforts garner their own rewards and I would not seek to seize such a serendipitous opportunity after she has tilted with such marvelous meleers."

"Oh?~" Chifu mused. "So you don't have any wishes you would like to see fulfilled?~"

Forte gave her a look, the names that he took down in anger after failing to get the Madame Chief's name burning under his fingertips. But he gave her a grin. "I have nothing that I desire so strongly as to cause undue distress to the one that shares my blood."

"If you say so~" Chifu said cryptically, as Miss X stifled a laugh. "In any case, we've got two well-traveled men with plenty of stories to tell, a night ahead of us, and plenty to drink~ Let's say we swap stories and gossip for a while?~"

"An exchanging of storied tales and flights of fancy? A most astute of games indeed." Forte agreed. "We shall allow the youngest of our number to establish the genre and tone of said tales, and I shall adjust to his pace."

"Only if you can keep up!" Quan challenged, giving him a grin. "Cause I got a story about meeting a burning man riding on a Charizard and I know you can't top it!"

“A competition, is it?” Forte seemed rather amused, pulling out one of his books to consult his “notes.” “Well I hope you’ll forgive my determination, for I am the more competitive of the pair that is Piano and myself. Though since my stories come somewhat from the lived experiences of others, the vernacular used to convey them will be of a more rudimentary temperament to make it easier to parse for those not educated to be fully elucidated”

“This should be fun!” Miss X cheered, hearts radiating off of her.

“Yes it should~ It’s going to be a long, fun night~” Chifu purred, leaning onto the cushions as she took a breath of her opium pipe with a smile.

“But I must request that you indulge us as to the manner of the inciencidary individual’s origin of flame? Was it a natural occurrence, a freak twist of nature, or a manufactured means of self-immolation?”

“Well, I wasn’t there exactly for how he got on fire, but I do know it involves the Charizard, some bad decisions, and six gallons of fish oil, which might have been my fault...”

While Quan began to set the scene for his story, Forte began to do his own scene setting, his wand “writing” in his book like he was taking notes. While magic couldn’t affect the young fae directly for some reason, as long as the spell didn’t affect anybody, it should work out. The rest would lay on Forte’s skill with words and getting Chifu to act the way he wanted to, and he could get everything he could possibly want.

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Piano quickly and quietly made her way to the room she shared with her brother, ensuring that she ran into no one else of note on her way there. Once she was there, she decided to give her brother time to lead Quan somewhere before she made a public appearance again. She took out all of her useable knives from her clothes and got into a meditative stance, concentrating on her ki and feeling the life energy flowing through her body. Against her next opponent, she knew that her

physical senses would only slow her down, so she would need to rely on her ability to sense his ki if she hoped to deal with him.

'..You're too soft. Someone of your pedigree had the right to end these fools for bothering you.'

'You don't even know what you want, yet you're willing to go so far as to destroy my arms? What are you hoping to get by doing all this?'

The words of the other women in this competition rang in Piano's head, making it harder for her to concentrate on her meditation. After about twenty minutes of failing to meditate, she knew she needed to do something to get her mind off of her worries. Grabbing her sword to have something to defend herself and going to her bags and grabbing her bulky brown sewing supplies bag, she made her way over to the Fox's Den.

The bar was still fairly crowded as she entered, though Volley had already vanished back to his room at Saki's order. Vivi was still drinking at the bar, though now she was joined by Pembroke as the two enjoyed drinks side by side as they laughed and joked with each other.

Piano hated how much she feels like she stands out now that she fought her match, much less with her bloodstained and tattered clothes, but she made it to the bar without being spotted. Saki didn't notice her arrival at first, tending to the needs of the other patrons. The oni woman began to clean some of her glasses, still not noticing Piano until the young woman gave a slightly embarrassed clearing of her throat, startling the stronger woman.

"Oh, I didn't notice you girl." Saki apologized, looking to Piano as she spoke. "Though I think that's more because you need to learn to assert yourself. So, what do you need? Did you come to try the drink we made in honor of you?"

Piano flushed, not wanting to think about anything she just said as she reached into her bag. "Well, I heard you were an alchemist, so I needed you to make something for me."

She placed three bolts of silk onto the bar, as well as two different vials and some herbs as Saki looked somewhat excited and set down her glass. Piano continued, "I need you to make a potion to soak this silk in so it resists my blood. It's a mix of troll blood as the base, with essence of light and Bouldilair's herb mixed in. You'll stir it counterclockwise once every minute for ten minutes, then put in the bolts and stir continuously for the next thirty minutes. Once the mixture becomes a bright yellow, you'll pull out the silk, put more herb in, then put them in and let them soak again for another thirty minutes with no more stirring, and then it will be finished."

Saki took all of that down in her head with a nod, her gaze never leaving Piano as Pembroke and Vivi looked over at the now rapid fire talking Devil Blood with some confusion or awe. "Alright, I'll have your materials out in an hour. Essence of light, huh? I assume that's to counteract the corrupting force, with the herbs maintaining the mixture's consistency, given how fickle the essence of light is..."

Saki still went over everything out loud with some excitement as she took the bolts and walked into her backroom, giving a motion for one of the other servers to take over the bar. Piano requested a glass of water to drink as she now had to wait, while Pembroke moved over to talk to the young woman.

"Wow, I'm pretty sure that's the most anyone's heard you speak at once since you've been here, from what I'm told." he joked with her, giving her a smile as she flushed with embarrassment.

"Is it? I didn't notice."

"You must really know your stuff! I didn't even understand half of the things you were saying there." he admitted, as Vivi nodded in agreement.

"I have to know this one. It's the only way I can make clothes for myself and my brother." Piano looked away shyly, drinking her water to try to avoid talking.

"Wait, you can make your own clothes too?" His surprise was apparent, as he leaned in to talk to her as she moved away. "So you can fight with crazy kung-fu moves, you can do some weird alchemy stuff, sew your own clothes, and seem like you know something about machines? Is there

anything you can't do?"

"Well, there's lots I haven't learned to do yet, but I'm working on that." Piano said quietly, looking away still. "My brother and I didn't get many luxuries as kids, so we had to learn to take care of ourselves, including making our own clothes. So really, what I do is nothing special."

"Ah, I see. Sorry to hear that." Pembroke apologized, bowing his head. "Here, how about I get you a drink to make up for it and we can talk while we wait for Saki to come back with your stuff?"

"Sorry, I need to keep my head clear. I have to patch up my clothes, sew a new outfit for after the tournament, then I'm going to go into the woods to do some training to prepare for tomorrow's match. My opponent's pretty fast, after all."

"He is." Vivi spoke up. "And hey, be careful out there. Not only are there ghosts in the woods, but Angie was harassed by some weird guy out there, so look out for stalkers. You did win the first round after all and I'm sure people will be after you."

"Ghosts and stalkers? Well, I already knocked out some people following me yesterday with Vilivian, so I don't think anyone will come after me today. As for ghosts, I'm not sure. I've never seen a ghost, as they were a major information leak threat so they were always exorcised upon being discovered. Hopefully I can do something about them..."

"Information leak?" Pembroke asked, leaning in. "What, is your world at war or something?"

"The section of the world I'm from is always at war." Piano explained, looking at Pembroke. "Various factions vie to rule the entire area. We have to hid underground in various hidden bunkers to avoid being killed during assaults. So when somebody dies, a priest immediately goes out to make sure there are no ghosts, who might be resentful enough to tell an enemy where people are hiding."

“Damn, that’s rough.” Pembroke said solemnly. “And you said you and your brother lived on your own? That must be why you had to pull yourself up like that.”

“Pretty much. We couldn’t afford a spot in the shelters normally, so we had to make our own way in the world. But as my brother has said, the experience also made me fully capable, especially for situations like this.”

“But not ghosts.” Vivi pointed out. “What are you going to do about them?”

Piano nodded. “I have my sword, I’ll be fine.”

Vivi looked at it. “I suppose you didn’t bust that thing out on Angie, so I have no idea what it can do. But if you say so, I’ll let you do you.”

Piano nodded once again. “Thank you for the warning.”

There was a brief pause, as the other two waited for Piano to add something to the conversation, but she just kept looking at the bar counter as she waited for Saki to return. Pembroke tried to get her to join in on the conversation, but small talk with Piano only lasted a few lines before she went silent again. Eventually, the two went to talking mostly to each other, though they both made valiant attempts to get Piano to contribute with occasionally surprising insights.

But eventually, an hour or so passed and Saki stepped back out with the bolts of silk. Fresh out of the concoction, the silk seemed to glow slightly as the oni handed it over to the devil blood.

“Well, that was certainly an interesting recipe to make. If you need me to make it again, don’t be afraid to ask. I even went ahead and made extras of the ingredients just in case, so you don’t have to hand those over next time.”

“Thank you kindly. If you all will excuse me.” Piano gave a deep bow to all three of them. “Thank you two for talking with me. I wish you luck in your match tomorrow, Pembroke.” And with those final words, she stuffed away the silk and made her way back into the now night air.

It didn't take her long to get to the Sacred Forest, climbing onto the roofs to parkour above the milling nightlife below in the Crossroads as she made it to the dark forest. She journeyed in for a few minutes, clutching her bag to her side as her grip on her blade never wavered. Once she made it to a clearing with a boulder at the center, she decided that's where she would stop for the night.

Taking off all but her leotard, she climbed to the top of the rock and pulled out all of her sewing supplies along with the enchanted silk. Grabbing her coat first, she began to stitch up the holes Angelique and her made in them, using the silk to patch up the bigger gaps as her stolen expertise quickly fixed up the first couple articles of clothing. Once she was done sewing, she would wash out the blood in a nearby stream and clean it up for tomorrow's match.

Just as she finished repairs and was laying out the silk to make a new coat for herself when she suddenly felt a presence. She didn't sense any ki, which is why she didn't notice them approaching earlier. Which meant...

“Foolish mortal!” A ghastly voice echoed over the clearing, as a woman with a fox tail and translucent skin floated out from the treeline and made her way towards Piano. “That you came out here alone was your biggest and last mistake! Surrender your body to me and-”

Before the ghost could finish it's spiel, it suddenly noticed that Piano was no longer on the rock. At the same moment, she “felt” the corrupting blade of Piano pass through her body. While the weapon itself had no effect on the ghost, the sensation of Piano's blood's corrupting influence sent a shiver down the ghostly spine of the woman.

Piano, for her part, looked down at the blade with some interest. “Didn't feel like anything. Guess them not having flesh really makes a difference when it comes to hitting things.”

While she was musing about her first time slashing a ghost, the ghost in question was reeling from the feeling of being slashed by Piano's sword. While it did no damage, it was so unpleasant that she decided to disappear rather than try to possess Piano again. So did the other ghosts that had surrounded the clearing also began to disappear, the haunting atmosphere they had established slowly fading as Piano felt she could relax again.

"I guess ghosts aren't so bad after all. Time to finish sewing, then I can work on some speed exercises."

Her next couple hours went by without further issue, two new sets of clothes laying on the boulder and her clothes for the tournament hanging to dry on some nearby tree branches. With that done, she stood in the middle of the clearing, picking a set of trees to serve as her practice dummies. She closed her eyes, sensing the faint bits of ki that flowed through the trees as she imagined them to be Quan moving around quickly.

For a few moments, she stood with her hand on her sword. But what made her hesitate was not the thought of her opponent, but imagining the moment beyond him. She imagined Vilivian or Pembroke standing before her, with the God Eater looming above her, magic in hand representing the wish that was waiting upon victory. What did she truly want from this tournament? What could she do to prove herself worthy of getting such a wish?

She saw Angelique's angered expression once she lost, and Vilivian's disappointed one in the alleyway. And feelings of doubt further arose. But then she saw the God Eater's amused expression and her brother's high expectations as he expected her to win the tournament. His words prior to the first day of the tournament ringing in her head.

"While your purpose in life does not normally suggest actively causing harm to others, in this one instance we must make special exception. While I know your gentle demeanor will stay your hand from bloodshed beyond what is necessary, that in itself may prove to be the boon you need to get the decisive slice upon your opponent's flesh to warrant your blade's purest victory."

With a dash of speed, she rushed forward and drew her blade as she delivered a swift slash. But instead of slicing through the tree, she instead had just the tip of her blade cut into the bark, leaving a small cut along the bark. She smiled to herself in victory as she looked at her work, a black corruption spreading across the bark as it ate its way through the living material.

All she had to do was repeat that against Quan and she should be good. She had another hour before her clothes were dry, and there were plenty of trees along the clearing to practice that cut.

An hour later, at the edge of town, Vilivian spotted the young Devil Blood woman stepping out of the treeline, a bag under her arm and her clothes freshly mended with sweat dripping down her forehead. But the thing the Matriarch noticed the most was the look in Piano's eyes.

"That looks suits your blood better, Blackblood." Vilivian commented to herself as she saw the girl walk towards the Kit Inn. "We shall see each other in the next round."

Deep in the forest, several trees had large gouges melted into them, with several of them having collapsed from lack of support as the bark was corrupted away. Even the boulder in the center had a large cut in the center of it as a final practice, with the surrounding rock crumbling away from the corruption.

As Piano laid her stuff down, she noticed her brother wasn't home. She remembered who he was with, and the anger she had noticed in him. Knowing her brother was capable of fending for himself, she wondered exactly what he was going to do to Quan tonight as she got the rest she would need for her match tomorrow, planning to meet with her brother again after the match...

# Violent Winds

Forte and Quan had traded stories for a while now, each of them telling more and more extravagant stories with each one, as if trying to one up each other. Miss X, halfway through this little competition, got up and left, citing other business she needed to get to. Chifu, meanwhile, had passed out around the same time, too drunk to continue listening despite how much fun she was having.

As Forte finished his story about two lovers in opposing families nearly ending their lives in order to be together before cooler heads prevailed, Quan punctuated its conclusion with a yawn, looking at the night sky outside the window.

“Man, that was a lot of fun. Despite sounding like a pretentious jerk, you’ve got some fun stories in you. Maybe when you finish that book you kept mentioning, I might have to steal a copy to read. Make sure you get a print all the way over to my world when you finish.”

“I can promise you that my utmost desire is to spread my literature to every bit of earth and stone that a star’s light descends upon, from the far-flung reaches of the multiverse to the core that these Crossroads lie about. Though I do pray that if you must commit larceny to retrieve my novel, that your pettemanry goes towards another so that I might receive the royalties due to me.” Forte gave an amused chuckle, sounding quite tired himself.

“I can’t promise you nothing!” Quan promised, before stepping away from the table.

But he only got a few steps away from the table before suddenly his entire surroundings had changed. From the sounds of bar goers downstairs loudly cheering and the darkened interiors that had been the atmosphere, an unsettlingly quiet bar brightly lit greeted him. Forte and Chifu disappeared, replaced by a startled looking serving man who looked at the hedgehog fae with confusion. As Quan froze in confusion at the sudden change, Saki stepped upstairs, pointing directly at him.

“There you are! Everyone’s been looking for you! Your match begins in ten minutes. You’re pretty fast, so I’m sure you can make it in time, but you better hurry!”

Quan looked at her with some horror, before running back to the table. As he did, the night sky filled the windows once more as Forte and Chifu reappeared.

“What did you do?” Quan asked, looking tired, confused, and upset at what was going on. “How did you make it night out?”

Forte just gave a tired grin, his eyes barely keeping open at this point. “A mere parlour trick, one that could fool even your senses if you were thoroughly distracted. As fate would have it, you are so enamored by the sound of your voice telling your finest tales and the rapt attention of those around you, that your surroundings and perception of time are easy to blend into false pretenses. But now you have to contend with my sister, whose refreshed condition from an eve’s embrace

should surely prevail.”

Quan gave Forte a dangerous look, before beginning to run away. But he was stopped by Forte’s voice calling out to him as the Devil Blood stepped out from the illusion, dispelling it.

“One last delay, if you scarce mind?”

“What? Hurry up, I’m in a rush?” Quan asked quickly, running in place as adrenaline jolted him awake for a little bit.

“I merely ask for your personage before you depart.” Forte asked, a tired smile on his face as his pen rested in his book.

“You’ll hear my name when the match is announced.” Quan looked confused at the request, looking towards the stairs ready to leave.

“But as a writer, I have perceived that one’s name is most well suited to being spake into existence by one’s own tongue.”

Quan stayed for a few more moments, before shaking his head. “Nah, I’ve dealt with enough fairies to know that’s a bad idea. You can ask someone else.” And without another word, Quan disappeared from the bar, leaving behind a slightly disappointed Forte.

At that point, Chifu began to stir awake, causing Forte to turn his attention towards the drunk. “Ah, fair maid. I see your slumber proved to be most fruitful.”

“Mmhmm~” Chifu responded sleepily, rubbing her eyes. “I’m surprised I didn’t wake up in my bed, but at least I woke in time for the matches, right?~”

“Of that, I grant you the finest of assurances.” Forte gave her a bow, before opening up another book and turning to her. “It is with grave misfortune, however, that I will be partaking in my own day’s rest to recover from last night’s revelries, and must decline the ability to view my sister’s match live. But I pray that you’ll give me your word you’ll share your interpretation of my sister’s match, and that you’ll bestow upon me your name before I depart, so that my spirits will soar their way to the land of dreams and pleasant manifestations.”

“My name?~ It’s Chifu~” The local gossip replied simply, smiling at him. Forte eagerly wrote it down... only for his golden eye to dull, and for the first time, an expression of anger flashing across his face before he cooled it to a look of disappointment.

“So even you are nothing but a peddler of false truths, are you now?” Forte spoke flatly, closing his book with a snap. “I certainly hadn’t expected the likes of you to prove to be so deceptive.”

“What do you mean?~” Chifu asked, but got no reply as Forte spun around and walked away. The drunkard looked at the departing Devil Blood with a cocked head, before giving an amused smile once he left. “Well, that was an amusing diversion~ But I suppose I have my duties to attend to~ Saki, could you get the door?~”

“Just this once.” Saki said simply, walking to the nearby door. As Chifu approached, her visage slowly shifted to that of her goddess persona, safe in knowing Forte was heading straight back to his room to pass out. As she reached the door, the sound of bells rang and Saki opened the door to the God Eater’s booth in the Cross Colosseum.

Saki walked over to the table as the last bits of the God Eater’s tail disappeared through the door, reverting it back to its normal passage to the upper floors. As she did, she saw the various margarita glasses that had built up through the night, not picked up as the staff didn’t notice the trio disappearing. There was also the empty bowl for the chips, and a completely untouched glass of brandy, resting where Forte sat.

Saki picked up the undrank drink, looking annoyed. “What a waste of good brandy.” Shaking her head, she cleaned up the rest of the table and got back to work.

At about the same time, the curtains to the booth were revealed as the God Eater sat down, and Miss X began her announcement.

“Fans of fury and fire and flames and fashion and force and foes, are you all ready for a spectacurific set of fights today? Well, are you? I can’t hear you! Good, that’s more like it! Welcome back to day two of the Cross Tournament! Today we bring you two more matches full of fighters willing to bring it all to bare it all in order to earn the right to the God Eater’s wish today! Which of these vicious four will be moving on to the final rounds and fighting their hearts out for our amusement? Let’s find out!”

There was a loud cheer from the audience, various members of the audience holding out flags and banners to represent their support for each of the competitors.

“Our first match is between two speedy individuals with lots to prove and little to lose! Which I guess means they’re probably ramped up to max speed, so we should be too!”

“Quan managed the biggest upset of the entire tournament, managing to trick the Strongest Man in the Universe and steal his tag in record time! No one was expecting such an opening move! But now he’s against a tenacious opponent that’s less likely to have her tag stolen in such a way, so we’ll have to see if he can put up a fight against her!”

“Piano, meanwhile, went through her own struggle, getting chased around and beaten up quite a bit in her match before she finally managed to overcome her opponent’s fearsome magic! But this next foe has speed that will send her head spinning! Let’s see if she has any more tricks hidden up her sleeve that will let her match the raw speed of this fae wonder!”

“No matter what way it goes, I’m sure this battle will be blazing before us in the blink of an eye! So keep those eyeballs open reeeeeaaaaalllllll wide, and we’ll see which of these two comes up on top!”

Piano was already waiting in the arena for her match, fully dressed in her usual outfit and her weapons hidden throughout her body once more. She looked well-rested and determined as she looked at her opponent’s entryway, waiting for the speedster to arrive. As time dragged on and he

didn't seem to show up, the audience began to grumble and complain, some even going so far as to boo and loudly yell at the God Eater as to where her fighter was.

With a sudden blur of movement, Quan entered the field. "Sorry guys, sorry! I just slept in a little!" His joke was enough to settle the crowd, several people laughing as those that still grumbled at least did so under their breath.

"Well, now that our two fastest fighters are here barely on time, how about we hurry along to their big match, shall we? Ready? Set? Begin!"

Both the red skinned woman and the scarf wearing boy rushed forward, their fists meeting in the middle as a bell chimed throughout the arena and the space around the two changed. The brightly lit arena shifted into a dank, dark sewer, slightly dirtied water going ankle deep for them in the half-pipe shaped pathways. Two side walkways higher up provided dry places, as did metal grated bridges spanning across them at various points. Metal pipes lined the ceiling as the two fighters could see, though the audience through Miss X's eyes could see directly into the square shaped area, getting the best view possible of the fight.

"Looks like we're going underground for this fight! Too bad we don't have any skaters among the fighters, because I'm sure this map could let you rack up a high score like you wouldn't believe! But I suppose to these two, the highest score will be that wish they're fighting for!"

Quan and Piano leaped away from each other, the former shaking his fist from the impact. "You know, I watched your fight yesterday, but I didn't realize just how hard you were pun-"

His talking was interrupted by two purple projectiles hurling his way. Normally, his quick reflexes could've easily dodged it, but his exhaustion from staying up all night dulled them slightly as one of the sharp heels managed to graze his cheek.

As he looked surprised, his regeneration healing the small cut quickly, Piano was already flinging several throwing knives in his direction, a mix of steel and blood forged knives flying through the air towards the speedster. Now more prepared after the surprise attack, he quickly ran around the corner, causing the blades to spark against the wall behind where he was.

“Looks like this match opened up real quick, with Piano’s heel attack barely grazing him. He’s already on the run from Piano’s rain of steel, and now he’s going to get a good layout of our map for today’s match! Talk about thinking on your toes!”

Piano stood in place, her eyes closed as she followed his ki. She felt him run around for about twenty feet on that side, before repeating the same for the opposite side of her. As he ran the twenty feet on the side behind her, she felt she had a good grasp of the layout of the arena as she heard his splashing footsteps approaching behind her.

He closed the distance between them as he rounded the corner, going to punch the back of her head. She quickly spun around to kick at him, but he easily dodged the attack and lunged for her neck where her tag was.

But just as his hands got within an inch of her neck, her hands quickly clamped down on his arm. He looked surprised, only for him to get locked into a judo throw and slammed into the ground with her on top of him.

She knew he would go for her tag, just as he had with Armius yesterday. So she focused her ki senses to the area in front of her neck. The moment his arm crossed that area, her arms would automatically go in without her conscious input and grab him. She was sure after this, he wouldn’t try again, so she had to take advantage of this and wear down his durability.

“Uh oh! Looks like Piano’s caught our little speedster, unlike the Prince yesterday! And as we saw with Angelique, that’s the last place you want to be with this fierce martial artist! Here comes a flurry of blows!”

With him pinned beneath her, she focused her ki into her fists to strengthen the blows and began delivering hammer blows down on him. At first, he merely raised his arms to block the heavy blows raining down on him, each impact feeling like an actual sledgehammer coming down on him. But as he got used to it slightly, he began to use one of his arms to punch back, hitting her side even as it felt like punching a tractor tire from her hardening her muscles with ki.

But as he was keeping her focus on his upper half, he moved his stomach and hips as quickly as possible to try and wriggle free from her pin. After a few exchanges of blows, which she blocked with her other hand to keep him from going for her tag, he suddenly created a gap and quickly clambered out from underneath her, running to the corner once more. As he rounded the corner, he felt a sharp pain along his right thigh, the sound of a throwing knife hitting the wall echoing as he disappeared around the stone wall.

As Quan went to catch his breath, his regeneration working hard to recover from all the bruises, he looked at his leg. There was a good size cut on it, which he watched to see it close. But then he felt something burning along the wound as the wound refused to close. He looked confused, trying to figure out what was going on with his tired brain.

But he didn't have any more time as he saw a flash out of the corner of his eyes as three more crimson daggers hurtled towards him. He hadn't even heard her run over! He ducked under them, before running away more.

"That stupid Sharp!" Quan complained. "Making me stay up all night, not letting me talk to Piano before the match, and messing with my head!"

"After quite a daring escape, our Quan has taken some injuries! While most of them are healing, it looks like that cut isn't going to close anytime soon! Got to watch out for anything red with Piano, because that's especially dangerous! It looks like it's taking all Quan can do just to get away!"

'With motivations as fickle as yours, the moment my sister proves more dominant and more challenging to overcome, you'll quickly cede the match to avoid the trouble.'

Quan stopped as he remembered the brother's words. An anger filled the pit of his stomach. He was proving that prissy jerk right this whole time! He was running away from Piano because she seemed overwhelming to him. Well, there was enough of that!

Pulling out his knife, he spun around and charged around the corner. At first, he didn't see her in the passageway, but looking up quickly proved to save him as he dodged out of the way of more throwing knives as Piano descended down knee first. Quan quickly backed up, before charging forward at her. As he did, he saw her grip the hilt of her sword, her eyes flashing his way.

'Ha, she's finally pulling out that sword!' Quan thought. He looked at the length of the sheath, quickly calculating his speed compared to hers and the length of the sword. 'I should be able to get a good slash or two on her before she can get that thing out, and then I'll be too close! I'll dodge her blood and-'

As he got close to her and was about to swing his knife her way, he felt another sharp pain across his chest. A spray of his blood shot out, as Piano's blade was held out in her right hand perpendicular to her body as she completed her slash. He looked at her sword and realized...

"It's shorter!" He exclaimed out loud, his dulled reflexes nearly causing him to take another slash from her anti-regeneration sword as he stumbled back. Piano pressed the attack, returning her blade to its sheath between each slash as she kept up with him.

"My oh my!" Miss X cheered as loud as the audience as Piano's mysterious blade finally emerged. "It looks like our pretty little Piano is a master of Iaijutsu! With stunning speed she sliced Quan's skin, and that wound isn't going to heal anytime soon! I guess we can see why Piano had to hold back with poor Angélique now! Good luck Quan!"

Piano pressed her attack a few more times, before Quan suddenly lunged forward between two of her attacks, nicking her arm. He quickly dodged to the side as a small jet of black blood spattered the wall behind him, the stone beginning to melt. As he gave a cocky laugh, however, he felt a dull thud on his side and he was sent flying away. Rolling to get back up, he saw her finish swinging her sheath in her left hand, as she now held both parts of the sword.

"Lucky hit!" Quan complained, before lunging forward once more. She blocked the stab with her sheath, swinging her sword at the same time and forcing him back.

“Same for you.” Piano said quietly, as the two got locked into an exchange of blows with each other, with Quan managing to tag her a couple of times. Once or twice, a jet of blood shot out from Piano as she was hit, forcing Quan to retreat. But occasionally, a slash would go unerupted, which Quan noticed.

“Guess it takes you time to do that spray thing. So if I keep slashing, you can’t keep doing it!” Piano leaped back before taking another hit, sheathing her blade as she did so. She got into a wide stance, preparing to slash him when he got close. “That same trick won’t work twice! I’ll get your tag this time!”

Quan charged forward at an even faster speed than before, reaching her just before her blade was drawn. Drawing on her ki, she sped up her slash to try and match it, only for him to dodge out of the way by stepping back.

“See, you miss-”

Before he could finish his taunt, he suddenly felt a burning pain along his shoulder, causing him to drop his knife. He looked to see a spray of blood splash on him... coming from her sheath.

“Uh oh! Looks like Quan wasn’t paying attention to what his opponent was doing while he had the upper hand! While he was focused on the blood not coming out of her, he didn’t notice her feeding blood into her sheath! And that extra space in her extra long sheath serves as a perfect holder for some extra blood that she could send at him for extra pain! Only an experienced warrior would even think of that! Just how dangerous is Piano really?”

Quan was forced to fully retreat at this point, needing to take time to recover from all of his injuries. As he disappeared around the corner, Piano did nothing to follow him, instead choosing to catch her own breath for a bit. While she was bleeding from quite a few places at this point, his wounds were much bigger, and the strain from not being able to regenerate from them was sure to take its toll. He would likely need to catch his breath and plan his next move, but he will eventually need to come to her. Time was not on his side. So she needed to prepare a welcome for him good enough to let her finish him off.

Quan, for his part, was on the opposite side of the arena from Piano, taking a deep breath as he clutched his chest. While the corrupting influence of Piano's blood did a good job keeping him from regenerating quickly, his body still was healing at a faster rate than likely any opponent Piano's faced thus far, the wounds closing imperceptibly slowly and the blood splashed on him only burning him on a surface level. But even with those advantages, he was losing blood fast. She could probably follow it, he was leaving so much behind.

"I've got to beat her soon. She's not even doing that doping thing she did against that prissy girl." Quan reasoned. He saw a few of her throwing knives on the ground nearby, and he quickly ran over to pick one up. "At least I got a weapon again. Now, all I have to do is catch her by surprise before she sees me get close and then I'll win!"

"Sounds like Quan's got a plan!" Miss X commented from above to her adoring fans, who were all cheering at the heavy bloodshed that was going on between the two speedy fighters. "It looks like we're getting to the decisive end of the bout! These next few moments will decide the match, so don't blink or you'll miss it!"

Quan rushed around two passages, getting back to where he last saw Piano. She was nowhere to be seen standing in the area, but he saw her match with Angelique. Looking down in the dirty water, he got a glint of gold in the water. Smiling to himself, he quickly closed the distance between them and stabbed down.

But there was virtually no resistance as he struck through the coat and down into the stone ground below, where the crimson blade sunk in. His mouth hung agape, processing what happened as the bells on Piano's coat rang from the impact.

But that wasn't the only thing ringing around. Quan looked up just in time to see Piano slash through the last of the pipes in the ceiling, causing a sudden cascade of metal to rain down on Quan below. The way she had damaged the pipes, there was no way for him to retreat either side before he'd get caught. He'd have to dodge them where he was.

The speedster moved as fast as his body could, weaving between the pipes as they collided loudly with the stone floor and sent water in the air as they rolled in the half-pipe between walkways. He was beginning to laugh, giddy at how his speed saved him at this moment. But then, as he saw one pipe fall to his left, he saw a glint of gold.

In an instant, Piano leaped off the falling pipe she had been hiding behind towards Quan as he was slightly in the air to leap over a rolling pipe. With a quick draw and swing, she crossed where he was and carved the tip of her blade along his back. A spray of blood filled the air as Quan gave a cry of pain, dropping her throwing knife as he fell. His eyes rolled up in his head as the pain overwhelmed him and he passed out on top of the steel pipes, his speed allowing him to dodge all but her slash.

“And what an exciting finish for that match! With a leap from a cascade of falling pipes she made herself, she launched herself at Quan and slashed open his back! At this point, he has been rendered unable to fight, making Piano our decisive winner!”

The surroundings shifted as bells rang once more, allowing Piano to hear the roaring cheer of the crowd as she returned to the Cross Colosseum. Her various thrown weapons collapsed onto the real ground as they were returned to their true location in space.

As that happened, she immediately went into medic mode, holding closed Quan’s wounds as she waited for the medical team to arrive to help him. She felt guilty that she went that far as she did, but she remembered the promise she made herself last night.

“To make up for the pain I caused Angelique, and to meet the expectations of my brother, the God Eater, and Vilivian, I will do what it takes to win, and make it up somehow with my wish. If not to the ones I hurt, then to Fate itself. That will work, right brother?”

But she had yet to consult her brother on her more consolidated goal for her further participation in the tournament. And as a stretcher was brought out to take Quan outside of the arena, Madame Chief looked down at Piano with amusement.

“My, doesn’t she seem more sure of herself?~” She commented to a Crossguard, who were all confident that Forte wasn’t among their number again. “I’m glad I invited her as I did~ She’s proving to be far more entertaining than even I had expected~”

As she watched on from above with amusement, she saw Piano receive Quan's tag from one of the medics, and his two tails vanished from him in her eyes to shift to Piano's backside. Invisible to all but Madame Chief's select few, Piano's four tails now swished nervously with her spade shaped tail, signifying her place as one of the two finalists to face off for one chance at a wish.

"Looks like this crop listens to my instructions to a t~ This should be an exciting tournament to the end~"

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