

[Piano's Epilogue] The Devil Blood and the Angel of Judgement

[Original Doc](#)

Standing atop one of the many mountain passes of Mt Mei and the surrounding mountains, Piano took a deep breath of mountain air, looking out to the landscapes that surround the Crossroads below her. While it would have taken most people several hours to climb such a distance up a mountain without climbing gear, Piano's stolen talents gave her the ability to easily scale such a trek in only an hour. Which was good, as she didn't want Vilivian to leave her too far behind on their journey to the demon Matriarch's homeworld to continue searching for talents to steal. While this wouldn't be the first time exploring a new world, it would be the first time she did so without using her brother's magic. As such, her nerves were starting to get to her.

To help alleviate that, she had switched out of the showgirl attire she had usually donned in her adventures up until that point, made to make her stand out so she could disguise herself as a showgirl as needed and steal talents up close, as well as to showcase her impressive talents in stealth. But since that made her uncomfortable, she switched to robes more fitting for a martial artist.

Her attire was now a dark blue gi with purple flower designs, with loose flaps that hung about knee length down her front and back, with both halves of the outfit tied together by purple string along her hips and golden ties up her front to cover the white undershirt beneath it. She wore white pants and blue flats, and her sleeves only went down to her mid-forearm and billowed out slightly, leaving plenty of room to expose her arms. Her hair was no longer in a ponytail, instead simply tied back with a purple ribbon, and she had a small bundle of flowers tied around her longer horn. She had a much larger bundle of the flowers on her left shoulder, a group of purple lilacs that covered her shoulder and gave off a light fragrance as purple leaves billowed off in the mountain wind, with new leaves regenerating due to the flower's special nature.

Already she could feel her ki flowing through her body more easily, his spirit more at ease to allow the ki to flow through her more easily. It also reminded her of her days “training” with the other martial arts masters she stole her abilities from, which were certainly easier for her to manage socially. All of this instilled her with a confidence she hadn’t felt in years, paired with her newfound confidence gained during the Cross Tourney. It was enough to almost make her smile.

Almost. But then that feeling returns. The one that made her send Vilivian ahead while she climbed the mountain to clear her head. The feeling filled her with a familiar sense of dread, one she hadn’t experienced since she and her brother left their homeworld of Etch for the first time.

The feeling of one of the agents of the Ruler of All being nearby, and looking for them specifically.

It shouldn’t be all that surprising, really, that an agent would search the Crossroads for people like them. With as much world hopping her brother and her were doing, having a central location was an obvious move for them to do, as she had foolishly established by making it her wish.

But what concerned her was how quickly they had found her and her brother. She didn’t think either of them were worth the effort of sending an enforcer off world, when there was so much to manage on Etch as it was, with the illegal migration between Cubbies and criminal elements beginning to gain strength in Aspect. Compared to all of that, a pair of historians like Piano and Forte couldn’t really be a priority, could they?

She looked at the southern gate of the Crossroads, as if she could see the threat from here. While normally, her ability to sense ki extended out only a few meters to overwhelm her, up here in the mountains that range was greater due to the harmony she felt in the moment, aligning her emotions with her ki more easily. But even that extended range only doubled the range, to sense all but the faintest of ki around her.

Instead, she felt the intruder by the exuding hatred and purpose he seemed to project towards her and her brother, as if trying to call them out to the source. The God Eater could likely manage a greater presence than this person, but her purpose never led her to do this. Whoever this person was, they had all the arrogance that the servant of the Ruler of All should have. And it was likely he wouldn’t leave without a confrontation.

Piano took a long, deep breath of mountain air. As much as the idea of going down and confronting whatever monster that was waiting for her was scaring her, what scared her even more was the idea of this person running out of patience and charging in at her brother was even more terrifying. So with one last wistful look at the surroundings from up high, she began to scale down the mountain with the practiced ease of decades of training she had stolen from others.

In only an hour, she was at the base of the mountain and had crossed through the Crossroads themselves, now at the southern gate herself. The Crossguards that manned it, their eyes covered as always by blindfolds, gave her no looks or signs one way or another about what was about to happen. But they were clearly aware of the presence outside, weapons more at the ready than usual as they gave a signal, calling for the gates to be open.

The large red doors silently slid open, revealing a large dirt path that extended out not only for miles, but across worlds if Chifu was to be believed. The area was sparse, with virtually nowhere to hide, as the nearest tree was at least two hundred feet from the gate. There was a ditch along the left side of the road, from which Chifu knows how many carriages pulled off to the side for inspection over the years. Under normal circumstances, the path would represent the beginning of a journey, a new start to adventures waiting to come.

That would be true, if not for the figure currently standing in the center of the road about fifty feet from the gate, was a figure with a broadsword embedded in the ground in front of him, the weapon glowing with a purple light that looked sinister to Piano. He had tanned skin, stood about half a foot taller than her, and had darkened hair that went down to his neck in a style that looked elegant while ensuring it stayed out of his smooth, almost beautiful face.

Not that it would block his vision, as his eyes were covered in a purple blindfold, with golden eyes emblazoned upon it, acting almost as surrogates for the ones they covered. He had several other golden eye designs across his body as well. His light green undershirt, covered by a white overcoat, had three eyes on it while the jacket had six eyes in total across the front of it, with at least eight more along the back.. His arms each had three golden eyes along the inner forearm, for a total of six across both arms as well. He wore simple green pants and a pair of black boots, and the clinking of chains against each other as he moved told Piano he likely was wearing a thin layer of chainmail under his clothes, likely blessed to protect him from the curse of her blood on his vitals.

But what scared her most was the blade he now tightened his grip upon, purple flames flickering off of it. Piano recognized a blade blessed by the Ruler of All when she saw one. One cut from that thing would result in an immense amount of pain for the Devil Blood. Even a Matriarch like Vilivian would be cut to pieces by such a blade honed by holy magics as that. That was the reason Piano wanted to be sure that they weren't seen together by this man, to avoid getting Vilivian hurt.

"There you are, heretic." His voice was low and dangerous sounding, like a fire lowly crackling, waiting to erupt into a blazing inferno. "Did you and your brother really think you 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 this twisting place and painted its streets black with your blood and sins."

Piano glanced back behind her, to the pair of Crossguards now standing at attention near the gates outside of the Crossroads. While they certainly looked ready to fight to defend the town, it did not seem likely they would raise their weapons to protect her. It did not seem that the goddess' will sheltered her from this danger any longer, now that the tournament was over.

The angel continued to rant, his anger at having been forced to wait to fulfill his duties clear. "The God Eater, she claims herself to be. My lord sundered an entire world by himself and brought a pantheon of gods to its knees by his own strength. 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 against the wicked. In all of my days, I have never allowed another that didn't deserve to receive justice to be harmed as I fulfilled my oaths. And today will not be any different."

Piano didn't respond verbally, but instead went for the sword hidden behind her back slowly, drawing it and holding it in front of her. The angel tilted his head at her, a cocky smirk on his face as he pulled his blade from the ground to aim it at her, purple flames now dancing across the blade. It was about a hand's length longer than Vilivian's Excalibur, and was easily double the size of Piano's blade. In every respect, he held the visible advantage.

"You think you can 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 both stain my blade as you watch your life drain from your body."

"...I-I have a friend waiting for me down that path..." Piano proclaimed, sounding somewhat timid as she slowly steeled her nerves. "I didn't want to get her involved with this... And I don't want you going past me to harm my brother... You may be important back home... but for the sake of the

history we both wish to write, I cannot allow you to do what you want.”

“The heresy you speak of is nothing but a means of extortion, an attempt to overthrow the Ruler of All by rewriting history to your liking. For such crimes, I will silence you here and now!”

“No.” Piano’s confidence was now manifested, her mismatched eyes narrowing towards him. “As much as I dislike doing tasks like this, I will ensure you die today. After all, I am more talented than you.”

Piano began to rush forward, moving forward with surprising speed. The blindfolded angel seemed unaffected, raising his blade. “I shall make you swallow your pride, along with your tainted blood!”

He cleaved downwards, the air screaming as purple flames arced down and the ground split from the blow. Piano easily dodged the blow, thrusting forward to try and pierce him. But with the distance she had to cover, he easily recovered enough to dodge around her, attempting to elbow her back. But a kick upwards met his blow with a shockwave impact, Piano was surprised at how powerful such a simple attack from him was as she barely knocked it upwards.

As the two got some distance between each other, they silently acknowledged that this fight would not be won so easily. They slowly circled each other, their cursed and blessed blades staying between the two of them. The two forces could almost be felt in the air between the blades, as if drawing the weapons together to determine which was superior. Piano knew that the amount of cursed blood she put into making the sword would allow it to survive a few direct blows from that blade.

But there was still the worry of the sword shattering from enough of the curse being broken from the power of his blessing. Her cursed blood wasn’t that strong after all. Despite all that, not having something to block the blade wasn’t an option, so she had to make do with what she had. Cycling through her various sword styles in her mind, she settled for the Cloaked Blade style, one that was useful for sneak attacks and hit-and-run style fighting, avoiding direct clashes in favor of wearing him down and looking for openings.

And her best chance to do that was to figure out what sword style he used. His broadsword was larger, suggesting a few styles that she already knew to come to mind. But to test which ones, she began to dart in, making feinting attacks mixed with dodging to bait out strikes. Sometimes, he refused to take the bait, instead chasing her and attempting to grapple her with his left hand, which she slipped away from each time as her eyes went wide.

But a few times he did swing, and she began to pick up patterns with his striking style. He preferred using only one hand to swing, almost exclusively his right as he made quick, sweeping cuts that served to try and kill her as well as push her back to then go for thrusts. He never switched which hand the sword was in, but would occasionally use a two-handed strike, adding surprising speed and power to try and catch her off guard.

Those facts combined, Piano realized he must be using an Aleclucian style of fighting, famous for its defensive tactics mixed with ferocious strength to lure enemies in before cutting them down with a vindictive strike. It is a style that relies on outlasting an opponent's patience, using as little energy as possible until it's time to make the killing blow. So drawing out the fight would not fully be in Piano's favor.

But she noticed that his stance was slightly different from the normal stance you would take. In the usual Aleclucian style, you would keep the arm not in use close to your body, to catch the opponent's arms after a dodge or to quickly grab the hilt for a two-handed strike. Instead, he kept his arm much further out, which slowed down his response to openings. Against most opponents, such a delay would usually not matter, as his strikes were otherwise lightning fast. But to the nimble and observant Piano, those microseconds of delay were an opening she could exploit.

Switching her sword to her left hand, she switched her own stance to the Rising Lightning stance, one that was much more aggressive and pressed on the attack more. She circled around his right, forcing him to make wider turns to keep her in the threat area of his weapon. During one of those turns, while his foot was still raised, she rushed towards him as she reached into her sleeve with her free hand. The gold along his arm seemed to glimmer as he had a cocky smile on his face.

She tossed a pair of throwing knives in one smooth motion, forcing him to swing his blade to deflect the projectiles. Piano reached him in that exact moment, her blade thrusting forward to strike the center of his torso during the opening. But she felt something sweep towards her left hip, forcing her to toughen her muscles to catch the kick to her side. She grit her teeth, her thrust going off to the side as it merely grazed his right side as she was knocked to the side. The angel gave a hiss of pain, growling as Piano looked up.

Angels could normally regenerate, but the curse of her blood should be able to prevent even that. But what she saw surprised her, as purple fire shot out like a jet from the wound. She could see wisps of her black blood mixed in the flames, before the wound closed with a golden light. He scowled down at her, swinging his blade in anger.

“Foul women! How dare you strike my form! Does the depth of your sins know no bounds? Will you continue to pile onto your list of crimes?”

“But I didn’t do anything!” Piano shot back, throwing another knife his way. He swung his broadsword with great fury, an arc of blessed fire shooting out to melt the steel as Piano backflipped away from the attack.

“Oh, but your sins are truly many. Did you not think we knew about the knowledge that you and your brother acquired back on Etch and that it would draw our suspicions? Your brother gathered the names of a good number of the most loyal men to the Ruler. And the knowledge to make blades like the one you point at me is too dangerous to allow in the hands of a group as unpredictable as yours.”

Piano moved forward, ducking under another gout of arcing fire as she swung at him “We’re nothing but historians! We simply want to know the true history of the world.” She gave a feint, but a glint of gold on his left arm indicated he wasn’t falling for it as he punched towards her. “Is that such a crime?”

“It is!” His punch barely missed, a kick from Piano striking his side with a snapping kick that made him grunt. He struck his blade down, a pillar of fire creating a gap between them as Piano leapt back. “You make such sincere claims, but really it’s just an excuse to gather strength of arms to fight and the discontented who would be willing to use them to overthrow the Ruler, just as he once overthrew the unjust system the gods before him once upheld! Don’t think we are unaware of what truly lies in your hearts.”

The two began to exchange blows, Piano's aggressive style putting the angel at a disadvantage. While his power and speed was usually enough to overwhelm any opponent, her innate knowledge of his fighting style along with her superior speed meant that even with the flames trailing his swings, he was unable to get a solid swing at her. And while she wasn't able to get a solid hit on him, she was at least avoiding his sword, avoiding putting pressure on her blade as she forced him to take a step back, followed by another.

"You don't know anything about me... I haven't done anything to hurt anyone who didn't deserve it all my life... S-So just leave me alone!" She ducked under a slash, kicking the angel in the face. Drawing a blood forged throwing knife, she threw it up at him, trying to get some more damage on him. While he seemed able to burn away the curse, it did seem to take more energy out of him than he would like, which would make it easier for her to wear him down.

He tried to lean back to avoid the knife, but the blade managed to graze one of the golden eye designs on his coat. Piano cursed to herself, knowing that the blow would not cut flesh, instead merely clipping his clothing. But as the slight cut bisected the image, the angel gave a horrible scream, stumbling back as he sent fire in every direction, blood seeming to spurt from the "wound."

"You filthy heretic! How dare you!" The man screamed, his face twisted in a snarl, flames erupting from the wounded shoulder. "I shall turn your bones to ash and scatter them across every Cubby so not a soul could ever bring you back!"

Piano looked concerned as more flames billowed out of the broadsword, before the angel started spinning the sword around in circles, creating a near impenetrable wall of fire as violet embers struck out towards her. His sword seemed to glow a white hot, although the light it soon gave off gave the impression of holy magic more than pure heat.

She ducked back, covering her face as she recognized the fighting style. It was an efreeti fighting style known as the Flaming Wheel Blade. It was one of the more aggressive fighting styles, using the constant movement of the sword along with ever erupting fires to continuously close in, thwarting off attacks while incinerating any enemy that stands in the way. To most people without any resistance to fire, such an onslaught would be impossible to overcome.

But Piano had already stolen a talent for this fighting style as well. As such, she was intimately familiar with its weaknesses as well. While the flames made it impossible for anyone to get close, they also blocked the vision of the user. It made them susceptible to sneak attacks. As long as she

got behind him, she could wait for his swings to create an opening to strike at him.

Switching to a reverse grip to use a more assassin-based fighting style, she quickly slipped around his whirling flames and got behind him. She saw that eight more golden eyes adorned the back of his jacket, all of which looked wavy in the haze of the flames circling him. As she prepared her next attack, he gave a cocky smirk.

“Don’t think you can easily escape the gaze of justice!” He whirled around, sending searing holy flames her way. She was taken somewhat by surprise, only barely dodging out of the way. But the close call with holy flames might as well have been a direct hit as she screamed in pain from the passing burns she received. “Submit to justice now, and I’ll make your death a swift one heretic! I might even ensure the same for your heretical twin!”

Piano didn’t respond, her tail flicking behind her with nerves as she looked at him again. Like her, he didn’t seem to need to face in her direction to be able to “see” what she was doing. But given the flow of his ki, she didn’t think he had the same training as her. He didn’t utilize his ki for any attacks besides what most people managed by accident while using brute force. So there had to be another method that he was “seeing” her.

She looked through the whirling flames moving slowly towards her, at the wicked face that grinned down at her with the promise of flaming death. And then at the bisected eye design on his left shoulder. At the impossible pain that had come from the attack. At how he could “see” when she was drawing her throwing knives from her sleeves as the tattoos on his arms glittered. At his unusual fighting stance that otherwise hindered his ability to strike. And the answer came to her.

Just as he closed in with a twisting blow that slammed towards her position with a wave of fire to accompany it, she focused her ki in her legs, sprinting off to the side to fully avoid the blistering heat as about six feet of the road was gouged open with a horrid black scar. Planting her ninjato-styled blade into the ground, she drew a number of throwing knives. Most of them were made of pure steel, but every fourth one was a throwing knife that had been forged with her blood.

Looking to test her theory, she began throwing sets of four throwing knives at the angel as he turned to approach her, her defensive stance ready to meet her attack. She had one blood-forged knife in each volley.

“Useless!” The torrents of flames raced out to meet the weapons, melting them in intense heat until they were puddles of molten steel on the ground. But Piano noticed that he took even greater care to have the path of the whirling blades meet the blood knives, ensuring they were knocked aside if they didn’t melt in time. Especially if it was aimed at one of his eyes, the desperation he showed to try and keep the blades from touching him was obvious, the angel clearly not used to feeling pain.

He then changed his stance slightly, bracing one foot back as he increased the speed of his swings, creating an almost perfect cocoon of fire that covered his upper chest and shoulders. With a powerful push off, he rushed forward and blazed through the path between them, completely destroying the last volley of knives heading towards him. But just as he nearly reached her, she also took off with her own burst of speed.

What the angel didn’t realize was that all of the thrown knives had focused all of his defenses upwards, including the Blazing Bull technique he was currently using. As such, his legs and lower body were free of flames, giving her enough room to run beneath the holy fire. As her hand slid along the blunt back of her blade, she could hear him cursing above.

With a graceful swing of her sword that sliced through the holy flames with more ease than she expected, the remaining two eyes on his left side were sliced in two, although the chain mail beneath ensured his torso wasn’t also split in twain. Before he could recover, she spun behind him and gave another long slash, a spray of red dancing along her blue and red form as four of the eyes on his back were likewise blinded by her cursed blade. She then got into a low stance, ready to try and pierce his heart from behind.

But the angry roars of pain from him caused her to hesitate, giving him a chance to swing a fist back at her. She managed to block it, but the blow knocked her blade from her hand, sending it skittering into the nearby ditch.

“I’ll crush you like the bug you are!” The angel rushed forward, swinging his sword wildly at Piano. Settling the flow of ki within her, she used only the slightest of movements to dodge the blade, before delivering a flowing palm strike directly to his stomach. As he doubled over in pain and rage, she twisted around him and grabbed hold of his arm, twisting it far enough to force him to drop his blade. With a spinning back kick, she sent the blade flying off in the distance, negating its threat for now.

She felt his ki whirling behind her and barely raised her arm and toughened the muscles in them in time to block the kick, though she was still knocked off her feet to fly back a couple feet. Landing gently, she rushed forward to meet him again before he could recover, her open palm strikes flowing like water as she deflected his massive haymakers while the petals from her shoulder fluttered around them.

He seemed just as well trained at hand-to-hand combat as he was with a sword. His style was highly derivative of boxing, though with the occasional elbow and knee mixed in to try and confuse her, which he only managed once before she adjusted to the deviation. Like with his sword style, he had a more open-armed stance to his style, letting the eyes on his arms see as much as possible before going in for the attack.

And it took a while for him to go for the attack. He fought like a true power-boxer, using jabs and hooks to lure Piano into position before going for the hard straights and uppercuts using his impressive strength. Once or twice he nearly got her, the Devil Blood barely able to tilt her head to turn the devastating attacks into glancing blows, even as she stumbled back from the rushing air that slammed into her at the same time. He would also throw in gouts of holy flames into his attacks, either using them to try and enhance the power of his punch, or creating pillars of flames to force her to dodge, which he would quickly follow up with a powerful attack at surprising speed.

But even with all of these advantages on his side, Piano could see right through him. He had surprising speed for the amount of power he put out, but even his blistering attack rate couldn't keep up with the more lithe fighter. Piano easily danced between most of his attacks, delivering open palm strikes to his chest, arms, and chin. The angel was sturdy, but he was not accustomed to having an opponent that outskilled him, and his frustrations showed.

To Piano, there was a noticeable gap between him starting an attack and him following through on it. The loss of most of his vision on the left side of the body was clearly having an effect, as he had to make more of an effort to see where she was, creating openings for him to be struck by the swift crimson fighter. His armor prevented her from using punches that would do more damage, and though her palms hurt with each strike, the way he started to swing his arms more wildly indicated that all of the regeneration he was having to do was starting to take its toll on his energy. He was forced to try and end the fight early, so now he was expending more effort to try and hit her.

But the increase in power in his swings soon turned against him as well, as Piano switched to a style of fighting resembling judo, using the gap in their strength to her advantage by using his momentum to send him tumbling to the earth with a heavy slam. He grit his teeth and stood up, shaking his head. But he soon received a kick to the head, his nose snapping for a moment before it healed, his teeth grit as he slid back.

“I studied you long before I came to track you down!” He roared, swinging his arm up as a pillar of fire rose. Piano easily stepped out of range of the attack, tilting her head to the side to avoid the straight right before sweeping his legs out from under him. “I thought I could kill you with little effort before breaking past the guards to slay that snake of a brother you have! So why are you still standing?”

“I told you before: I’m more talented than you are.” Piano replied simply.

To her, it was the truth. While his fighting styles were certainly deadly and it was clear he was well-trained as one would expect of an elite soldier of a conqueror who single-handedly subjugated gods, he didn’t have many opportunities to fight anyone with real skill. The delays in his attacks, both physical and magical, were the results of using his strengths to oppress those beneath him, as opposed to actually fighting. He had never been pushed to his limits, nor had he ever been in a situation where he needed to develop his fighting style beyond the basics.

So it was no surprise that against someone who had the skills of several masters of their crafts as her arsenal of weapons, such sluggish attacks would prove ineffective. He didn’t have the true power or experience that the likes of Vilivian had, nor had he been pushed to the brink of survival to allow his magic to come readily to his fingers as Angelique had been. Compared to both of them, he was a much more manageable opponent for Piano to flex her skills on.

“You have no idea what you’re talking about, little girl!” He gave out a burst of holy flames in all directions, forcing Piano to back up. “All these eyes over my body are each gifts from the Ruler of All, as proof of my diligent obedience to his glorious ways! And you cut them down like they are nothing! Do you know the amount of shame you bring upon me with your sacrilegious blades?”

A red blade suddenly flew through the air, slicing one of the eyes on his arms in half as he roared in pain from what was otherwise a shallow cut. Piano just tilted her head, looking at him as purple flames erupted from the wound.. “B-but that’s it... All of your strength, all of your abilities, all your power... they are all gifts from the Ruler of All. You don’t work for your place. That’s w-why you can’t win.”

“I serve the Ruler of All! The greatest being in all of existence! Even his attention alone is the highest praise one can receive! Someone like you, who crawls in the shadows to avoid it, would never understand!”

With the furious cry of a beast, he raised both of his arms, creating two pillars of flames to block Piano’s path to escape before rushing forward with a haymaker straight for her center of mass. And with the speed of the punch, she wouldn’t be able to throw him like she did before.

But his anger also gave her an opening. As his fist swung down, he managed a direct impact onto her stomach, his grin malicious as he cheered. “Got you now, heretic!”

“No. I have you...” Piano whispered back as he tried to pull back his fist. But he soon realized that she had not only toughened her abs before the hit to soften the blow, but she had also been positioned in such a way that allowed her to “catch” his fist and trap them in her muscles. As he attempted to pull his fist back, she put one hand on his arm, gripping tightly to keep him from moving as she placed her open palm on his chest.

She took a deep breath, feeling the flow of oxygen moving through her body as she focused internally. Her ki likewise began to flow within her, moving from the tips of her toes to the top of her head. Bracing her feet on the ground as she prepared her attack, she opened her eyes to see him panicking as he clearly understood that something was about to happen, his mind too flustered to use flames to help him escape.

With a twist of her hips and a slight movement of her whole body, her ki surged through her palm into his chest, a pair of cracking sounds ringing out as she struck him with a Heavy Palm strike. It was very similar to the One-Inch Punch she used on Vilivian, though with the obvious difference of using an open palm versus a closed fist. The One-Inch Punch was usually more effective due to it

being a focused, direct strike to one area over the wide area of the Heavy Palm. But that dispersion of energy goes both ways, as the blessed armor would hurt her with a focused strike, while the palm strike relied on the “weight” of the blow to do damage while keeping the blessing damage to her to a minimum.

But that same armor proved to be rather effective. She was hoping to cause a fatal strike by breaking at least six or more ribs, but she felt his ki flow around two of them, showing which ones broke as he staggered back in pain. He glared at her, watching as she shook her hand to try and shake some of the pain and numbness out of the appendage.

“You think you’re so clever, so talented. Don’t you, heretic?” The angel's voice was low, angry, and dangerous. His breathing was more labored, the effort of the battle starting to show. A purple glow emanated from his throat, showing his holy flames at work ensuring not an ounce of her cursed energy remained in him. While visibly he looked mostly healthy, his ki and form indicated that he was starting to wane.

In contrast, Piano’s form looked more visibly damaged. Her arms were burned, there were several bruises hidden underneath her clothes. She had used about half of her hidden throwing knives, including a third of her blood forged blades that were melted in holy flames as red had been incinerated in violet. She glanced over to where her sword lay, wishing she had it so she could put an end to the fight.

Despite all of that, Piano’s breathing was still steady and calm, her mind and body in perfect harmony as her ki flowed through her limbs in preparation for her next movements. Her stance was sturdy, low to the ground in a defensive manner as she assessed her opponent, trying to figure out the best way to approach him. After all, a cornered animal is a dangerous thing to approach, and since this was likely the first time he had ever been pushed to this point outside of training, his desperation was quickly showing itself in the flow of his ki as it wildly surged through his body.

“I have slain hundreds of warriors, all traitors to the Ruler of All.” he continued, flames dancing along his arms now. “I have killed men whose names will be remembered, who have committed crimes more vile than yours. So why is it that you are the one that has brought me to the darkest of depth such as this? You are nothing. You are not special. You are a mere thief, using your stolen trinkets. Against one who has worked hard such as me, you should not win!”

He drew his arms back, the cackling of flames mixing with an almost angelic song as the holy blaze shot forward in a sphere of destruction. Piano ducked beneath it, trying to press close while he was swinging wildly. But even maddened and half blind with rage, he still possessed impeccable aim, sending a bolt to intercept her path and forcing her back once more.

Forced to mid-range once more, she threw a pair of knives, but only succeeded in baiting out a fireball from one of his hands, melting them as his other raised a pillar of flames to send her scrambling to the side to dodge. Pushed to his brink, he was now forced to expand how he used his flames to try and take her down. This last ditch maneuver was enough to put her on the back foot, her mind scrambling for a way to close the gap.

With her throwing knives useless, she decided to try and approach instead, hoping to overwhelm him with speed in order to take out a few more eyes. She dodged another fireball and rushed forward, watching him prepare to intercept her with another bolt of holy energy at her feet. Just as he sent it flying, she leaped in the air, planning to fly over it to reach him.

“Think again!” As he shouted in victory, she watched the ball hit the ground beneath her and explode into a pillar of fire. Her eyes widened and she barely twisted to the side, but half of her body was engulfed in holy flames. She screamed in pain, rolling onto the ground between them as she tried to put out the blessed flames as her cursed blood roiled inside of her in protest. Purple petals floating off of her shoulder now burned with violet flames, creating an ember shower that rained down before eventually the flames died down there and the ever growing flowers could regrow to their normal forms again.

Just as she got the last of the flames out, her body smoking as she shivered in pain, she sensed his ki above her at the last moment before he kicked her in the stomach. She didn’t have time to fully toughen her muscles, feeling the impact as she gasped in pain and lifted about two feet into the air. Guessing his next attack, she toughened her arms and covered her face as he slammed a flaming fist into her guard. She yelled at the holy energy smiting her devilish form, sending her rocketing about ten feet back as she rolled upon contact with the ground. She laid in a heap at her resting point, trying to regain her internal harmony as her body screamed in pain.

She had never been hit by so much holy power before, and the sensation was almost overwhelming to her, as if experiencing a total rejection of her existence by the force of apparent light. Her arms felt like they had nearly been burned off, even as she looked down at them to see that they were still whole despite the smoke that emanated from the impact zone. Her bones likewise felt brittle after contact with the holy power, as if the next strike would break them and allow his flames to sear her torso if forced to block them again.

“Where’s all that confidence now? A little fire on your body and you’re down for the count?” The angel called, marching towards her while he let violet flames drip off of him. “You were having so much fun stealing away my gifts, so I think it’s only right if I get even as punishment for your crimes.”

Piano’s eyes grew wide, not looking at him as she could sense his menacing ki approaching. She can’t close in on her own in her current condition, and her throwing knives were useless. She could try and ambush the angel as he went to attack her, but if she failed, she would be incinerated in a holy smiting in what would surely be one of the most painful deaths a member of her kind could be killed. She would need some way to overcome him if she wanted to turn it around.

But that’s when she remembered the item she asked Nephro to make for her. Reaching down to her waist, she unwound her secret weapon and wrapped it around her arm as she stood up, careful not to let him see. Hiding her hand behind her back as the angel of judgment looked at her, she flung her right hand forward in a similar motion to throwing a knife as she was sure his loss of eyes reduced the likelihood that he saw exactly what was going on.

Sure enough, he swung his arm up to create a pillar of flames, intent on burning the “knives” coming his way. But he was in for a surprise as a small chain continued out the other side of the conflagration, slashing at his inner thigh as he gave a grunt of pain. With a twist of her arm, she sent it wrapping around his leg, pulling him off his feet and dragging him towards her.

The chain was a thin length of silver metal in tiny, imperceptible links that made it seem like one whole length of material. The end wrapped around Piano’s arm had a blunted weight the size of a golf ball to act as a balance, while the end wrapped around the angel’s leg had a pointed tip with a small weight behind it to add mass and force to the blow. It was designed to be used for quick whipping slashes, as well as its current use of ensnaring enemies and dragging them close.

By the time he recovered enough to lift his arm and head to see what was going on, she was already on top of him, slamming a palm into his nose as it broke from the attack. At this close, he saw that she had a blood forged dagger in her hand. Before he could raise any flames in defense, she slashed twice at the eyes on his right arm, before stabbing into the eye on his right shoulder.

As he screamed in pain, she leaped off of him, coiling the chain under her foot. As she landed, she stepped down hard on the chain while she pulled on it with her other hand, creating a swinging motion that lifted the angel up in the air with intent to slam him hard on the earth and expose his back to eliminate them so she could perform sneak attacks to finish him off.

But she suddenly felt a slight jerking motion as he stopped in the air above her. She looked up as she saw a set of three flaming purple wings as he hovered above her. Which confirmed for her his ranking as an angel.

It was obvious from his skills and the amount of holy energy he gave off that he wasn't a high ranking angel, which are only sent after the most egregious of enemies of the Ruler of All. And while she would've felt that a low ranking angel fit for smaller transgressors would be sufficient for how much of a threat she was, clearly an all-powerful entity had other ideas, as low ranking angels didn't possess wings.

So clearly he was a mid ranked angel, one fit for the execution of powerful officials who betrayed the ruler or great warriors that needed an angelic warrior to bring them down. His boasts from earlier were clearly not for intimidation. He had likely killed countless men whose names her brother would've loved to have. And he was appointed as the personal executor of her and her twin.

His wings, however, could not let him climb higher. Only stop his fall and allow him to control his descent. But it was enough for him as he pulled his leg up with tremendous force, the chain coiling up before yanking her along with it. Just as she reached him, his fist came hurtling down towards her stomach as she kicked her leg into his side. The two flew apart from each other, the chain unwinding from his leg as Piano slammed into the ground hard, barely able to cushion her impact while he descended much quicker than he would've liked, stumbling on the landing.

"I've been forced to give this everything I've got today. More than any other enemy I've ever faced before, you've pushed me. This is an absolute disgrace to me. I've lost half of my eyes to such a

lowly threat such as yourself. I will make you suffer for every eye you've stripped from me. That I promise."

He created a barrage of flaming pillars to try and trap her while he went for his blade, but he saw that she was already in his way. Her skin was now darker, as the flow of her blood increased in speed to dope herself up. She slammed her palm into his chest, a ringing of metal echoing out as he gasped in pain. She kept up her assault, ignoring her own pain as she used her toughened muscles and ki to make use of every ounce of enhanced power to batter the blessed armor that had been vexing her for so long.

With each blow and step back he took, more of the rings of the armor began to bend and unlink from each other, the armor beginning to break under the assault. In a desperate attempt to stop the hammering upon his ribs, he flung his hand towards her to try and torch her with a jet of violet flames to the chest. Her enhanced speed, however, ensured that she easily ducked the strike, looking directly into one of the two remaining eyes on the front of his coat as she reached into her sleeve.

"Don't you dare!" he screamed, terror clear in his voice as a red knife was drawn from her sleeve. The ever calm Devil Blood said nothing as she slashed out the two remaining eyes on his coat, before grabbing and twisting his left arm, forcing him to double over to avoid the arm breaking. She then stabbed through the arm twice, piercing the two remaining eyes on that arm before flinging the dagger to fully blind his arm eyes as he yelled at her. "No no no no no no no NO NO NO NO NO!"

He kicked out at her, catching her in the stomach and sending her spinning back away from him. As she regained her footing, she felt him behind her with her ki as he wrapped his arms around her, holding her in a bear hug with his superior strength. His body then began to heat up, as he used his holy flames to become a living furnace to burn her alive in.

"Your people, while in rebellion of the Ruler of All, could once resist even the fires of hell as they plunged themselves in the inferno in order to strike a decisive blow towards our rightful ruler. It was only fitting then, that he stripped them of their strength with flames, and cursed their blood for their acts of treason. And it is only more fitting that you be burned alive, just as a witch is burned at the stake for her sins."

Piano hardly seemed bothered, using her own ability to control her body temperature to lower hers, keeping her insides from overheating as she struggled for a moment. Once she was in position, she kicked her leg up all the way over her head, slamming her shoe into the front of his face. He swore as his nose broke again, letting her go and backing up as he clutched the slowly regenerating part of his face.

Only for the hand to get pulled away as her silvered chain wrapped around it, pulling him in as she reared her free hand back for another palm strike. With a roar as she poured every ounce of ki and strength she could into the blow, she smashed the heel of her palm into his chest, a shattering sound ringing out as his armor fully gave out along with three of his ribs. Light shone in all directions, Piano wincing as the holy energy hurt her even in that form.

Spitting up red blood mixed with violet flames, he shook off the chain and swung fire towards her. But he only ended up scorching the air, as Piano had already looped around him. As his golden eyes spotted her, that soon became the last thing they saw as four throwing knives embedded themselves into the holy gifts, the curse within them snuffing out the Ruler's blessing once and for all.

The angel gave a lamentable howl, his coat, vest, and armor sliding off his form to reveal his bare, muscular form, tattoos similar to the ones on his arms apparent on his torso where the golden eyes were on his coat. All of them had a black slash through them now, indicating that the curse had blotted them out. The blindfold wearing fighter then spun around, fury clear on his face.

"At this point, I'm not going to kill you because I was ordered to." He stomped forward, flames bursting out from under his feet with each stomp. "And I won't kill you because you are a danger to society. I will kill you because I want you to suffer as you've made me suffer."

"Likewise. I need to stop you, because you'll hurt those I care about. I can't let you win today." Piano got into a low stance, holding her hand forward as the chain twirled behind her using her other hand.

There were a few moments where the two looked at each other, a light breeze carrying away petals from Piano and purple embers from the angel of judgment. The nearby Crossguards, who had grown in numbers as the fight raged on and attracted quite a lot of attention. The blindfolded guards looked on with bated breath, waiting to see what would happen. A X-Camera was floating

above the gate, likely recording the fight for the God Eater to enjoy front row seats to the battle.

With a burst of flames, the two rushed forward as a collective gasp rose up. The two clashed elbows, before Piano ducked as a flaming fist swiped across at her. She leaped up as it passed, kicking him in the side of the head. He kept himself stable despite the damage, grabbing her leg and trying to slam her down. She pushed her arms out, stopping her fall with only a slight quiver to her arms. She twisted herself around, kicking him a number of times on each side until he let go.

As she flipped back onto her feet, she had to raise her arms to catch his fists as he punched down at her with both hands, using his greater strength to try and oppress her. She struggled to keep him back as their hands locked for a moment as he leaned in, the eyes on his blindfold glittering with malicious intent.

Piano's head suddenly lunged forward, biting down on her hand. The angel looked confused, only to laugh at her.

"Getting desperate now, aren't you?" The angel mocked, forcing her down on her knees. "You didn't even bite my hand with that one!"

Piano smirked at him, before opening her mouth as her black blood trickled out for a moment. The angel attempted to pull back, but Piano's grip tightened as her blood spurted out with high speed and pressure. His face got coated in cursed blood, but most especially his blindfold as the purple fabric turned black.

"AAAAAHHHHHHH!" The angel stumbled backwards, grabbing his face as violet flames fanned out, sputtering more than before as his energy was running on empty. He pulled his blindfold off, finally revealing his true eyes.

They were a pair of golden orbs, with purple flames instead of pupils. They burned with an intense hatred for Piano as his fists were alight with holy flames. "Your crimes are far too great to be judged by normal means. I shall ensure your soul reaches the Ruler of All, that he might punish you

accordingly. Your brother will likewise be sent for direct punishment. So lie down and accept your fate!"

Piano backed up as he began a furious combination of punches, her palms meeting them as the air seemed to explode from the force of each exchange. In this moment more than ever in this fight, he was still the stronger of the two, so continuing the trade in strength would result in her losing. So she tried to use her chain to drive him off. But even as he was getting cut by the chain, he seemed to ignore it as he grabbed hold of the length of silver, trying to pull her forward. She leaped off the ground, jumping over the punch as she did a spin kick in the air, sending him reeling as the chain wrapped around his neck.

She pulled taut on the length, strangling the angel as he struggled to pull the thin metal from his throat. He tried to spin around, hoping to untangle himself that way. But the chain was too tight around his throat for that to work. So instead, he swept his arm to create a low blast of flames, forcing Piano to jump in the air. As she was airborne, his wings sprouted out once more and he launched himself towards her, closing the distance so the pressure around his neck loosened as he began an aerial assault on her.

Piano defended herself as best as she could, but she didn't have much leverage for power fighting in the air, only managing a few kicks compared to the hail of punches that pummeled her. The two were quickly parted by a punch to her gut that sent her careening into the ground, causing the chain to finally slip free from his neck.

Engulfing his fist in flames, he descended down after her, his fist now a flaming meteor aimed for Piano's skull. But with a quick motion she pushed herself out of the way, coiling her body in on itself as his fist hit dirt. She then thrust both feet upwards, slamming into his jaw and sending him airborne once more. As he tried to recover in the air, he opened his eyes to see Piano right above him with her foot high in the air. He raised his arms in time as she ax kicked him, sending him back to the ground with a painful grunt.

"Where did all that confidence of yours go, heretic?" The angel asked as the dust around him cleared, swiping his hand to incinerate the throwing knives thrown his way. "You're starting to look exhausted. Preparing yourself for the gallows you deserve?"

Piano's breathing was getting heavy from the strain of speeding up her blood flow, her body shaking in pain as every muscle screamed for her to stop. But unbeknownst to the angel, she had finally lured the fight to the exact place she wanted to be. She just had to draw him in without him noticing where they were.

"I still have enough of my talents to beat you. I refuse to lose here."

"You still wish to spout your nonsense, heretic?" The angel sneered, his flaming pupils blazing with righteous fury. "Very well. I shall burn your folly into the dirt behind you!"

With a swift combination of punches, he sent a flurry of fireballs towards her. She swung her chain a few times, detonating a few of them some distance away before being forced to weave between them. She could feel his ki getting close even as the violet barrage blocked her vision, so she wasn't surprised when his fist suddenly lashed out at her through the flames. She leaned back to go into a back handspring to avoid the attack, but the angel managed to grab hold of her chain.

With a yank he tore the weapon from where it was wrapped around her arm, sending her spiraling in the air as she tried to correct herself. He chased after her, a wild smile on his face as he took aim at her chest for another jet of flames. But just as he thrust forward to fire, his foot suddenly slipped from a change in elevation, causing his attack to fly off-course as he looked down in surprise.

He was so focused on trying to kill Piano, he hadn't noticed that he had been rushing towards the ditch on the side of the road. His eyes went wide, looking back up at the Devil Blood as she landed. Her foot slammed down on the hilt of her ninjato, flipping it in the air behind her before she snatched it out of the haze that surrounded her due to all the flames, her confidence clear on her face as she now had the weapon advantage over him. He glanced over at where his weapon was, but realized that she would close the distance before he reached it.

But even that thought was enough to fill him with anger, as he realized that the gesture was an omission at to what ways she was superior to him. "You think you're better than me? A glorious servant of the Ruler of All?! THINK AGAIN, WORM, AS YOU BURN IN HELL!"

Putting all of his flames into his right fist, he sent a withering blast of fire surging forward, his flaming pupils burning just as intensely as he laughed maniacally at his imagined victory. "RULER OF ALL, I SERVE YOU ALWAYS!"

But his victory cry was cut short as he saw his attack was being split in half. Looking surprised, he could see Piano's red-tinged blade slicing through the purple conflagration. Growling angrily, he poured the last of his energy into the attack, trying to overpower her. His body glowed with the excess holy energy he was using, cracks on his arms shining blinding light through as the ground under his feet cracked from the power he gave off.

But Piano's blade seemed to slice through the flames with continued ease, the air behind the weapon streaming from how cleanly she swung the weapon. Within moments, she had crossed the distance, her eyes meeting his as time seemed to freeze for just a moment. The look of hatred in his face was mixed with a level of fear, while Piano looked as calm as she usually did when fighting, her mindset focused on winning the fight and maintaining internal harmony to get ki in perfect flow throughout her body.

Then she passed by him, stopping a little ways away as his flames died down with him still in his attack pose. Their backs faced one another as neither moved, the wind blowing Piano's hair and the petals from her shoulder in graceful waves as nobody moved, nobody even breathed as they waited for what would happen next. Her darkened skin slowly lightened back up to its usual light crimson as her blood returned to its normal flow, no longer needing to strain herself anymore.

And then Piano moved first, flicking what little blood remained on her blade onto the ground before slowly sheathing it, taking a long slow breath as the weapon slowly slid into the extended sheath. Just as the sound of her hilt hit the wooden entrance of the weapon carrier, a spurt of blood shot out from the angel as his head slowly rolled off his shoulders, falling into the ditch as the curse of her blood kept him from regenerating from this wound. Piano had done it.

She killed an angel all on her own.

But as the Crossguard began to cheer and Miss X's voice started congratulating the martial artist on her victory, Piano felt a disturbance in the fading ki of the angel. A sudden surge in power and energy.

Her eyes going wide, Piano dashed forward as light began to emanate from the still standing body of the angel behind her, violet flames erupting from the stump of his neck. With a loud explosion, the angel self-destructed, blasting apart about ten feet of the path leading into the Crossroads, purple flames scorching earth to a pitch black as Piano barely escaped the blast radius. She rolled along the ground, her bruised body screaming in pain from all the impacts.

As she came to a stop, the last burst of the angel had subsided with only a few bits of flaming debris still falling as she lifted up her head to see the charred center where the angel once stood. His flaming blade was also destroyed, any holy power left in it long faded as the Ruler of All's blessing was revoked from the loss. Piano breathed a sigh of relief, closing her eyes to offer up a prayer of thanks for having pulled through.

The Crossguard quickly ran over to check on her, helping her to her feet. Piano was still shaking, the adrenaline slowly fading as all of the aches and pains could really be felt. They tried to take her back into town to get looked at, but she waved them away.

"No, I couldn't possibly... I'm not a competitor anymore... I couldn't ask for more of Madame Chief's hospitality... Besides, Vilivian's probably waiting for me..."

She slowly walked away with wobbly steps, stumbling for a moment as she nearly fell over. But it worked out for her, as she was able to start picking up all her weapons again. She would need a forge when she got to Vilivian's world, as she was almost out of throwing knives from having them all melted. She gave a sigh, wondering how she would explain what happened to Vilivian.

Luckily, it would be several hours before she had to do that, the night having long fallen as Piano walked the path away from the Crossroads. Just as she felt like her feet would give out on her, she saw a small campfire. Even though she knew Vilivian wouldn't need a fire for warmth or to cook her food, she knew it had to be the Matriarch telling Piano where to meet her.

As the Devil Blooded girl stumbled over to the open stump for her to sit on as Vilivian watched her expression carefully. "I take it your battle with the Brightblood was a considerable one, Blackblood?"

Piano looked surprised for a moment, before tiredly nodding. "Y-Yes... He was after my brother and I, so I-I had to take care of him..."

"It's easy to imagine the Wordsmith getting in trouble with an individual like that. Is there a reason you sent me ahead to deal with him alone, when we could have crushed him together? He did not seem that formidable of an opponent from my brief glance at him as I passed him on the road."

"B-B-Because it wasn't your problem... I didn't want you to get hurt b-because of me..." Piano looked down at the fire, her tail wrapped around her wrist in comfort, even as the burns on her arm hurt from the pressure.

"Did you think I was too weak to face such an opponent?" Vilivian raised an eyebrow at Piano, drawing a knee to her chest as she held it close. She cocked her head towards the younger girl, examining her reaction closely. "Did beating me truly give you such an inflated view of your skills compared to mine?"

"N-N-N-No! N-n-nothing like that!" Piano panicked, waving her hands. "I just meant that since I figured he'd be an angel with a blessed weapon, which is already as effective on someone like me. I could only imagine what it would do to a Matriarch like you..."

"So it was for my protection?" Vilivian just looked confused. "But then, wouldn't it have been easier for the pair of us to work together? Between both of our strengths, we would've crushed without you being injured."

"T-That's not the point..." Piano sighed, trying to find the right words. She wished for a moment her brother was here, before realizing that moments like these were why she had to be apart from her brother from a bit, to grow in this regard. If she couldn't talk to Vilivian, someone she had gotten to know over the last couple of weeks, how could she talk to anyone besides her brother?

"W-What I mean is, that angel was after my brother and I for crimes he thought we committed back home... Just because my brother and I are interested in learning more about the world... about the

worlds, I should say, then what the Ruler of All wishes for us to know... He's afraid that if people know more than he thinks they should, they'll overthrow him..."

"And do you wish to overthrow this ruler? He attacked you first, so it wouldn't be dishonorable to strike back at him in revenge."

Piano waved her hands, trying to de-escalate the conversation. "I'm not interested in something like that... My place in history is not to be the one to slay the Ruler of All..."

Vilivian leaned back, looking thoughtful at Piano's words. "So your problem is the opposite of the one I accused you of earlier? You don't believe it's your place to achieve the greatness you are capable of, Blackblood?"

"I..." Piano looked down, her hands clasped together to help calm herself. "I'm so used to just staying out of the spotlight, that the idea of being a part of something like the work I'm doing is already pretty out there. The fact that I'm traveling across worlds learning new things is something I could've never dreamed of years ago... And now I've killed an angel, one of the top enforcers of the Ruler's will... I just don't know if I can go back to being who I was before... and that scares me more than anything..."

"...Then maybe you can use this opportunity to disappear." Vilivian suggested, causing Piano to glance up. "He seems all powerful when you are forced to be under his gaze at all times. But the fact that his angel couldn't come for you until after you left the Crossroads means that his strength does not carry the same weight over you as it once did. Maybe this is a chance to remake your life using your own strength, rather than relying on the whims of the Trickster. Nor on the machinations of that Wordsmith who's blood you share."

Piano looked almost shocked at the idea, along with being a bit frightened. "I-I suppose that's true... But if one angel can find me, then so can another... and I doubt the next one will be as ill-prepared as this one..."

"Then grow stronger. I have faced some powerful warriors in my centuries of guarding Graal. And I can see from my fight with you that you still have much room to grow, Blackblood. Such an opponent should be beneath you. And perhaps your journey across my realm will show you a path worth following."

“...Thanks for the encouragement, Vilivian... Now, let’s get some rest... We have a long journey tomorrow...”

Piano began to prepare her sleeping area as Vilivian simply laid down on the dirt with seemingly no care. As Piano laid down in a small sleeping bag, her eyes stared up at the stars, she thought about what today’s battle meant, and what she would have to do in the coming days. She could feel her ki flowing out of control from all of her worry and concern, realizing she wasn’t going to sleep tonight.

She had much to think about, without any assurance that she’ll find an answer that can assuage her fears. But at least for now, she could rely on the fact that she had a strong companion to help keep her safe. Hopefully she would be able to find an answer for herself in that time.

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