

[Piano & Forte] Round 3: Black and Purple

[Original Doc](#)

Settling Ebony

“Nah, it’s fine. We were fighting, stuff like that happens, you know?”

Laying on the bed of the infirmary, Quan gave Piano a smile. Several bandages were wrapped around his torso, slightly stained with blood on the back. But at this point, they were starting to be mostly for show, as the corrupting taint of Piano’s blood had begun to fade and his regeneration picked up again once more. Within a few minutes, he would be fully healed and he’d be out of the infirmary anyways.

But even still, Piano seemed guilty about how the fight ended. While it was the most surefire way of ensuring her would go down, and having been careful to keep it shallow to avoid permanently damaging him, there shouldn’t really be anything for her to apologize for. Even still, she bowed her head, her tag swinging on her neck along with Quan’s, Armius’, and Angelique’s.

“Even still, I need to at least apologize. It probably hurt a lot.” Piano insisted, not looking at him as she started down at the ground in shame. “So even though you say you’re fine, at least let me apologize for my own sake.”

“Fine, fine, I forgive you and name you knight of the Crossroads or whatever else I need to do to let you get over this.” Quan said casually, waving his fingers on her shoulders in a mockery of knighting. “Does that make it up to you?”

"I-I suppose it would..." Piano confessed, her tail curling onto her wrist as she scratched her face.

"Good." Quan relaxed on the bed, his hands behind his head. "To be honest, that pain wasn't too bad. No worse than when I stole fire honey from Infernal Hornets. Those guys know how to sting real good. And besides, this place was getting a little too stuffy for me anyways. All you people with your prissy names. Now that I've lost, I can hit the road as soon as I want to. I don't have to stick around if I don't want to anymore. But it would've been fun trying to trick that God Eater lady into giving me her powers if I won. Maybe you can do it for me?"

"Uh... well, I don't really know if that would-" Piano began, only for Quan to cut in.

"Nah, you couldn't do it. She'll probably run circles around you even if you tried. Better to stick with whatever you want. What is it that you want?" He began to lean forward with interest, only to wince in pain from his back muscles stretching over the wound.

"Well, I want-"

"Nah wait, don't tell me. It's bad luck to tell someone your wish before you get it." Quan shook his head. "And since you beat me, I guess I want you to at least win so this back pain ain't for nothing, you know?"

"I'll-I'll do my best..." Piano stammered, flushing from his expectations.

"Though I'm also glad I didn't win. Imagine me, going against that monster of a woman!" He gave a laugh, which did nothing to cheer Piano up. "One wrong move and I'm a hole in the wall. Now that would be some serious back pain!"

“Uhh.... yes, I suppose she is a rather intimidating opponent...” Piano agreed, thinking back to the fight in the alley yesterday. “And I have to beat her tomorrow if I want to get that wish...”

“Well, good luck with that. Maybe I’ll stick around to watch it. I’m sure it’s going to be wild!” Quan laughed as if it was none of his business. Well technically, it wasn’t, but Piano’s stomach twisted at the ever looming figure of Vilivian on the horizon.

Her worries were extra strong because of her other purpose coming here: to collect particularly historic or valuable talents. And Vilivian’s unspoiled martial arts were unfortunately one of those talents she knew she had to seek out. Which means she’d have to draw out the fight for a while to observe it enough to “steal.” And even once she succeeded in stealing her talent, Piano would then have to take on a Vilivian that didn’t easily tire in comparison to her, that had magic at her disposal, and had a monstrous form to overwhelm Piano’s meager strength even when the Devil Blood was doping herself up. In a fair fight in that arena, there was little chance Piano had of winning, even if she tried to steal the tag.

In the arena...

In the arena...

In the arena?

“Yo, Piano? Are you doing alright there?” Quan sat up and waved his hand in front of her face. “You’re spacing out on me. It’s kind of freaky, and I sleep in haunted houses all the time.”

“I’m.... I’m sorry...” Piano vaguely apologized. “I need to go find my brother. Take care of yourself...”

“Okay, take it easy!” Quan called, relaxing back down on his bed. “Hey Doc, I think my back’s hurting something fierce! Maybe something sweet will help distract me from the pain!” The last

thing Piano saw of Quan was his cocky smile as the doctor passed her to check on his patient.

Back at the Kit Inn, Forte was just beginning to wake up, grumbling slightly as the light of the soon setting sun hit his eyes, forcing him to squint. He looked at his bedside table for his glasses, seeing them lying next to the healing crystal he “borrowed” from Vilivian last night when he took that short little excursion from keeping Quan up.

He picked up the gem, admiring it in the light of the sun once again with his smirk. “Isn’t it rather marvelous, blood of mine?”

He glanced over, seeing his eyes mirrored back at him by his sister as she leaned against the wall. He noticed more slash wounds across her body, likely from her match earlier. But given her lack of worry at disappointing him, instead having a look of some shame but still having some resolve, he reasoned she had won her match. He gave her a proud grin.

“I suppose some manner of celebratory guerdon bestowing is in order as proper celebratory procedure for making it within a stone’s throw of having whatever appetency you are possessed of granted by the God Eater. And I believe I have the perfect knick-knack that should receive your grateful thankings.”

Forte held out the crystal to Piano, who took it in her hand with a curious look, looking down at her brother. The writer took his time responding, grabbing hold of his glasses and polishing them with a cloth to ensure they wouldn’t inhibit his vision before donning them and standing up.

“They are a sort of sanative crystal, infused with the magic of a witch and the woman who will prove to be your opponent.” Forte explained, causing Piano to jolt in surprise. She looked at the crystal more closely, as if she’ll be able to see the magic in it now. “You must simply crush the jewel in hand and allow the electrical current of its healing property course through you properly and any exsanguinating wounds upon you shall cease to be.”

Piano looked to her brother as he lifted his shirt to wrap his tail around his torso to hide it as he began to redress himself to get to “work.” “And will this recover any blood I’ve spilled? Can I use this to replenish my blood after spilling a bunch of it?”

Forte shook his head sadly, putting on his vest with a quick buttoning that was well practiced. “I am afeared that crystal does not possess such astounding properties. It is merely the sealing of wounds both internal and external that it enacts.”

“I see...” Piano commented lightly, before pocketing it. “Well, I’ll be sure to use it tonight when I’m done.”

“This eve?” Forte asked, surprised. “Should not wait for the opportune time on the morrow against your opponent if you wish to stand a greater chance of defeating her? She is quite the fearsome foe.”

“I don’t think so.” Piano shook her head. “Aren’t you the one that says I should be at my best before I put on one of those performances? I always listen to your advice.”

Forte looked at her for a moment, then gave a grin. “But of course. And I as ever shall trust your judgements when it comes to labor of a physical manner. In which case, we should begin the discussion as to the rewards for your endeavor.”

Piano looked back to her brother, a look of guilt on her face. He put on his coat, before finally donning his hat as well. “And I have a proposal for your consideration. It would seem that the God Eater keeps herself at quite the distance from the usual populace, and I am afeared that her security is wisened to my tactics. As such, I would pray request to utilize your wish to create greater access for ourselves to her presence.”

Piano rubbed her foot along the ground, her arms behind her back as she looked at her brother. “About that... I might already have a wish in mind that I think would work out better for the both of us. Would you trust me to make my wish instead?”

She flinched at the expression on his face, a look that told her he was dumbstruck by her boldness for a moment. Internally, Forte's stomach was roiling from anger and shame, as another step towards getting all he wanted seems to have crumbled beneath him. His whole trip into the Crossroads, he was getting thwarted left and right, unable to do his own duties properly. If it was just once, it wouldn't be so bad. But the fact that even Chifu, the drunk gossip gave him a false name. It was infuriating and humiliating.

And then for his sister to deny his request without any sort of hesitation was just another blow to his pride. While he always tried to maintain a give and take relationship with his sister, where they worked together to meet both of their needs. But even still, he was used to his sister always giving in to whatever he asked for. So the fact that she refused him and offered her own solution was a blow to his pride.

But only briefly. The confidence she showed to be able to directly ask something from him was something he could only commend her for. His confident smirk quickly returned as he gave her a deep bow. "In that case, blood of mine, I shall take heed of your wisdom and defer to your ingenious plottings. Therefore, to what end shall I assist you?"

Piano looked surprised at how quickly her brother recovered. She had expected him to be more reluctant given the frustration he had been facing. She hoped that if everything went well, she could help him regain his injured pride. "I don't need too much from you. Just keep Vilivian busy for a bit while I start preparing for tomorrow's match. Would that be alright with you?"

"It'll be my pleasure to be of assistance to you, my meek sister. I shall ensure your social obligations are fulfilled by my locutions." Forte gave a bow, looking out the window. "I can scarce imagine she'll be far now. You should depart before she catches hold of your scent."

Piano gave her brother a hasty bow. "Thanks Forte. I promise I'll win tomorrow."

"Your victory in battle tomorrow shall be my prized reward for efforts rendered this eve. Until victory's achievement on the morrow." He tipped his hat to her, before his sister departed on her way out of the window, climbing onto the roof of the Kit Inn to make her way to her first destination.

“Now, let’s see how much my aid will prove to assist in this little bout.” Forte mused to himself, making his own way out of the Kit Inn. “Let’s see if the seeds of friendship I’ve sown these previous two days prove to bear fruit.”

Rushing Violet

Vilivian walked with purpose down the streets of the Crossroads, returning back to the Kit Inn where she was likely to find the Blackblood girl. Her next opponent in the tournament, the final one she had to beat to win the wish.

She had seen the girl fight a couple of times now. Once in an alley with a bunch of males that the Blackblood showed far too much mercy on. She had also watched the girl fight her two matches ahead of her each day, defeating the magic user with the false arms and the quick fae that had tried to run circles around the otherwise swift girl. And both times, the spry girl seemed to overcome great odds.

And last night, the Blackblood's brother had managed to secure one of the healing crystals she and Wendy had made. Which would make for a useful tool in the fight tomorrow. Although Vilivian was sure she was stronger physically, both before and after transforming, she knew not to underestimate her enemy.

She had learned that lesson the hard way all those years ago, against the man whose silver sword she now bore on her hip. In fact, that sword Piano had piqued her interest during the second match. It seemed to bear the same presence as the blood that flowed through her veins in Vilivian's senses. Not only that, but the ease that the girl had swung the weapon showed a level of skill in it far beyond what her tender youth and naive manner in fighting would lead the Matriarch to expect.

So she wanted to talk to the younger warrior before their match the next day. Partially as a formality, as she had spent time with the other two opponents she faced, getting to know them before the match. Both of her opponents had proven to be far more interesting than she would've given them credit for prior to engaging with them. And Vilivian had already engaged with Forte, Piano's twin, so she knew some things about how to deal with her.

But there was another purpose to meeting with Piano prior to the match. She had noticed last night that the younger girl seemed to look forward to her match with more confidence than she had possessed when they had first met in that alleyway. In the first match, she seemed to hold back, not using the sword at her back. And in the second match, the girl did not get her blood flowing nearly as fast as she did in the first. And the level of dedication to putting down her opponent in a worthy manner changed between the two matches.

So Vilivian wanted to confirm this newfound confidence by speaking with the girl directly. To make sure that she wasn't going to hold back on Vilivian now, and to get an idea of why this girl even decided to participate in the first place. But she had to find her first.

At this distance, Vilivian could feel the black blood of one of the Devil Blooded sitting in the lobby of the Kit Inn. But given how slowly the blood flowed in the veins, more like a river of ink rather than the burning black that flowed through Piano's, the likely person sitting there is...

“Good eve and great tidings be upon you, fair maiden~” Forte’s voice, a mix of delight in seeing her and a note of amusement rang clear across the lobby to Vilivian’s ears. It was hard to tell if he was genuinely mocking her or if his voice just had that effect, but either way, it was hard not to take offense to the tone. It was only due to her interactions with him the last couple days that she didn’t feel the urge to slam him through a wall.

He could be helpful when he wanted to be, and his way with words was certainly impressive. But the only thing she wanted to hear right now was: “Where is your sister, Wordsmith? I wish to speak with her.”

“You wish to speak with my paired partner in familial matters? Why alas, I am afeared that I have not the slightest of inclinations as to whence my sister has departed this eventide. And she isn’t one who cares to be noised about on. If you wish to engage in conversational matters, I should prove more than sufficient a partner.”

He gave a bow, though the smirk on his face never seemed to go away. He seemed to be enjoying this whole interaction, almost as if it was a game.

“Sorry, I would rather speak with the Blackblood girl. She is my opponent tomorrow after all.” Vilivian didn’t seem to budge, but Forte’s demeanor didn’t change.

“A most reasonable desire indeed.” Forte agreed with her, nodding his head readily. “And yet all the same, I must provide an obstruction to your attempts, as per my kin’s desires. She wishes to be left to her own devices, to prepare her mental faculties for tackling such a formidable opponent such as yourself. I pray beg that you acquiesce to such a request for the sake of my sister’s more timid tendencies.”

Vilivian blinked in surprise at the request, not used to the normally steadfast Forte that seemed to own any situation he’s in. While he did seem to exude all the same confidence that he had in previous engagements, it seemed to be with the knowledge that they were for the most part even in terms of favors being done. He no longer had quite the upper hand over her.

“Wordsmith...” Vilivian began, looking up. “I can already feel that your sister is not in this building. She’s probably long gone by this point to somewhere else in the Crossroads. If I have to guess, you’re here to slow me down.”

“A rather accusatory proclamation indeed.” Forte looked offended at her words. “Can’t a gentleman simply wish to accompany the one finalist that I have not spent the better part of my time on this mortal coil besides for but one eve?”

“Haven’t you taken up enough of my time the previous two nights?” Vilivian asked, cocking her head. “I’ve only had one conversation with your sister and she’s to be my opponent in less than twenty-four hours. Getting to talk to her for a little while should be fine. I feel we’ve talked more than enough.”

“Forsooth, our engagements have spanned quite the period these days thrice. And yet to a Matriarch such as yourself, such a brief period must seem almost transient in nature, would it not?” He gave her a sardonic grin as she stiffened, now mildly interested in him for the moment.

“And where did you hear of my people’s name?” Vilivian turned to face him fully now, resting a hand on her hip. Despite being nearly half a foot shorter than the gentleman snake, she still managed to exude a dangerous presence that made her seem to be the tallest person in the room.

“My my, that’s quite the exhibition of charismatic strength, sentinel of Graal. Though mayhaps you would be better served directing your ire towards the sotted woman who spends her eves besmirching her constitution in spirits serviced by the oni woman. There you might find a safe harbor for such fury towards treachery.” Forte seemed unaffected by Vilivian’s anger the whole while, even though his sister was not nearby to protect him from physical harm.

Vilivian gave a huge huff, crossing her arms. “I should’ve known that Trickster was involved in such a scheme.”

Forte’s smirk twitched for a moment, before it regained its smug confidence in quick form. “I can see we’ve both been befouled by that slovenly wench’s schemes. For one who seems well at ease within the depths of her tankard, she is possessed of wiles and insight beyond what her unsightly

demeanor might otherwise offer. A most tedious danger indeed.”

“She is.” Vilivian agreed. “And how did she go about telling you about me?”

“It was not a particularly malicious manner, if that is what troubles you.” Forte assured her. “She merely began rambling upon some of the hidden aspects of all the contestants of the current contest, as expected of a drunkard. Any of your people’s secrets remain unspilled, if that was your concern. That’ll be something I’ll have to extract from you by my own hands~” He pulled out his notebook and pen, looking at her with a smirk.

Vilivian gave a sigh, knowing she’d have to try and convince him to let her go to pursue her real quarry. “I don’t have time to do this tonight. It would’ve been better to do this the last couple of days.”

“Forsooth, such foresight would’ve been advisable. Alas, I must instead strike at a later time than I would normally permit. Mayhaps you’ll grant me such mercy out of an abundance of confidence towards our kinship?” Forte’s words were laced with poisonous friendship, and Vilivian stiffened.

But not because his words affected her. But because she could feel her mind being probed by a magical intrusion. Her sense of her magic gave her some cognizance on such things, and her paternal heritage gave her resistance to such mind-altering magics as the one that was attempted on her. Looking closely, she could now almost see the fey chains that the writer had attempted to bind her in with his words laced with magic, the specter of the serpent he seemed to truly be looming behind him.

She thought back to how he always seemed to get his way whenever he spoke. Whether it was getting the dock workers to forgive her for the misunderstanding with the paints that Volley had used. How he managed to get the wine he used as a gift to get the healing crystal for Piano. While certainly he was a skilled master of his craft when it came to using words to get what he wants, the use of mind manipulating magics certainly would enhance his ability to get whatever he wanted. While her trust in the man had gone down, she could at least respect his capabilities and be wary of them from now on as she just glared at him.

Seeming to realize his magic had no effect on her, he changed gears in an instant, as if unperturbed by the resistance he was suddenly facing. He simply continued on, still holding his pen to paper as he looked at her intently behind his glasses. "Now then, I would scarce imagine an interview can begin thusly without first the subject rendering forth her name fore me. Therefore, I must ask you to state your name."

Vilivian met his gaze and found a level of intensity in them beyond what she expected from a writer. His golden eye looked at her with an almost greedy glint in it, as if hearing her name was the only thing that mattered. Whether this was a desperate maneuver or the first step to another plot of his, something about his question made Vilivian feel uneasy.

"You already gave my name, Wordsmith..." Vilivian said hesitantly, keeping her eyes on him.

"That is truthfully spoken, my companion of the night." Forte gave her a confident smirk. "And yet, I find that hearing one intone their own title with their own vocal cords possess a more formal air for beginning such matters."

"I'm running out of patience for your games, male. Move aside, or I will push past you to find your sister." At this point, she realized that Forte had moved himself to block the entrance, still leaning against the doorway with his notebook still out looking expectantly at her.

"I promise you, fair maiden, I present myself before you with forthright intentions. At this point, I am beyond such frivolous pastimes." There was an edge in his voice, the playful teasing in his voice replaced by a hint of anger. "I've been met with several misfortunes since bestowing my presence upon these Crossroads, so I intend to at least make some progress with my interview of you this evenfall."

Vilivian raised an eyebrow, looking him up and down as if inspecting him for his prowess even as she knew the answer. "Do you really intend to stand in my way? Even after seeing what I can do?"

"That I intend." Forte confirmed, turning his attention back to his notebook. "So as to my first inquiry-"

He got no further, as he suddenly felt a hand on his chest. Before he could react further, Vilivian shoved forward with all her might, sending the taller man flying out from the doors across the street. Two Crossguards seemed to materialize out of nowhere, using their arms to catch and slow Forte's launch before he crashed into the buildings, though were only successful in mitigating the damage to the buildings, as Forte's hat flew from his head and he spat out a glob of his own inky ichor from his mouth.

He collapsed to his knees as the two Crossguards released him, onlookers staring at him as he coughed in pain and looked up. He watched Vilivian look at him for a moment, before she walked into the night streets of the Crossroads, her way lit by the various neon signs that populated the buildings of the city.

Once she was gone, he stood up gingerly, feeling a severe ache in his back that he knew would last him the next couple of days. But he felt he bought his sister as much time as was reasonable of him to achieve, so he was able to put on his confident facade once more.

'I leave the rest of your duties squarely in your capable hands, Piano' he thought to himself, putting on his hat once more and turning to the opposite direction that Vilivian disappeared off to. 'Mayhaps I shall try my hand at some easier marks, to ensure I haven't truly lost my touch here in these Crossroads...'

The thought didn't seem to please him, as he too disappeared in the night, knowing his fury wouldn't be satiated until he got at least two dozen names to put in his notebook. If he got at least one of the mayors of the town, that might be a worthy enough entry to satisfy his anger. Maybe the Faux High Inn's owner would be in? His steps quickened, eager to put his frustrations behind him and return to a better mood.

The soft trickling of the hot springs water flowing down from the upper rocks to the lower created a soft ambiance throughout the rest of the room. In this slightly steaming room, Piano sat under one of these mini waterfalls, her legs crossed and her arms in a meditative pose as she focused her ki throughout her body, working on getting it to flow quickly through her in preparation for the next day. The water flowing from the top of her head and down her body soothed her body, while providing a decent mental distraction to make this a good mental exercise.

She had been there for an hour by now, so it was close to midnight by this point. Having spent most of the night preparing for her match, this ki exercise was the last thing she needed to do to give herself the best chance of beating Vilivian. Between her and Armius, they were the two opponents that would give her the most trouble due to their physical strength. Not that the other fighters weren't likely to be troublesome. But Piano had felt comfortable that she was physically stronger or on par with the other five.

But Vilivian possessed a monstrous amount of strength beyond what all but Armius could wield. Not only that, she also could use magic, a talent Piano did not have at all and could never learn. So the Matriarch will always have that advantage over Piano. She also had the transformation into her demonic form that would also prove to be a major problem for Piano.

And lastly, Piano's duties as a historian meant that Vilivian's martial arts were something she would have to acquire. Which means she couldn't just go for the win as fast as possible. She's forced to drag it out, to steal the talent that Vilivian had, even if it means risking a loss against the Sentinel. This was definitely going to be a challenge. As was what was about to happen...

"There you are, Blackblood." The voice of Vilivian sounded, just as Piano expected when she sensed the shorter woman's ki. Vilivian appeared through the slight steam, not even a towel on her as she approached the still towel-clad Piano. "Your brother tried to keep me busy, but I got away from him. I've been looking for you all night, but I didn't expect you to be up here."

"H-how did you find me then?" Piano asked, putting an end to her little exercise and beginning to stand up.

"Well, that would be because a little fox told her~" A friendly voice called out. Looking over, the two contestants saw the ringleader of the tournament, the God Eater herself, striding in. With nothing but her tails to cover her and her hair in a ponytail, she smiled at the two girls. "I thought it

would be interesting to have one good conversation with the two finalists and the host the night before the big fight~”

“Tch.” Vilivian clicked her tongue, looking at the God Eater with some annoyance. “I dislike using your help, especially after you gave the Wordsmith all of that information on me.”

“And yet, I helped reunite you two for this little talk~ You can at least say thank you to me~” Madame Chief teased, sinking herself into the hot water as two of her tails formed a pillow for her to recline her head on as she settled in. She gestured to the other two to join her, which Vilivian did after a moment and Piano did after some hesitation.

“I’ll deal with you in a bit, Trickster.” Vilivian said, trying to brush off the God Eater. Madame Chief simply laughed as Vilivian looked at Piano, who flushed from the attention. “I wanted to talk with you, Blackblood.”

“So I’ve heard...” Piano replied meekly, not making eye contact as she desperately wanted to just sink under the water and be forgotten.

“Yes. The last couple of days, I’ve been talking with my other opponents, learning why they wanted to fight in this tournament and what they would wish for. And I’ve certainly learned a lot about people from other places. And so I wanted to know what brought you here.”

Piano stayed quiet for a bit, her mismatched eyes looking at Vilivian. Eventually, in a small voice, she said, “When we first got here, I didn’t really have a reason to fight. My brother wanted to meet the God Eater-”

“Which was a really fun meeting, might I say~” Madame Chief interrupted, a coy smile on her face.

“H-he doesn’t quite agree...” Piano thought back to her brother’s anger yesterday. The God Eater simply shrugged, as if that wasn’t her problem. “But anyways, I mostly agreed to fight to let him interview people in the Crossroads. We hadn’t had a chance to come here yet, so it was a nice excuse.”

“So you’re only here because your brother wanted to come here?” Vilivian questioned, raising an eyebrow. “Do you truly have no will of your own to fight here?”

Madame Chief looked at Piano as well, who bit her lip in thought. “It’s not that I didn’t have a reason to come myself... It was just that my reasons for being here weren’t as strong as my brother’s...”

“Were?~” Madame Chief chimed in. “But that changed, didn’t it?~”

“Well...” Piano began, looking away. “When I fought Angelique, she seemed pretty upset by me beating her. Not just because she lost, but because of the fact that she lost to me. That I wasn’t good enough to lose to. And that hurt...”

“Without doubt.” Vilivian agreed. “Your value as a warrior was judged twice that day. Once by Angelique and once by me.”

“Right...” Piano said, flinching at the memory. “And my brother worked hard to make Quan tired for me, so I couldn’t hold back for his sake. And for Quan’s sake as well. After all, everyone coming here must be worth something for you to call them here, right?”

“But of course~” Madame Chief teased. “Angelique, Quan, Volley, Pembroke, Armius, Rum~ Everyone of them had quite a few chances to win~ It’s interesting that it’s you two that made it this far~ But all of you are very interesting and strong in your own ways~ It’s been lots of fun watching you all fight to the best of your abilities~”

“Exactly...” Piano agreed, nodding. “All my life, I did well by not standing out. I liked staying out of people’s attention and doing what was needed in the shadows, letting my brother soak up all the attention. But from the moment I accepted the invitation, I couldn’t just hide to the side. It would be insulting to everyone else.”

Piano stood up, water dripping from her body as she gave Vilivian a determined look. Back out of the water, Vilivian noticed that the wounds Piano had gotten from her two fights the last two days had all vanished, scars and all. The Matriarch raised an eyebrow at Piano, standing up herself.

“And at this point, winning the tournament isn’t about the wish. Though I guess it never really was, cause I was already happy for the most part with my life. It was only after today that I even figured out what I wanted. And at this point, I’m already well within the spotlight. I might as well go all out for the win. So tomorrow, Vilivian, I-”

Piano hesitated for just a moment, before steeling herself again. “I.. I will beat you! Not for the wish, not for some other objective. I will beat you, fully and completely, for myself. I hope you’ll forgive me.” Her shy personality quickly returned, bowing in apology to the shorter girl.

Vilivian gave a slight scoffing sound, though the slight smile on her face told Madame Chief that the older woman was not offended. “I was coming here to convince you to go all out against me. A victory against an opponent that held back wouldn’t be as satisfying for a conclusion. Though I wonder if you can win without that healing crystal your brother managed to bargain from me.”

“O-oh, that?” Piano gave a nervous little laugh. “My brother always said that a performer should always look her best before the most magnificent shows. And I guess this would be such a show.”

“And here comes the Wordsmith’s words, crawling from the lips of another.” Vilivian complained with a grin, shaking her head as Madame Chief giggled nearby. “But are you saying that you can beat me without that little advantage?”

“I think so. If I couldn’t, then I wouldn’t have been invited to this tournament, would I?” Piano tilted her head in thought, getting another giggle out of Madame Chief. “And since we’re on the subject, you won’t be holding back, will you? You were against the other two you fought, so I don’t want to win because you were holding back for my sake.”

Vilivian crossed her arms, looking confident in herself. “I suppose I shouldn’t look down on you, Blackblood. While I still won’t use the sword against you for personal reasons, I promise not to hold anything else back against you. I’ll bring to bear all of the might of the Sentinel of Graal. Try not to

break too quickly.”

“I’m not that fragile…” Piano complained quietly, looking away. “And I promise to use every bit of talent I’ve built up for myself to take you down.”

“And no help from your brother.” Vilivian added. “From what I’ve seen, your brother has done most of the work against your opponents the last couple of days. But I won’t fall for his charms and magics, nor do his words hold any influence over me once you were the one to be my opponent. You will have to defeat me with your own strength if you wish to win and join your blade as the second to have taken me down..”

“The only way I can earn my wish is beating you by myself. Otherwise, my wish is useless.” Piano matched Vilivian’s gaze once more, her purple and gold eyes shimmering with a strong determination as they met Vilivian’s emerald ones that matched that determination.

“And what might that wish be, exactly?” Vilivian asked, curious.

“I’m sorry, I’m afraid I can’t tell you that.” Piano apologized, wrapping her tail around her wrist. “I’ve been told it’s bad luck to share a wish before it comes true. So you’ll have to wait.”

“Aw~ Who’s the party pooper that told you that?~” The God Eater complained, pouting adorably from her still lowered position.

“From someone who seems to have a lot of knowledge on such matters.” Piano said vaguely, a sheepish smile on her face as she thought to Quan’s words from earlier.

While the goddess still sulked, Vilivian looked thoughtful. “Well, it’s not like I had a solid idea of what to wish for myself to share. Perhaps it will take form during our fight tomorrow.”

“That would be nice...” Piano nodded, holding out a hand to shake Vilivian’s. The Matriarch accepted after a moment, still unused to civilized customs. “In that case, may the best woman win tomorrow.”

“Woman? So you don’t view me as a monster, as does everyone else in this town?” Vilivian asked curiously, still gripping Piano’s hand.

“I mean... even if you are, that doesn’t really change anything. Either I win or you. Luckily, I think I have a talent or two for fighting monsters...”

“Very well. Trickster, no more words will be needed. You’ll get the entertainment you desire from the two of us.”

“This will surely be a treat~” Madame Chief hummed, her grin a devious smile at the thought of tomorrow’s match. “Do be sure to put a good show on for me, dear travelers~”

Black and Purple

“What a beautiful day it is today, my lovely fans, is it not? Just a perfect day for bloodshed and spectacle, and I have just that kind of content for you for this concert! The God Eater brought eight unique fighters from across the multiverse to our humble Crossroads to compete for one wish from our local resident goddess! Two remain after two intense days of battle, and now they face each other on this final day, both having hardened their hearts to be willing to take down the other and prove themselves worthy of having their wish granted more!”

Miss X’s proclamations brought about a host of cheers from the audience as she began the final day of the Cross Tournament with overwhelming exuberance. Her platform seemed to spin and dazzle even more than the last two days had even shown. Given this was the finale, it seemed Miss X didn’t want to hold anything back.

“Our first competitor is the shy martial artist whose skills have proven themselves over and over against the fiercest opponents in the multiverse, Piano! Her previous two opponents showed off impressive magical and physical abilities respectively, putting Piano up against a tough fight! But her opponent combines the best of both worlds, creating the ultimate culmination of danger to finish off this tournament! Let’s see if she has what it takes to overcome impossible odds as the obvious underdog in this match!”

“And across from her, the fearsome demon that has inspired terror in her opponents and the audience, Vilivian of Lilith! With brutal force she managed to trash her two powerful opponents, proving she was on top of them! But now her opponent isn’t going to try and match her blow for blow, but use cunning and skill to overcome her disadvantage! Can Vilivian adapt her strategies to these new tactics or will her reign as the powerhouse of the Cross Tournament come to a screeching halt?”

“These two women are masters of their bodies and minds, right down to the strange colored blood they both have! I’m sure the fight that’s coming up will stain the battlefield in all sorts of colors, I can hardly wait to see it! While I’m sure they’re not super eager to hurt each other, they both have one dream, one wish to earn the right to see become real, so they’re going to have to put aside what little friendliness they have with each other and put it all on the line for victory! Get ready folks! The show is about to begin!”

Both women had stood in the arena, neither one having been late and both showing signs of being ready to begin. Vilivian was dressed in a simple white blouse and black leather pants, though both were not long for this world with the way Vilivian has fought thus far. Her silver sword keepsake was already buried in the ground, stuck so deep as to render it impossible to remove by the hands of others. Piano, on the other hand, was still dressed in her slightly tattered, but still flashy and elegant raiments as she adjusted her stance back and forth. Her sword was prominently displayed on her back, her intentions to use it obvious to all as the two women stared at each other with barely any expression on their face.

“And it looks like these two are raring to go at it themselves!” Miss X proudly called, floating high above them at equal level to the God Eater’s balcony, the goddess watching down at the two below with a look that showed how entertained she already was with them. “So let’s get this countdown going! 3! 2!”

Below, Vilivian shifted her stance, holding her arms forward ready to fight. Across from her, Piano did something completely different from previous bouts, getting on all fours with all four limbs in a solid starting position, her body poised in the air as she prepared for an all out sprint. Vilivian's mouth twisted into an almost demonic smirk at the expression on Piano's face, the latter having a cold expression that seemed to almost be dissecting her opponent before they met.

But it was the glint in the Devil Blood's eye, one that seemed to be viewing Vilivian as prey to be hunted that really got her fired up. The scared, timid girl she fought alongside two days past was buried now, leaving only a calculated warrior that would do anything to complete her objective. And Vilivian could hardly wait to cause such a strong will to fail its mission.

"1! Let's get this show going!" Miss X gave a cheer, fireworks shooting up above her and bursting.

The instant the explosions went off, Piano rushed forward with impressive speed, crossing the distance between her and her opponent before the Matriarch could even realize it happened. Rising up, she launched a straight punch that was met by a jab from Vilivian, the force of their opposing blows creating a ripple in the air as the chime of bells rang out around the arena. But instead of the field shifting significantly in biome, instead only a transparent wall shimmered around the edge of the battlefield. The God Eater seemed to have deemed a change of scenery unnecessary for this bout.

Piano instantly launched into her next attack, flipping into a front handspring as her right heel had been popped off as the punch landed. Catching the dart with her toes, she slammed it down on Vilivian's shoulder, drawing purplish blood with a grunt of pain as the lithe girl leaped in the air.

Her other heel was already spinning in the air between them, Piano twisting into a spinning kick to launch it towards Vilivian. More prepared, the Matriarch knocked the purple projectile aside with a backhand, only to notice too late that Piano had continued her rotation and landed a hard haymaker into the red head's jaw, sending her rolling onto the dirt.

"And Piano draws first blood, launching a devastating short range assault that lodged one of those deadly heels of hers into Vilivian's shoulder before clocking her jaw! Where were starts like these the last couple of days?"

'Burst!' came a quick incantation of magic from Vilivian, a purple aura surrounding her arm as she swung in Piano's direction, causing the earth to explode between them and send the girl running back to avoid shrapnel.

But four throwing knives quickly hurtled themselves between the blast, which Vilivian deflected by pulling out the heel from her shoulder and smashing them aside with the makeshift weapon. She then tossed Piano's heel back at the younger woman, only for a red blur to dash underneath it and land a blow on Vilivian's stomach. The Matriarch tried to back up, but a hand gripping her arm held her long enough for three more gut punches to land, each one causing Vilivian to bend over more, before the last one was used to flip Vilivian onto the ground with a hard impact.

Vilivian barely had any time to recover before she had to dodge out of the way as Piano brought her foot down in a crushing axe kick towards her head. Vilivian rolled a good distance away, doing a sweeping backhand to stop Piano's assault as she had to leap back.

The Matriarch cracked her neck for a moment to adjust it after such a hard landing, before she was the one to approach. She kept her arms in as Piano got into a defensive stance at the charge, before lashing out with a punch with no wind-up. The slim martial artist barely dodged out of the way, her hair whipping up from the gust of the powerful blow so close. Vilivian soon had a hook shoot out towards Piano's side, the martial artist deflecting it with an open palm as she now squarely faced her opponent once more.

A barrage of punches soon followed, with Piano deflecting each one with an open hand every time, sending the blows harmlessly to either side as she maintained her position. Every time Vilivian tried to trick her from another angle, Piano's centralized stance made it so she could always respond before returning to the same position. It didn't help that Piano's longer reach meant she had more time to deflect the blows versus Vilivian's shorter arms, keeping a set distance between them.

But Vilivian had an idea, looking down at the planted feet of the Devil Blooded. Dropping low to sweep her legs, she was surprised to see that Piano was already in the air and kicking down at her. She raised her arms to block, as Piano flipped back to regain distance.

Vilivian raised her arm again, directing the flow of magic once more as her arm radiated a purple energy. 'Burst'

But even as she finished the incantation, Piano was already crossing the gap. As the ground behind her exploded, Piano already slammed her fist into Vilivian's face and sent her sailing across the battlefield. As Vilivian rolled onto her feet, Piano had reached her again and kicked her in the chest, knocking her to the ground. Piano quickly leaped on top of the fallen Matriarch, using her hips to pin down her opponent's stomach and hold her in place as Piano began to rain blows down.

Vilivian moved her head out of the way, covering it with her arms as the surprisingly powerful punches of Piano were something she couldn't take too many of in this form. And yet, the flow of the Blackblood's life essence was still keeping a slow flow through her veins. It didn't have any of the fiery passion that she had used to defeat her first opponent.

Bucking her hips powerfully, she flung Piano off of her. As Piano stumbled onto her feet, Vilivian leaped up and closed in, beginning her own counterattack with a straight punch. Piano toughened her muscles as she raised her arms, getting sent back into the wall as she let out a gasp of pain. But she barely had time to react before another explosive fist slammed into the wall where her head was.

"What happened to your resolve, Blackblood?" Vilivian asked, slamming more blows towards the Devil Blood. "Have you already lost the nerve you showed me last night?"

Piano didn't say anything at first, her eyes focused on Vilivian's punches, seeming to pay attention to how she prepared each one. This seemed to help her block them as well as some other purpose. Her golden eye seemed to flash with glimmering light with each punch, whether it hit or missed.

Seeing an opening in the barrage, Piano leaped up and curled her body as she pressed against the wall. Pushing off, she soared over Vilivian's head and landed behind the red head. Vilivian spun around in a backhand, only to see that Piano had contracted into a ball again on the ground, before both feet launched upwards into a vertical dropkick that rocketed Vilivian's head backwards.

While she was still recovering, Piano spun her upper body along the ground, kicking her foot out with great rotational force to Vilivian's side. A straight kick quickly followed, before a sweeping kick to knock the Matriarch down again. The comboed woman tried to lash out with a kick of her own, but Piano's leaping kick dodged past it and retaliated in one motion as the added force of gravity made Vilivian grit her teeth in anger and pain.

But the Matriarch finally got a grip on Piano's leg. With a tightened grip as Vilivian stood up, the red skinned woman was sent in a semi-circle straight towards the wall with the ringing of bells. But just before Piano's torso reached the wall, her other leg wrapped around Vilivian's waist and locked with her grabbed leg in a tight grip as well. Both of Piano's arms hit the wall loosely, defusing some of her impact before using her muscles and ki to quickly push off above Vilivian again before her face slammed into the wall. With a twist of her hips, all of the force from Vilivian's attack was used to twist the older woman until she was flipped upside down, before Piano slammed her feet down and sent Vilivian's face into the dirt with a loud crack. Whether it was the ground or Vilivian's skull was hard to tell as Piano flipped away from the impact with a slight flourish, her arms shaking from the amount of force they just absorbed.

"What an absolute rush of battle!" Miss X cheered above, as the formerly breathless audience that had simply sat stunned watching the battle now began to roar with excitement at the exchange of blows they just watched. "These two have been on each other almost every moment, with barely enough time to breathe! Let alone get any words in on the action! These two are finalists for a reason!"

Vilivian slowly stood up, purplish blood leaking from her broken nose. Putting a hand on the broken nose, she gave a sharp twist and a dull crack to set it back in place as she glared green eyes at Piano. "Your soft nature betrays you. Not only for holding back against the opponents that came before me. But for you holding back still against me."

Vilivian rushed forward, dodging out of the way as Piano gave a sweeping kick by rolling past it. Spinning around, she swung her fist Piano's way as the martial artist spun back to create distance. She quickly planted one foot and kicked out, forcing Piano to swing her leg to block, the Devil Blood gritting her teeth as the force of the meeting was overwhelming even with toughening her muscles. She was slower to recover than usual and had to bend back pretty far to avoid the follow-up attack, nearly falling over as the fist barely grazed the tip of her nose.

“Like now. Your arms are nearly numb from those last few blows and you think you can use your legs to hold me back until they recover. But then what? You’ve shown no drive to defeat me thus far. Recovering now or later won’t change the way this battle will go if this keeps up.”

Sure enough, Piano was being put on the back foot now, constantly being pressed back by Vilivian’s continuous assault, as if undaunted by the blows she suffered earlier. The blood from her shoulder and nose seemed to be mere inconveniences to the Matriarch, her gaze entirely focused on her retreating prey with each swing of her well trained fists and legs. While Piano had caught her by surprise at first, her centuries of experience now allowed her to adjust to the younger girl’s tricks, not allowing her to even get a solid foothold to utilize her impressive acrobatics.

“What’s this?” Miss X called from her platform, shading her eyes to get a better look. “Piano, the surprising underdog that had managed to pull ahead of her opponent, is now falling back! Is Vilivian really too monstrous for anybody to defeat?”

“You’re wrong...” Piano’s voice was quiet, but still was loud enough for Vilivian to hear as the red skinned girl leaned past the flying fist heading for her head. “I wasn’t holding back. I just couldn’t try before now...”

Piano’s eyes, the only shred of her determination that Vilivian could see up until now, seemed to shine even brighter with determination. No, not determination... hunger. The same hunger her brother displayed last night asking for her name. No, not that either. As she looked into the golden eye of the young woman before her, Vilivian realized that there seemed to be some form of satiation in it as Piano looked at Vilivian.

Vilivian lashed out with another punch to the jaw, but Piano dodge low and past it, planting her feet in a low stance as the shorter woman looked surprised. Not only was a dodge like that impossible with the punch she threw just now, but because she could sense the blood in Piano’s veins flowing into a fiery heat in her arms as she prepared her attack.

She raised her arms to defend, but Piano’s first punch snuck right past her guard and slammed into her jaw. As her head shot to one side, Piano stepped forward and planted her lead foot, before twisting her whole body for a second face shot. With each punch she stepped forward, rolling back and forth with each consecutive punch as she regained the upper hand.

“And our comeback queen returns with a devastating Dempsey Roll directly to Vilivian’s face! It’s a shame, because she’s rather pretty when she’s not in her demon form! But whatever leads to victory must be done!”

Vilivian finally dodged back and tried to punch back, but Piano moved to the side and grabbed her extended arm. With a few joint locks, she quickly twisted Vilivian’s arm and flipped her onto her back. Vilivian rolled onto her feet and raised her arms. ‘Ward!’ A shimmering blue barrier blocked the back kick Piano sent her way, the purple shoe slamming into the magic wall with some considerable force for the weaker woman.

As Piano pulled her foot back, Vilivian dropped the barrier and rushed forward to punch at her opponent. Piano, for her part, began to channel more of her life energy into her fist as she watched her opponent approach, her knowledge of Vilivian’s talent for hand-to-hand already allowing her to dissect her opponent’s approach. As Vilivian went to punch, Piano unleashed the same exact punch, but faster and with a longer reach, her ki-enhanced strike stopping Vilivian in place.

As her eyes went wide, she stumbled back as a swift kick, just as powerful as the punch she just received, slammed her into the wall. It felt like a weaker version of herself hitting her at this point. She raised her arms to block the next punch, but both limbs were sent upwards. Piano then got into a sideways stance, holding her fist an inch away from the staggered woman’s chest. Gathering her ki in her stomach, she let out a long exhale as she quickly surged the ki into her fist.

With a brief thrust forward, Piano’s fist slammed into Vilivian’s chest with more power than anything Piano had thrown before. Pain radiated from her chest and back as Vilivian was slammed into the wall with nowhere to go as Piano’s fist held her there. The Devil Blood then stepped back, allowing Vilivian to fall to her knees to catch her breath after having all the air knocked out of her, Piano stopping a few feet away.

“What an impressive arsenal of moves Piano’s brought out today! Kung-fu, boxing, Muay-Thai, Judo, Capoeira, and now the fearsome One-Inch Punch! Piano’s shown off a lot of skills these last few days, and it never seems like she runs out! Does our martial artist have more collective experience in those skills of her’s than even Vilivian has experienced?”

Vilivian stood up slowly, using a hand on the nearby wall to help steady herself as she coughed a few times. She then slammed her fist into the wall, a loud bell noise ringing out from the spatial barrier that protected the structure holding up the audience. "Alright Blackblood, looks like you weren't holding back on me. Good. I was hoping to make you draw your sword before I adopted my other form, but it seems I'd lose before that happens. But you do know..."

As she spoke, Vilivian's body began to twist and change, muscles beginning to grow in size as her body elongated upwards. Her clothes began to stretch and then tear with a horrible ripping sound, any modesty concerns set aside as her torso began to shrink in on itself, and a long, segmented tail began to emerge from her lower back. Her skin began to turn to a charcoal gray, hardening visibly even as it grew taut over the growing musculature as she rose over two meters in height. Her hair had disappeared, her skull elongating into a calf-like structure and a large beak beginning to form where her mouth was, a long tongue snaking out.

...THAT YOU WON'T BEAT ME WITH CHEAP TRICKS ANYMORE.

"And there it is!" Miss X cheered above, a thrill of horror music resonating from her platform as a stinger at the unveiling of Vilivian's demonic form. "The form that trashed her previous two opponents! But Piano's proven herself against the odds! Will our underdog be able to overcome this new threat?"

UNLIKELY. Vilivian sounded confident from her telepathic message, shifting her enormous weight on her elongated legs as she stretched claws the length of Piano's forearm. NOT UNLESS SHE IS TRULY HIDING SOMETHING ELSE FROM ME.

Piano didn't say anything, merely adopting another defensive stance before gesturing at Vilivian to come at her. But the Matriarch's rising confidence meant that she not only accepted the challenge, but did so with overwhelming force as she rushed forward towards Piano.

SINK. At her command, the hard earth turned soft beneath Piano's feet, sucking in her purple shoes as her mismatched eyes darted down for but a moment. Cursing internally at losing her footing, Piano had to adjust her defense as Vilivian reached her, raising her arms to block as a clawed hand

swiped upwards toward the martial artist to cleave her into pieces. The shattering of metal showed that she was able to draw throwing knives to avoid being sliced into ribbons, but they did nothing to stop you lithe girl from being flung halfway across the arena from the sheer force of the monstrous Vilivian.

But even flying through the air, Piano's senses were focused on her opponent, making sure she could have a safe landing as she flipped onto her feet. The moment she dispersed the impact through her leg muscles, she dodged to the side, avoiding being impaled by the segmented tail thrust her way. She reached for the intruding appendage, only to dodge backwards so that the two clawed arms that were about to pierce her torso instead slammed into the invisible wall blocking the exit of the arena with the peal of two bells.

FOOLISH GIRL. DO YOU NOT THINK I'VE HAD ENEMIES ATTEMPT SUCH A MANEUVER BEFORE YOU? YOU ARE NOT THE FIRST, AND YOU WON'T BE THE LAST TO TRY IT.

As Vilivian reprimanded her, she used her tail and claw to block Piano's methods of escape now that she was backed against the wall, while her free hand began to slash forward at the small girl. Letting out a long breath, Piano began to sway her body, her form appearing to almost be "pushed" out of the way of Vilivian's strikes with each dodge. The sound of bells ringing grew louder with each swing, and behind Piano, subtle cracks began to form in the spatial barrier that normally barred exit.

Madame Chief, the goddess of the Crossroads responsible for creating the barrier, smiled with amusement as she felt her simple spell beginning to shatter under the might of Vilivian's demonic strength. "My, just how amusing shall these two prove to be?~" she asked herself, as the spider web of cracks began to solidify into a more substantial tear.

Then, with a loud noise of a bell cracking, the barrier behind Piano shattered completely, leaving a sizable hole in its make. The instant it appeared, Piano spun around and began to sprint down the passageway out of the arena and back into the Crossroads itself.

WHY DO YOU FLEE, BLACKBLOOD? Vilivian's voice roared in her mind, before the Matriarch chased after the quick-footed Devil Blood.

“Oh my!” Miss X gave a cry above. “It’s been a while since the competitors have broken loose of our Colosseum! While those in the physical audience will be upset that their tickets they worked hard to get are useless, have no fear! The show will go on! Follow me!”

With a shift in her will, Miss X’s platform began to float up above the Colosseum, her heart-shaped pupils scanning the surrounding streets for the two fighters as they zipped down the streets. Then, there was a cacophonous blast as wood soared into the air, and Miss X took that as her cue to head towards it, knowing her targets would be there.

Sure enough, as she floated high, she could see the young Piano getting up from the debris, having barely dodged out of the way as Vilivian had used her powerful magic to blast apart a nearby wall to try and slow the Devil Blood down.

Her plan worked, as Vilivian quickly reached Piano as she landed on her feet once more, forcing the Devil Blood to draw her sword to block the swiping claws, the clang of metal on bone ringing out across the street. Piano quickly swiped her sheath to her left, deflecting the tail sent to impale her before spinning out of the way of another swipe of claws and slashing out with her sword to Vilivian’s exposed side.

But the only thing she got was the sound of metal scraping on something hard as her blade failed to pierce through the tough hide of Vilivian. With how dark the Matriarch’s skin was, Piano couldn’t see if her blood’s corrupting influence was having an effect or not, and she couldn’t hold still to watch as a large backswing sent the young girl rolling below it. She made another slash at the large target that was Vilivian’s back, only for her blade to be rebuffed again by the hardness of the skin.

YOUR STRENGTH IS NO LONGER ENOUGH FOR YOU TO WIN. SURRENDER NOW, BLACKBLOOD. Vilivian’s words echoed hollowly in Piano’s mind, her crimson blade batting aside the clawed strikes of the Matriarch with closer and closer margins, as she began to feel the claws brush her skin. Close enough to touch, but not enough contact to cut. But eventually, Piano’s luck would run out.

And sensing the tail behind Vilivian beginning to prepare to strike as one claw strike forced a step out of Piano, she began to shift the flow of her blood to the most likely contact point, hoping a spray of blood might gain Piano some distance. For a moment, it seemed Piano's plan was going to work, seeing the tail head towards the correct part of her body as she braced for the pain.

But then, the tail snaked to the other side of Piano's body, piercing through the red skin of the young girl as she yelped in pain and the bells on her coat rang from the forced movement of being stabbed. Little blood spilled from the piercing, though a slight coating covered the tail as Vilivian tried to shake it off with a few flicks once she withdrew the tail before the corruption could truly set in. I CAN SENSE YOUR BLOOD'S FLOW FROM YOUR VEINS. SUCH TRICKS WILL NOT WORK ON ME. SURRENDER NOW, BLACKBLOOD.

Piano staggered back, a gout of black ichor pulsing from her wound as she could no longer keep its flow from the wounded area. Instead, she attempted to slow the flow of her blood to keep the bleeding to a minimum as she faced Vilivian with an unfaltering expression.

SO YOU WILL NOT SURRENDER? VERY GOOD. LET US KEEP FIGHTING, BLACKBLOOD, AND PROVE WHICH OF US IS TRULY SUPERIOR. Vilivian's hollow voice echoing in Piano's head seemed excited, which matched the body language of the Matriarch as she crouched into a predatory stance.

"It looks like the dynamic of our fight has shifted back to what we all expected it to be!" The cheerful X called from above, as if oblivious or excited by the danger Piano was in. "It seems that Piano is now the one being hunted by Vilivian! Oh, I got chills thinking about what's going to happen next! I think you kittens better prepare for a wild ride!"

Piano was used to fighting monsters larger than herself. She had even fought some with a good amount of intelligence like Vilivian. But unlike past large creatures she had fought, her sword did not easily cut through its flesh, nor did the corrupting influence of her blood seem to bother Vilivian's flesh at the point of contact or if it did, she was showing no signs of pain.

A monster whose body could fend off Piano's unnamed blade. Too strong to overpower or reliably use martial arts on. Too tough for her blade. Too intelligent to outwit easily. And a fresh wound that meant she couldn't use her ki and body control to enhance her blood flow and make her stronger. Too many factors against her.

But she had to prevail. As Piano widened her stance in preparation to fight, Vilivian lunged forward with both claws, bringing them both down onto Piano. Piano raised her blade and sheath, holding off the descending death before deflecting her arms to the side. Hooking her sheath against the Matriarch's leg and her blade to her side, Piano used the deflection knocking Vilivian off balance and twisted to flip the large monster completely over to slam onto the ground.

Vilivian's tail quickly lashed out to strike at Piano, the small girl barely blocking the whipping appendage with her sword and sheath, though she was launched a distance away so she couldn't follow-up on the fallen Vilivian. But Piano seemed pleased by this, as she quickly rolled onto her feet as Vilivian struggled to hers and ran into a nearby building.

The small counter of the flower shop greeted Piano across the way, displaying a number of prices for flower collections themed around Miss X and the God Eater along with normal selections. Rows of flowers filled the sides and on displays running down the middle of the floor, filling the air with a bouquet of aromas that was tainted by the smell of Piano's blood. The crimson girl glanced behind her, hearing and sensing Vilivian get up, causing her to run deeper into the store.

The hulking gray demon woman lumbered to the front of the glass windows, "looking" inside for the girl whose blood she could sense. Rather than just burst in, which she figured the girl was expecting, Vilivian raised her arm. SHATTER.

The entire front of the store exploded into glass shards, sending sharp projectiles and flower petals hurtling into the air. Piano quickly dived behind the counter, grabbing a glass vase and dumping it out as the wall in front of her was peppered with glass shards that exploded on impact with the wall.

Piano didn't need to try and see through the still raining bits of glass and petals to know that Vilivian was charging towards her through the destroyed shop. She could feel the monstrous ki rushing towards her. She leaped up in the air just as a gray claw swiped through the double set of glass that had separated them, wiping the counter in one strike as the Devil Blood twisted in the air.

Vilivian's tail then snaked up to strike, causing Piano to stab her sword into the nearby wall and use her gymnastic talents to pull her body just barely out of the way, her body curled around the appendage as it pierced the plastered wall. With her other arm, Piano swung it around and flung

the vase towards Vilivian's face.

The Matriarch raised an arm to block the projectile only to realize too late that the glass container had been partially filled with Piano's blood as she destroyed the front. The even more fragile than usual glass broke upon impact, sending black blood to cover the gray skin of Vilivian's arm and parts of her chest, just barely dodging her head out of the way.

As she hissed in pain, her pain as the skin now being affected by such a large amount of the corrupting influence on it, the pain was then doubled as Piano flipped forward once, slamming her blade into the weakened flesh. The sharp sword managed to lodge itself about half an inch into the muscular forearm of the Matriarch, drawing violet blood for the first time in this form.

But Piano's rush of excitement wouldn't last long as Vilivian reared her arm back and swung it forward, sending Piano careening towards the wall. She just had time to toughen her muscles to dull the impact somewhat as she smashed through the wall and left a sizable hole in the back of the flower shop.

"What an intense indoor combat! Although Lily's Forever Flowers has been decimated by the magic of Vilivian and the clash of might of both our finalists, her damages will be covered by the wonderful insurance policies we offer in the Crossroads! Which allows us to watch this marvel of a combat without fear for the small, locally operated businesses that we support here! Now give a cheer for our fighters, especially Piano for having drawn some blood against her fearsome opponent, though she's clearly lost the greater amount so far!"

Piano gave a wracking cough as she recovered from the impact, though she quickly scrambled away before a pair of clawed, three-toed feet slammed into her back as the ground shook from the terrible impact. Piano dodged a few more chasing stomp, before trying to pull a springing vertical dropkick onto the large skull of Vilivian, who simply took the blow while barely moving from the full body weight of Piano.

Piano flipped off of the large demon, landing with her arms outstretched and fists closed as Vilivian rushed towards her. Pulling her left arm, the glint of light off a string showed as the large gray woman reached high to strike. At that moment, Vilivian realized her mistake as she finally noticed the sensation of Piano's blood moving above her.

A storm drain above suddenly burst as black blood melted through the remaining fastenings holding that section up, causing it to spill the remaining corrupting blood down towards Vilivian's back. WARD.

A shimmering blue barrier erupted from Vilivian's raised arms, blocking the corrupting force as the blood began to taint the shield to black. As she was blocking high though, Piano drew a throwing knife and slashed her own forearm, sending another jet of blood directly onto Vilivian's chest with a mental howl of pain. The slender tail of the demon woman lunged towards the Devil Blood, but she rolled out of the way and threw back three throwing knives that lodged themselves into the weakened chest area with a small spray of violet.

"Whoa! Where did that come from?" Miss X certainly seemed surprised. "It looks like Piano had planted a bag of her own blood here ahead of time to catch her opponent by surprise! Did she really plan this fight out this far in advance? Has Vilivian been playing into Piano's hands this whole time, while we all thought she had the upper hand? What a devious trick from such a meek girl! Guess we're all still learning to be worried about the quiet ones!"

The bag in question fluttered down, revealing it to be made of the same material as Piano's clothes, having quickly sewn several of these bags and filled them with her blood throughout the previous night before healing with the crystal Forte got for her. She hid a few of these, having planned to use them to catch Vilivian by surprise and hopefully coat her in blood, or at least create openings to strike with her sword. But more blood-covered skin would mean more weak points, which would make Piano's job easier.

THIS STILL ISN'T ENOUGH TO DEFEAT ME, BLACKBLOOD. Vilivian's voice rang in her mind, as if intruding on this optimism that the martial artist possessed. YOU STILL HAVE TO GET YOUR BLADE PAST MY CLAWS AND TAILS. AND I'VE FOUGHT MORE SWORDSMAN THAN YOU KNOW TECHNIQUES OF. I WON'T BE SO EASILY VANQUISHED.

Piano flung another pair of throwing daggers, which were easily shattered by a swing of Vilivian's claws. Even as injured as she was, the Matriarch still showed no sign of slowing. Piano could speed up her blood flow to maybe get a few blows in, but with the open wound she had, she couldn't do that for very long. She'd have to create another opening.

Retreating backwards, Piano ran down a block with Vilivian hot on her heels, before diving into another building. Vilivian again stopped outside, though this time she took her time to examine the situation. She could feel Piano's blood moving rather sluggishly in her veins, trying to conserve their energy for combat. She could also sense the droplets of blood Piano was leaving where she ran, like a trail of crumbs leading to her... and the large bag of blood hidden between the two floors of this building.

THAT WON'T WORK THIS TIME, BLACKBLOOD. That was the only warning Vilivian gave before gathering the energy and commanding presence needed to keep the next spell under control. DESTROY.

The entire building erupted in a magical explosion from the ground up. Piano gave a cry as the building blasted upwards by the force of the spell, before it all came crashing down in a huge pile of rubble as wood and stone collapsed on top of her, the neon sign in the front exploding from the force and riddling some of the weaker portions of Vilivian's flesh in glass shards that she didn't react to.

"There it is folks! The spell that destroyed half the arena in Vilivian's first showing against Volley, once again used to great effect! Mr. Roberts is going to have a fit now that he has to repair his shop, but I'm sure he's having a blast right now seeing all this destruction! I know I am! Let them hear your excitement, everyone!"

There was a roar from the Colosseum as Vilivian strode forward. She could sense where Piano lay, and was intent on finishing the fight quickly before she pulled any more tricks. But as she got to the large rock she could sense the young girl under, she felt the blood begin to quicken beneath her feet.

With great force, the rock was pushed away by Piano's prone form, which Vilivian caught with both hands, stopping it in its tracks. But before she could throw it back, a crimson blade oozing with Piano's blood in Vilivian's senses pierced through the rock in a swift stab, catching Vilivian's chest as she gave a grunt of pain. The blade then twisted, slashing fully across the gray chest of the Matriarch as a gout of violet sprouted from the wound as the rock was carved through like butter. Weakened by the slash, the rock then shattered in Vilivian's powerful grip, revealing visually to her the bloodied Piano.

Her clothes were even more tattered than before, her head was bleeding slightly from where she slammed her head into the ground and she was covered in bruises, but her face and skin were darkened. Her head and side wounds bled more quickly than before as Piano had quickened her blood flow to give herself a boost in strength to get this blow.

“But that hasn’t been enough to put down Piano before and it won’t start now as she managed to turn around and really draw some blood with that powerful strike! Will this finally be the turning point in this fight?”

As Vilivian looked down at the blood spilling from her, almost impressed with how much this young, small girl was pushing her, Piano used her boosted strength and speed to quickly rush back and begin making her way up the hill on the next street.

It took a second for Vilivian to follow, sensing Piano’s blood slowing down to conserve her remaining blood supply. She likely had already lost a quarter of the blood needed before she passed out, she couldn’t afford to spill more just yet.

As Vilivian began to run up the hill on all fours to catch up, Piano had finished messing with the brakes of a wooden cart full of fruits, vegetables, and other produce and kicked it down the hill towards the Matriarch at high speeds. The powerful demon caught the cart as it reached her, slowing it to a stop, only to realize that there was another blood pack above her head and that Piano was quickly following after the cart to take advantage of the opportunity.

SHATTER. The cart began to explode from the magical force imbued into it, only for Piano’s lithe form to leap through the debris and deliver a cut to Vilivian’s arm, cutting through the already nicked portion from earlier and managing to cut through some muscle as she leaped past. She then grabbed the string, pulling it and releasing her next payload of black blood onto Vilivian.

The demon roared in pain in the minds of Piano and Miss X once more, before rushing after the former to slash at her with the nearly foot long claws on her arms. Piano’s sword was raised to block it, but the weapon was sent up in the air upon impact, as well as a portion of the nearby wall being gouged out and the pipe along the outside getting nearly wrenched out from the force as Piano flipped in the air.

But with a quick movement, Piano grabbed the broken pipe that jutted out and ripped the other half off its weakened bolts with a yank, swinging the makeshift club with the force of her rotation. While Vilivian's skin was tough, the blunt force of the blow was enough to make her legs buckle for a second as Piano landed and began another swing with a strong stance. The Devil Blood had stolen a few talents of club fighters and baseball players, so she used their techniques to maximize the power of each swing.

But eventually, Vilivian managed to move an arm to solidly block the attack. But the moment impact was made, Piano let go of the pipe and leaped up, grabbing her sword just as it was reaching her and slashing, getting another good hit on Vilivian. Giving a howl of pain and anger, Vilivian lunged with her injured arm, only for Piano to fling her sword up and duck under the attack, speeding up her blood once more as she grabbed the pipe before it hit the ground.

What followed was a nearly non-stop, high speed combo of Piano as she kept juggling the pipe and sword in the air between attacks, switching between sword talents and club talents along with her enhanced strength and pouring as much of her ki into each blow as she could manage. With all of the power and the rapid fire nature of the assault, for the first time since she transformed Vilivian was being driven back, gouts of violet erupting from each bite of Piano's blade.

Just as she started getting used to the current pace of Piano's blows, though, Vilivian was soon met with a third implement as the sheath for Piano's sword came into play once more, slamming into the wounds the sword had left with pinpoint precision, causing another burst of pain that forced Vilivian back another step as Piano's wound bled freely and swiftly once more. Each time Piano switched to a new weapon as it came down to her hand, she used a different fighting style for that weapon, ensuring that Vilivian couldn't be too confident as to how she'll fight with that tool. For a minute, Piano was fully on the offensive.

"Wowwy wow! Look at Piano swing all those weapons! If I didn't have perfect vision so I could see all you lovelies in the audience, I would think she has three arms to swing them all! What blinding speed, just like she used to beat down Angelique! What an impressive feat of juggling, swordsmanship, and... pipesmanship? It's certainly a strange weapon to be using! But she used them both to beat Quan! And it looks like she's finally putting it all together to finally take down the unstoppable monster that is Vilivian!"

But even as she spoke, Piano's movements began to slow down, forcing her blood to do so as she was starting to see spots in her eyes from blood loss. As the assault finally died down, Vilivian

thought she saw her opportunity and stabbed the tail forward, trying to pierce Piano while she recovered.

But Piano saw that coming too. Flipping up and leaving the pipe to be impaled through and split apart from the sheer force of the thrust, Piano grabbed her unnamed blade with both hands and swung it in the cleave she made to Vilivian's arm earlier, finally cutting through it all the way with a yell as she sliced off the Matriarch's deadly appendage.

"Dismemberment!" There was a roar of excitement from the Colosseum once more. "Piano has done the unthinkable and sliced off Vilivian's arm with her own strength! Black and purple is really starting to fly in this match! It's still impossible to tell who will win at this point, but it won't stop being exciting until the end! Keep your eyes wide open like your ears at my concerts!"

Vilivian gave a growl of pain and anger as a flood of purple ichor splattered onto the ground next to her dismembered limb, painting the cobblestone streets of the Crossroads violet as she tried to staunch the bleeding. CLEVER, BLACKBLOOD. DOES THAT BLADE OF YOURS HAVE A NAME?

"No..." Piano finally spoke, looking at the purple blood on the red blade. "Truth be told, this sword probably shouldn't exist... Nor should my participation in this tournament..."

AND YET IT'S SLICED THROUGH ME WITHOUT A SLIVER OF SILVER. COMMENDABLE. BUT I HAVEN'T LOST YET.

Before Piano could understand what Vilivian meant, the Matriarch began to run down the street. Piano was bewildered for a moment, before beginning to chase after the large demon.

"What's this?" Miss X looked shocked from above, her heart pupils nearly popping out of her eyes in exaggeration. "Vilivian is running away from Piano? The nearly unstoppable demon is running away from the smaller opponent, after beating such powerhouses as Volley and Pembroke's ATX? I'm sure nobody had that on their sports bets! Just what will happen next?"

The answer swiftly came as Piano realized they were running towards another hiding spot of her blood packs. Vilivian leaped up towards the storm drain it was hidden in, burying her claws into the wall of the building before thrusting her tail up to pierce the bag. Black blood began to pour from the hole... directly into Vilivian's waiting maw.

For a moment, nothing happened as she downed the ebony ichor. But then there was a mental growl of pain that slowly rose in volume to a roar as Vilivian crashed back down to the earth, clutching her chest in pain. If she had eyes, they would bulge from the corruption attempting to eat away at her insides, which were also being matched by her Matriarch powers attempting to use the blood to heal her. This seemed to go on for a few seconds, during which Piano worried about striking for fear of accidentally killing the older woman.

But eventually, it seemed that Vilivian's nature won out, as flesh began to grow out from the stump of her arm, forming a new one in a matter of seconds. The injuries on her chest healed in a patchwork manner, the parts still coated in blood not healing while those just outside of the black patches slowly began to reform. The Matriarch began to breathe heavily from the exertion, before swinging her head around towards Piano.

"What a shocking twist! After two and a half matches of people avoiding Piano's blood like the plague, we finally have someone that drank it up like Chifu drinks margaritas during happy hour! And it looks like it worked out in her favor, since she looks fully recovered! All that work Piano did to do that much damage, gone in a flash! Things are starting to look hopeless for the Devil Blood!"

Piano's heart had certainly sunk at that. She hadn't considered the possibility of Vilivian getting any benefits of drinking her blood, since that usually just killed people and even vampires tried to avoid drinking her blood. And she had already lost too much blood as it was and she didn't have many blood packs left in the Crossroads to coat Vilivian again. She couldn't pull off the same strategy twice. So she only had one move left.

She turned fully around before Vilivian could get into a charging position and began to run full sprint down the hill, clutching her side as she did so. Soon, she heard the horrific sounds of Vilivian chasing after her. But she also noticed that the demonic woman's ki had diminished greatly in force. While she recovered externally, that stunt must've taken a lot out of her internally. She's likely counting on using the last bits of her overwhelming physicality to crush the weakened Piano before the damage was too much.

But Vilivian wasn't going to let Piano escape just because she was hurting. BURST. With an eruption of sound, the ground beneath Piano exploded, forcing the girl to roll into a nearby alley to avoid the blast. While the alley itself was a dead end, Piano was already clambering up the walls as best as she could, hissing in pain as she stretched injured muscles as Vilivian clawed at her from below.

But even before Piano had gotten to the roof and headed for the next one, Vilivian was firing off another spell. SINK. The roof Piano landed on next went from solid to a semi-liquid state, causing the martial artist to go through the roof to the floor below just as she heard a crashing sound beneath her. Looking around quickly as she sensed Vilivian's ki lining up below her to strike, she dashed towards a window at full speed and jumped out of it, sending glass cascading below as the wooden floor behind her was torn asunder by a large claw.

Piano made a sharp ninety degree turn as she heard crashing sounds beneath her as Vilivian smashed through walls to get back under her, heading for the front and leaping through another window to get back to her full sprint. But even as she did...

SHATTER. The storefront behind her exploded into debris, bits of stone slamming into Piano who gave a gasp as she was sent tumbling towards the ground. She slammed into it at an awkward angle, not able to get her bearing before she crashed to toughen her muscles as she tried to roll to recover. Her shoulder ached with pain at nearly being dislocated, but she quickly scrambled to her feet and slammed it into a wall to set it back to normal as Vilivian was hot on her heels.

"And now the destruction is really kicking off as both girls desperately try to do what they want! Walls and floors are no longer obstacles for Vilivian, much to the escaping Piano's dismay! Will she be able to reach where the next step of her plan is before her gray pursuer gets those sharp claws on her?"

But as they reached a straight path, Piano noticed that Vilivian came to a stop behind her. Not slowing down to look back, Piano dashed as fast as she could to gain distance, only to realize what was going on as Vilivian planted herself firmly at the end of the street. The Matriarch gathered magic inside of her and began opening her mouth as a pink glow began to emanate from her core.

"Uh oh! Looks like Vilivian is going to finish things off with the blast that halved Pembroke's ATX! The barrier protected the Crossroads last time, but there's nothing in its way now! This is sure to

be total destruction!”

The God Eater, overall amused with the match so far, gave a slight frown at that, not wishing for the town to be destroyed merely for her amusement. She held her power at the ready as she watched what happened next.

Piano, for her part, was trying to use Vilivian’s ki to gauge what she should do as the demon’s life force seemed to almost swell before the attack. Just when it reached the apex and was starting to drop, Piano put all of her ki into speeding up her movements, throwing herself fully to the side and into a building as a beam of deadly pink energy raced down the street. The whole street was overtaken by the blast, the ground being incinerated by the magic as it rushed down the way towards a tea shop at the end.

With a ringing of bells, the door to the tea shop slid open, catching the deadly attack into open space. Outside of town, another set of doors opened to release the blast harmlessly into the air, lighting up the sky with a glow of pink as a good portion of the Crossroads was spared.

But all of the shops along this street were now missing their fronts, as they had been disintegrated by the force of the blast. Piano had just barely evaded the attack, bits of glass in her arms from having landed in shards of glass to dodge. But she didn’t have time to worry about that as Vilivian was finishing catching her breath and seemed to have noticed Piano’s continued survival. Getting up and moving on all fours to take off as soon as possible, Piano made her way to the entrance of the Colosseum she had just left not too long before.

Just as she got there, Vilivian had managed to catch up and was swinging down at Piano with both claws with a mental roar. Piano drew her blade and raised it to block, but the weapon was knocked from her hands as she was sent flying back from the force of the swing. Piano clutched at her wounds, her whole body sore and aching as the Matriarch closed in.

YOU DID WELL, BLACKBLOOD. THIS IS THE HARDEST I’VE FOUGHT IN A LONG TIME. YOU HAVE MY RESPECT. BUT THIS IS THE END. Vilivian’s words sounded hollow as usual, but there was a level of respect in the tone as she began to move forward slowly. Then she began to break into a charge, lunging at Piano with her claws outstretched.

And that's when she noticed the silver sword right next to Piano... and the black blood that had seeped into the cracks. With a shout of her own, Piano grabbed the hilt and pulled the silver blade free, dodging under the claws of Vilivian and slashing her from shoulder to hip, spraying purple blood down as they parted.

Vilivian crashed into the ground as the pain distracted her, bouncing once before landing with a heavy thud a distance away. Piano had been lucky to get knocked where she was, gathering what blood she had left to pour into the small gap between the sword and the ground to corrupt and weaken the earth to draw the blade. Silver, luckily, was resistant to the corrupting effect, ensuring the blade would still be sharp.

As Piano held the only weapon to defeat her before, Vilivian knew she could no longer face Piano in this form. She had used all of her magic on the streets before, and her strength was sapped from drinking the black blood earlier. Piano still had a strong enough flow in her veins to be able to push one last time, and with a silver blade in hand she could likely slice Vilivian to pieces with ease.

So with one last slam of her fist, Vilivian began to stand as her body began to shrink, her skin lightening as her organs began to fill out her torso once more. Her muscles shrank as she resumed her normal, though the wound she sustained in demonic form remained as purple blood continued to freely flow from the purple slash. Her red hair regrew and her green eyes reopened as Vilivian stood in human form once more, no shame in her lack of clothing as she stared down her opponent.

"You've far surpassed the expectations I had for anyone in this tournament, Blackblood, I must admit. But I have my pride as a Matriarch and the Sentinel of Graal, and as such, I cannot lose!"

Flipping her foot up, Piano's crimson blade leaped up to land in her palm as she rushed forward. Piano looked surprised that Vilivian had landed near her sword, before searching her talents for the best sword talent to face a weapon wielding Vilivian. Her chosen talent normally held a shield as well, but she figured her sheath could prove to serve the same function.

“Oh my! It looks like this finale is baring it all!” Miss X cheered excitedly at her position above the arena once more. “No more demon form! No more planned ahead tricks! No more fists! No more words! Two women! Two swords! One winner! Let’s see which one comes out on top!”

Vilivian sent a wild swing at Piano, which the latter deflected with a swift movement. Even in that brief exchange, Piano knew she couldn’t match blow for blow with the Matriarch, as her strength was still overwhelming. But on the other end, it was clear her skill with a blade had rusted from disuse. Piano’s multitude of swordsmanship talents should allow her to pull ahead and win in no time.

But it was also clear that Vilivian was getting some of those old skills of her’s back after just a few blows as she got used to Piano’s blade. Within about twenty exchanged and parried blows, Vilivian’s swings became more focused and deadly, forcing Piano to utilize all of her talents to avoid being slashed in two by the cleaving strikes of the Matriarch. Vilivian had a wide smile on her face, seeming to enjoy herself despite the amount of violet blood flowing down her front as she fought.

Piano, meanwhile, was looking concerned, her skill only barely keeping her alive, but with each second, her own blood was leaking from her own wounds, and she wasn’t nearly as durable as Vilivian was. She was already feeling the exhaustion from so much blood loss to maintain her doped state long enough to injure the demonic Vilivian, and her eyesight was being darkened by spots in her eyes. She had to finish this fight quickly.

Gathering the last bits of energy she had, she sped up her blood flow once more, pumping more blood and oxygen into her limbs as she launched into a frenzied assault. Vilivian looked surprised, but redoubled her own strikes as black and purple blood began to streak off from glancing blows between the two.

Then Vilivian attempted a thrust when she thought Piano was open, only to find the sheath for the sword she was using waiting for the strike. As the sheath and sword met, Piano twisted the blade around and tried to throw Vilivian off-balance before stabbing down with the silver blade. This was however met by a shoulder check from Vilivian right to Piano’s wounded side, sending the girl sprawling back with a whimper of pain and a flash of darkness behind her eyes.

As Vilivian reclaimed the sword that should not have been made, she leaped up and attempted to impale Piano once more, who contorted her body to dodge around the blade as the ground beneath them cracked from the force of the blow. She wrapped her legs around Vilivian's neck and twisted to slam her face first into the ground before flipping away just in time to avoid the furious swipes from the redhead in response.

Piano felt that, while the silvered blade was far more durable than normal blades, against the fierce blows of Vilivian and being wielded by Piano, the blade would not sustain many more direct blows. So as Vilivian charged forward, dragging the crimson blade through the earth before delivering a powerful swing that Piano swayed out of the way of, she knew she had to end it in the next blow.

Backhanding Vilivian to create distance, Piano crouched into a low stance with the point of the blade forward before lunging upwards. Vilivian, in turn, recovered and pointed Piano's blade down and thrust, both women meeting partway with their blades disappearing into the other woman's torso.

For a terrible moment, neither woman moved, the entire crowd going silent as they waited to see who won. After a few moments, drops of black began to appear on the ground as Piano's wound bled first, the tip of her sword buried above the previous stab wound she sustained.

But then with a slight push from Piano, the tip of the silver sword emerged from Vilivian's side, the longer blade running through its keeper before Piano's blade could pierce its owner beyond the first inch. Giving a coughing laugh in pain, Vilivian gave Piano a pat on the shoulder before her eyes rolled in the back of her head and she collapsed on the ground, both blades leaving the respective women as a pool of purple began to grow from the fallen woman.

"AND WE HAVE A WINNER FOLKS!" Miss X cheered above the now roaring crowd as Piano bent down to grab the tag from Vilivian, before covering her with her tattered jacket for modesty's sake. "THE WINNER OF THIS YEAR'S CROSS TOURNAMENT IS NONE OTHER THAN PIANO! GIVE HER A ROWDY CROSS CHEER!"

Piano stayed conscious long enough to listen to the crowd cheer in adoration of Piano's stunning victory over Vilivian, meekly waving at the audience. She saw her brother sitting near the front of the crowd, his face pale from the fight he just witnessed but applauding all the same at her victory. She then looked up to meet the God Eater's gaze, who nodded approvingly at the girl.

She then looked down at Vilivian just as paramedics arrived with blood packs and began to feed it to the unconscious Matriarch, whose wounds healed before they became fatal with that bit of assistance. Once assured of Vilivian's safety and feeling the arms of the medic on her shoulders, Piano herself collapsed from exhaustion, not wanting to feel people's attention for a while.

Calming Covenant

It was a full two days before Piano woke up after winning the Cross Colosseum. When she did, her body was covered in bandages and wearing a red and black patient outfit as the tattered clothes she wore over the tournament laid on a nearby table. Her sword was also leaning against her bed, her numerous throwing knives also arrayed in neat rows on the table.

She had expected to wake up and see her brother there, but instead saw her opponent Vilivian sat there. Unlike Piano, she showed no signs of lasting injuries thanks to her Matriarch blood

regenerating her flesh after some blood consumption. She wore a black shirt and red leather pants, along with Piano's lilac coat that hung on her shoulders.

"You're awake, Blackblood." She said simply upon seeing Piano's eyes open, sending the shy girl's face flushing a darkened color. "It took you long enough. I don't know how these tournaments of strength normally go, but I do not believe the winner is normally permitted to rest so long after her victory."

"Uh... no, I suppose not." Piano admitted. "But I don't have that much healing unlike you. Are you ok?"

"I'm fine. I'm more than durable enough compared to the rest of you. And yet you proved to be the superior warrior. This is only the second time in my entire lifetime that an opponent defeated me fairly in single combat. And even with the same blade was I felled. You're truly a remarkable fighter."

"I... ah... I..." Piano seemed to be embarrassed by the praise, hiding her face under her blanket. "I didn't do anything special. Just what I was supposed to do..."

"Well then I suppose you should finish this task of yours." Vilivian said with some finality, holding her hand out to Piano. "You have a wish to obtain."

"Right, of course." Piano stood up, looking nervous due to her state of dress. Luckily, there was another change of clothes likely provided by her brother in the room, which she changed into. Dressed as she was before, Piano went to leave, Vilivian giving her a strange look as they walked together.

"I'm certainly not one to make much comment on ones clothing, as I simply don what Saki puts on my bed after each match. But do you not possess any additional garments for you to wear?"

“Oh, yes, my brother selects clothes that are considered stylish from each of the places we visit. But since I was asked to put on a performance fighting in this tournament, I thought I should still get my reward in the same...”

“I suppose that makes sense. But perhaps you should wear something else. I would think it would be interesting to see you outside of your combat attire.”

“Uh... well, I have a nice dress I can wear after this...” Piano flushed as they exited the Colosseum and made their way towards the Fox Den. The streets outside were still filled with the noise of construction, as the people of the Crossroads were busy fixing all the damage the two had caused in their fight. The entire street Vilivian obliterated was closed off as they had to recobble the streets.

“We certainly did a lot of damage...” Piano looked guilty, rubbing her arm as her tail wrapped around her wrist.

“That’s battle. There’s no shame in what we did.” Was all Vilivian replied, no emotion on her face as she looked at the destroyed store fronts.

“Right...” The two walked in silence the rest of the way, until they reached the entrance of the bar. Inside, there were people already chatting and drinking when the two women entered.

All heads turned to them, before a cheer came up as they recognized the Cross Tourney winner stood embarrassed at all the attention. “Welcome to my bar, fellow winner.” Saki greeted from the counter, giving Piano a warm smile in congratulations. “The Madame will meet you upstairs in the VIP lounge. Your brother is also up there talking with Chifu, so let him know you’re ok.”

“Th-thank you.” Piano flushed at all the attention, her tail wrapping even tighter around her wrist. “I’ll be sure to do so...”

Piano quickly ran up the stairs, Vilivian following idly behind her as the red skinned woman vanished from the crowd’s sight as Saki laughed and shook her head at the bar. Reaching the VIP lounge, the Devil Blood soon found her twin sitting at a counter alone. He noticed his sister’s arrival

and stood up quickly, giving her a gracious bow.

“My most wondrous sister indeed, an avatar of Nike herself, it is good to see that the shackles of exhaustion and pestilence no longer plague you and tether you to the bed in the Colosseum’s hospice.” Forte made his relief and care for his sister known to her, though Vilivian just seemed to absorb the barrage of words with the same uncaringness as she did to his flattery. “I take stock in the knowledge that you have come to collect the well-sought prize of the God Eater’s wish granting capabilities?”

“Yes brother.” Piano said with a slight bow of her own. “Thank you so much for your help. I know helping my needs has taken time away from your work.”

“Think naught of it.” Forte said, but she knew her brother was still infuriated at being thwarted multiple times over the last few days. And it would seem that he still wasn’t having any luck, given how he was tilting his head in silent frustration that only she could recognize. “I still have a fair few days of interviews to conduct.”

“I suppose so... Were you not talking to Chifu again?”

“On that, I have not the slightest inclinations as to her location.” he admitted with his usual smirk. “She made a sudden departure from our follow-up interview but a handful of minutes prior. Mayhaps the spirits she imbibed throughout our collaging had finally inflicted their dreaded curse upon her constitution?”

“That’s about when you woke up.” Vilivian commented in a low voice so only Piano could hear. “As I would expect of the Trickster.”

“What do you...” Piano began to ask, before they were interrupted.

“I heard someone was needing my attention?~” the sultry voice of the God Eater interrupted the sibling reunion, as a pair of doors opened to reveal the goddess. “Ah~ There is my new winner of

Cross Tourney, here to collect her wish I take it?~”

“I suppose I should...” Piano said nervously, glancing at her brother as she did. He raised an eyebrow, but gave her a nod to encourage her.

“Very well~” The God Eater’s tails spread out, the eyes on the tail seeming to blink as they looked down at Piano. Behind the martial artist, eight fox tails seemed to appear behind her, making everyone look surprised at the sudden appearance. “And what is it that you wish from me?~”

Piano stayed silent for a minute or two, aware of the gaze of the three in the room as she gathered her courage to say her wish. She glanced at Vilivian, who just nodded to push her to speak, before looking to her brother once more. He gave her a smirk, jerking his head towards Madame Chief to signal Piano to talk. Piano took a deep breath, gathering the last bits of courage needed before she spoke.

“I wish... I wish...” Piano took another deep breath as the God Eater stood tall, not saying a word as she smiled wryly at the Devil Blood. “I wish... to have a means of returning to the Crossroads safely on my own. That is my wish.”

Piano’s wish drew surprised reactions from both her opponent and her brother. The former’s eyes widened for a second before tilting her head in thought. Forte, meanwhile, looked absolutely stunned at the request, his eyes flicking as he tried to understand the purpose of the wish.

“Is that all?~ Well, I was hoping for something spectacular~ But a wish is a wish~” The God Eater gave a wave of hands, the sounds of bells ringing out loud as her tails waved, the tails behind Piano moving in rhythm as a ninth tail began to grow to match the goddess’.

And then with a brief flash, the magic was over. The tails behind Piano were gone. And in their place, there was a small fox plushie in her hand, a small letter in its mouth.

“And there we are~” Madame Chief gave a soft sigh, sitting on a nearby table as she pointed at the letter. “All you have to do is take out the letter and open it and it will transport you here, just like it did at the start of the tournament~”

"I see... Thank you..." Piano gave a slight bow.

"I look forward to hearing of where you go when you use that to come back~" The God Eater rested her head on her fist, producing her opium pipe with the other hand as she watched Forte approach his sister.

"Dearest blood of mine, might I receive a proper introduction towards the reasoning behind the necessity of such a method of transportation?" Forte tilted his head, and even though he gave her a smile, she knew he was hurt by the implications. "Have I not transported you between worlds faithfully all this time?"

Piano looked somewhat ashamed, but still looked her brother in the eyes. "It's nothing like that... I just know that you have a lot of people to 'interview' here, and I'll be finishing up my tasks before you do. I don't want you setting aside your work for my sake again. You always give up things for me."

"So how then do you intend to traverse the planes of the multiverse? Will you be utilizing the unique quirks of this Crossroads in order to move on to other modes of existence?"

"Exactly. We can make this place a steady base for ourselves. You can get a place where you can work on your 'writings' while I travel to learn more. Wouldn't that be fine?" She looked to the God Eater, who smiled.

"Well, there's certainly a few places available~ I could even get you one close to the Fox's Den so we can talk more~" The God Eater gave them a wink, manifesting a set of keys with a jingle.

Forte gave it some consideration, pulling out his pen and spinning it in his hand. "... if that's what you intend to do, then I shall not provoke any hostilities by seeking to end such an endeavor. This will be a rather intriguing period in our life spans."

“That it will brother... that it will...” She began to back up, heading towards the stairs as Vilivian stepped back. “So since we’ve got this all settled, I’m going to go look for Pembroke. I would imagine he’s still fixing that mech of his...”

Vilivian nodded, following her down. “The Soldier is down at the beach along with the Smith repairing the golem he fought me with. I think the Fey child and the Specter are there as well.”

“That’s a lot of people... but I do want to see how such a machine is repaired...” As she spoke with Vilivian, her golden eye seemed to sparkle in anticipation for acquiring new talents.

Forte watched his sister leave, a mixture of anger and pride in his expression before he turned to the God Eater. “Well, with that whole affair to be engaged with over the next few days, my conversation with the truant spirited wench has been postponed. Mayhaps you might be willing to take her place?~”

“I’ll certainly try my best~” The God Eater said, clearly amused as the pair sat across from each other at a table.

It was about two weeks later when Piano decided to take off to the next world she would go to. She and Forte had found a place to stay in the Crossroads, and she had gathered quite a few talents from the other contestants. During her stay, she agreed to accompany Vilivian back to her home dimension, with the hope that they might be able to explore the human realms together.

Piano had finally changed out of the flashy outfit, switching to a more oriental styled dress with flower designs, including a patch of flowers on her left shoulder, and high cuts on her legs to make it easier for kicking. Angelique had muttered under her breath about how “Of course she looks good in that too...” and Vilivian had wondered why such an outfit had to be so loose and exposing if it’s supposed to keep Piano warm.

As Vilivian and Piano were getting ready to leave, something about the day felt off for Piano. She convinced her traveling partner to go on ahead out the gate, and Piano would catch up within a few hours. Vilivian seemed confused, but agreed to go on ahead.

In the meantime, Piano climbed her way up the mountains of the Crossroads, looking down at the place she had fought for glory she did not wish for. As the mountain breeze caused her hair to sway slightly, she took a deep breath, both enjoying the air and preparing herself mentally for what she thought was to come.

An hour or so later, she had descended the mountain and was making her way out of the same gate she knew Vilivian had just left. But instead of an empty path beyond the gates where the Crossguards keep watch, a figure stood barring her way.

Standing there with a purple glowing broadsword impaled in the ground in front of him was a man with tanned skin and darkened hair, his eyes covered with a blindfold with golden eyes designed on the front of it. His clothes were a light green with more golden eyes across the front of it. His arms had three gold eye tattoos each, for a total of six eyes that almost looked like they blinked as he moved his arms to grip the hilt of the blade again.

“There you are, heretic.” The man spoke in a low, dangerous tone. “Did you think you and your brother could escape the Ruler of All’s justice by retreating to the den of a goddess whose powers are used to suit her own debauchery? If not for those insistent guards of hers, I would have pursued you within the streets of this twisting place and painted its streets black with your blood and sins.”

Piano had figured the Ruler’s angels would’ve chased the two of them all the way to the Crossroads. She was glad that the God Eater had protected the two of them as part of Piano competing, but she knew she couldn’t rely on the goddess’ protection forever. And she didn’t want Vilivian involved with this, since the blades of the Watchers could easily pierce the demon’s hide.

“The God Eater, she claims herself to be.” the angel continued to rant, his anger at having to wait clear. “My lord sundered an entire world and took down an entire pantheon of gods. Compared to that, one single fox should be nothing to us. But I prefer not to have any collateral damage when I perform my duties. In all of my days, I have never allowed another that didn’t deserve to receive justice to be harmed as I perform my functions.”

Piano gave no verbal response, instead drawing her sword and preparing to face him. In response, the man tilted his head, before pulling his blade out fully as purple fire began to pour from the edge.

“You think you defeat me with your paltry skills simply because you won some contest of might? Your arrogance is nearly as unsightly as your sins. I shall ensure that both stain my blade as you watch your life drain from your body.”

“... I have a friend that’s waiting for me down the path...” Piano proclaimed, somewhat timidly. “I didn’t want her to get involved with the likes of you... And I don’t want you going past me to harm my brother... You may be somewhat important back home... but for the sake of the history we both wish to write, I cannot allow you to do what you want.”

“That heresy you speak of is nothing but a means of extortion and an attempt to overthrow the Ruler of All. As such, you will die for such a sin.”

“No. As much as I hate to do it, it will be you who dies today. I’m more talented than you.”

And with that, she rushed forward, her blade drawn back as the crimson edge prepared to meet purple flames. The angel roared in fury as combat began, the Crossroads getting one more front row seat of the timid Piano’s fighting as purple and black clashed one more time.

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