

[Quan Hyun] Round 2: Together, Better

[Original doc](#)

References:

- [Summer League Round 1: A Dance in Shadows](#)
- [Piano and Forte Reference Sheet](#)

Piano is sitting on the bed, quietly tending to her wounds when her brother comes in. Even Piano could tell something was off- she carefully eyes the way her brother comes in with furrowed eyebrows, still dressed in the uniform of a cross guard. This was meant to be a simple respite to quietly celebrate Piano's win, but it looked like it would be something more, the way he muttered and paced as though someone was stepping on his heels.

And then he stops, carefully drifting his attention back towards Piano. "Sister, I am afraid that our fate dances to a different tune than we hummed. Our melody was of Prince Armius, but her notes are discordant with his. I admit, the atrocious melody she hums... It is most bold and catchy." He resumes his pacing, his shoes tip-tapping against the floor. "I put much faith behind your indomitability in combat, and even though you've failed today, my trust remains as an unweathered stone. The stone is not to blame for the strength of the wind, and I fear for the mighty gust of this... Boy. I would watch for wear, as it seems this breeze might attempt to weaken your unbreakable ore."

He stops once more and looks her in the eyes. "Your pain is mine, sister, and I would not wish upon you harm for all the world."

"I don't think I will be hurt, brother. When I met him, he seemed to be far more playful. Like Madame Chifu." She says, carefully applying salve to her many bruises.

"My ear and heart are yours, you know this, do you not? Quan moved as a gale, called to existence by the great lord of the waves. He was the unjust arms of the depths, tossing the ship Armius back and forth for his amusement. A god who taunts with bright skies only to crush with howling winds! His face was a twisted mask of amusement, or did you not see? It was like beholding a muse, his face forever locked in the grimace of comedy." He rubs his forehead.

"Perhaps we are not the omniscient gods we thought, perhaps this, this boy is the eye we considered ourselves to be. But even gods will fall, as we must suppose from the name of our appointment, with the so-called God Eater. But I fear for the speed of this zephyr, for he has proven himself swift in the past. My heart lies with you, but the speed of the sunlight does not lie with your feet as with his. Nary a round matched its breadth, save the diplomatic briefness of Pembroke's and Rum's. I fear I must embark on a pilgrimage to find what I can of this unnamed force."

Sensing her brother's unease, she spoke lightly. "The people of the town will probably be able to speak on his behalf. Perhaps you can find out something about him? I watched him, and he just sped off. There is no talent or skill in his speed, it's only *ki*."

"I declare, it will take all the cunning and wits we've between us to best this breeze." He clasped her hands, earnest. "You will have to channel this unknown boy as you face him, matching him turn for turn in your humors. I will not be there for the feat, but I will return as the crow flies, with all the expediency of the traveler god himself. But I must ask, in this twisting web of people, pray, have you seen the strings he is knotted with? The faces he knows?"

She considers for a moment before speaking again. "Try his opponent from the last round. I saw the boy drag him out somewhere to talk."

After approaching the prince, who had thoughtfully given a description of Quan as simply, "Excessive. In both personality, and in power."

When questioned (with a smile!) about who else Forte could go to to ask about Quan, the response was simply, "Talk to anyone. He gets around."

"I have come to inquire a few questions about the contestant, Quan. I am but a reporter, soon to egress the location in search of a new story, and I would like to know of his impressions upon the esteemed town of the Crossroads." Always with a smile, always with a notebook out, Forte authoritatively asked the opening question to his interviews.

"Quan? That darn hedgehog... He shoulda thought twice about stealing from my wares! I got a good whack on him before he ran off... Maybe. I'm real good at driving those damned weasels away from my stuff but you should have heard the time I beat off a whole pack of wolves from comin' after my meat! It all started when..." An old man ranted as he flipped skewers on a grill.

"Annoying." A huff from Saki. "Reminds me a lot of my nephew, Volley. Too much energy and more words than he knows what to do with. He causes trouble on purpose, and that ain't happening in my bar."

Angelique turns, her hair flipping over her shoulder. A slight frown at Forte. "Who? He must've gone before me, I wasn't paying attention to that match at all. The kid with the scarf, right?" She shrugs. "He's fast. That's all I've got."

“Oh yes, the little one. I assumed he was a human. He was not.” Vilivian only just looks up from her bucket full of fish. “He strongly reminds me of the pixies in Graal. Chaotic but.... Very friendly.”

“Quan, Quan, Quan... Oh yeah! He’s really cool! He showed me how to stab people properly-” Volley demonstrates with a little swipe, startling people into hopping backward in the immediate vicinity. “And he knows a lot of *really weird* things. Like *really weird*. How did he figure out how many crossguards were here in the span of like, a day? Or two days? Like, c’mon!”

“The boy.... Yes. I haven’t seen anything like him before. He just so reminds me of... “ Rum snaps his fingers. “Champagne. Bubbly, strong, and tasteless, I believe are the words I am looking for.”

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Pembroke shakes his head. “I thought it was crazy, meeting that fox. And then the shinigami. And then the crazy fox lady. And then I met a self-proclaimed hedgehog fairy, who proceeded to literally run circles around me to show off. I don’t know what to expect anymore.”

“Oh, you mean that sweet little boy from the first match? He told me about his power, yes he did- say, I feel like I’ve been seeing you asking around far too much about that child. If you’re a competitor’s friend.....” The woman says with a frown. “I can’t tell you anymore. If you know too much about your opponent, you’ll have too much of an advantage! And that’s no fun.” She shoos him away from her stall.

He sighs deeply and pockets his notebook and pencil. "I am most gracious for your additions, miss. Goodbye."

Forte strolls along the street, now changed out of the crossguard uniform, politely waving at the competitors he had greeted and interviewed earlier. Excessive, annoying, friendly... How strange of a combination. But most of all, they simply said *fast*. Too swift to catch. Always out of arm's length, and besides *talkative*, no one ever managed to learn anything about him, it seemed. A loner, then, he scoffs. Loners were always far more vulnerable compared to a team.

With this information under his belt he heads back to his sister's side... only to find her already speaking to their quarry, how wonderful! He picks up his pace, approaching close to his sister's side.

"Have a nice day, Belue!" Quan said cheerfully, before speeding off. When he runs, his thoughts flow like his steps, simple and fast. It's his favorite way to think.

He thinks about all the different ways he could spend his time in the Crossroads, maybe he could try and rile Saki into a fight- He hums as he runs right past someone's stall and steals a meat skewer. Or maybe, he could figure out exactly how many crossguards are in the city, and see what happens if one of them disappears or something. So many things to do here, and so little time- Ms.X had already put out the announcements, and *damn* he has to go up against the scary demon lady, somehow the one person he hadn't managed to go say hi to *just because he couldn't track her down*, like, ever.

And he had tried, too. She wasn't in the bar, she wasn't at the inn, she wasn't walking around the streets as far as he could tell, and she wasn't even staying near all those merchandise stalls near the colosseum, so she was probably just staying in her room. Or someone else's room. Or something.

Quan was getting frustrated. Being frustrated was *annoying* and if he could do something about it, he should. He curses internally as he accidentally knocks over another person. He stops. A thought

had dropped into his mind like a rock in the river.

His wish! It would only be two more days of not getting murdered or defeated. He high-knees above some rolling apples from a barrel he knocked over- He might not win, but he beat the Strongest Man in the Universe, he deserves some credit.

What could he possibly wish for? It was easy to think of things for *now*, and it would be really, really funny to see the other competitors' reactions if he wished for a sandwich or something. He flips over a passing cart and starts munching on the stolen meat skewer. A sandwich, food, food *is* life, long life, oh yeah. He'd mentioned immortality, endless entertainment, and a glimpse of the future. All things he could have used when he was much younger, but it was still fine now, he guessed.

Or to make things a little more fun- Maybe he could challenge the goddess herself to her godhood- if she wouldn't grant it, he would fight for it! And he would win! It's not like it would be har-

Maybe think a lit-tle bit quieter, boy~

He refuses to startle like he did the first time she spoke into his mind, and he doesn't really stop. Don't want people to think he's insane or rude by talking to thin air. He's faintly certain it's bad manners to talk to ghosts and mind readers and spirits over live people or-

Are you done? Your mind runs like the wind. It's annoying, how loud it is in there.

He skids to a stop in the alley, still eating. "Yeah, for now. Something wrong?" He wipes his face with a sleeve, hiding his smile. This- He can think smug thoughts a little later.

There was a slight edge to her mind-voice, although it was amused as ever. *You wish to steal godhood from me? Or the Crossroads?*

"I'm not really sure yet!" Quan rocks back on his heels.

You should be sure before you decide to challenge me~ Just imagine what could happen to you, in my town. Nothing so good, eh?

Quan scoffs. "Don't worry, I'm only thinking about it right now. Imagine all the things you could do with a wish *other* than be a god. Though I'm not sure what I really want. Wouldn't it be funny to wish for a sandwich?" Chifu was so much fun to talk to, really. She was cocky, and her banter made everything better. Maybe he shouldn't steal from her if he could keep talking to her.

He can hear her cackle, the sound echoing in his mind. *Think about what you really want. I'm not so sure godhood is it, and a sandwich might not be it either. But what can I say? I'm just a little fox~*

Quan feels the presence lift from his mind and smirks. *Now* he can think smug thoughts. This is good. He can work with the ire of a goddess, and with any luck, he'll be just a bit more entertaining for her!

He strolls out of the alley, back onto the bright main street and far, far across the streets he sees.....

Her.

With black hair, red skin, and yet another outfit it would be really difficult to steal from, is the person he's been looking for for the past... maybe six hours. Ish. It wasn't that important for him to find but either way- it's his opponent, Piano, wearing bruises as though they were accessories.

He laughs, and speeds up, sliding in front of her. "Hello! I've been looking for you- Piano, right? I heard about what you looked like and I watched your round, it was really cool using swamp to hide! I don't think I could have held my breath long enough to take down my opponent! I have absolutely no idea where you've been because you haven't been anywhere I've checked, and I hope I haven't interrupted you on your way to anything because I think I'd like to talk for a while~"

Quan keeps blathering as he watches her listen to him talk. Surprisingly, she's still listening intently- her eyes haven't glazed over once, and she hasn't started looking away at something or

someone else. But he can only do this so long, and Piano doesn't seem the kind of gal to interrupt him, so he finishes, without wasting a breath- "Anyway! So how are you?"

She responds slowly. "I'm fine. I've just been recuperating in my room from my last match. Thank you for your kind words- you're Quan? The speedster?"

"Yup! At least, that's what I'm known for in the tournament."

"Then it's nice to meet you too, Quan." She smiles at him, folding her hands together. But her eyebrows are twitching so... maybe annoyed? Instead of pleased? Or polite?

Quan draws a huge smile to his face. It would be nice if this was like his thing with Armius- an easy way to read someone and learn what scares them, or a way to connect the two of them, sympathy, he thinks is the word. "Yep! I've just been wandering around the Crossroads. See, I've been meaning to talk to you because you're so cool-"

Piano is nodding along as Quan talks, and he *still* hasn't lost her attention yet. She's sharp, he'll have to watch out for that. He almost pauses when someone appears on the street behind them, someone unfamiliar, not unusual, but...

... Why's that guy coming over here?

"Piano! I see you have encountered your opponent, how exciting!" The... man? says loudly. He approached with white hair and a winning smile, similar in stature to Piano, but not in looks- and certainly not in equipment. He carried only a small bag and a notepad.

"Hey. We-"

Quan interrupts her before she can finish, turning to the man with a big smile and his hands tugging his scarf. "Are you two friends?"

“With all the surety of the stars above! It is only by the great love fate has for me that I was blessed with a glance from the lady; who, do I dare call a bosom friend? But I came here not to sing the praises of my close companion, but rather to hear your tale. How did you come to be here, cradled in the spiraling grasp of this madness; this tournament of a goddess whose own madness is sung behind closed doors. By what twists of fate are you but a maple seed on this distorting wind of cheers and screams?” Quan nods, on the outside. What the *hell* was this guy talking about? Friends, tale, how did he get here?

Quan opens his mouth to respond, a spiel about friendship about to spill off his tongue, but Forte’s mouth rises in a tiny smile. And then his chin raises just a bit to disguise a smirk. A smirk, surely directed at Quan’s obvious confusion.

Quan instantly dislikes him.

But he has to be at least a *little* subtle because, in his experience, people don’t like it if you insult their friends, because most people don’t have that many. Or maybe that was just him. And he doesn’t know anything about Piano- she might just try and get rid of him before their round, which he is *faintly* certain isn’t illegal.

“So, I don’t exactly understand what you’re saying but-”

“Ah, fear not, my friend! Do not worry your heart with these trite things.” He smiles at Piano as though sharing a secret, and Quan is getting closer to strangling him. Stop being so smug and showing off your damn relationship! “The turtle is never to know the heights of the eagle, and I find myself so often the soaring mind above. But I must not blame the chelonians for their ignorance, as the world is so steeped in its sweet, sticky molasses.”

“Oh no, I’m not worried. I guess I just can’t say for sure you aren’t saying anything that important. Or smart.” He says brightly. This is going to be a shitty conversation. He has to analyze every word he says, *and* all of his facial expressions. Give him what he wants, and let it go. Get out fast, let him spend time with his friend. Whatever. Turtles and eagles, soaring mind, plus being a prick... if he can give it, he better be able to take it. “So, it doesn't really matter whether I can understand you or not. So what’s your name?” Quan widens his eyes just a smidge and tilts his head to the side.

He hesitates- it's almost unnoticeable, but it looks like it worked. The man can't tell whether Quan was insulting him or not, and Quan burns from the inside out with smugness. "But what a delightful point, and such a turn of phrase! I will swoop low, perching low upon the mulberry to hear your fribble. How delightful, to be so low in the atmosphere! But ah, I must seem foreign to you, as more than a circling shadow. They call me Mezzo, for this, is, ah, my moniker." A false name, Quan deduces, from the way "Mezzo" had looked away when he said his name. He can't really judge- he's been doing the same thing.

Mezzo seems to relax back into his groove, a winning smile playing across his lips. "Quan, the rabbit! The eddy in the dust! The fleet of foot and milky of bread! I would grovel if I didn't fear that I could not reach your eyes even by doing that. But it is with utter penitence that I ask your story. I have been told of your temperament, that you were an unlicked cub and a spoony, but also that you were one who could weave the threads of magic but do little else; a pony of one trick, if you will. Did I hear wrong, or is all you've told to be the truth, or perhaps with your parlor tricks, but the chattering of the birds?"

He interrupted any response that might've been forthcoming with a grand gesture hindered by his cloak, making him look a bit silly, in Quan's humble opinion. "Or perhaps are you a man of the grift, one who draws strength from the shadows and those who hide in them? No doubt, a man of your malefactory stature would have strings to pull?"

Quan makes a mental note to find out what those other words mean. If they were an insult, they better be one hell of a good insult. He spends an extra second thinking over the questions. One trick pony, some kind of short insult... milky of bread? Magic? What the hell was grift? Maybe his powers? He speaks and hopes he gets lucky.

"I was born with them, I think! Unless my Ma put something into me when I was too young to remember. She might've, she's the kind of person who would do it, but really- it's all-natural! And y'know-" Quan doesn't think Mezzo would put so much emphasis on tricks if he had a natural magical ability of his own, so he refuses to give Piano another advantage by showing her the gold rings. "I could be even more powerful if I really wanted to. I have to work to keep myself slow enough for you guys. Don't want to give anyone whiplash!" He waves his arms around when he's speaking- Piano hops a little bit out of his space and Mezzo simply leans back until he's properly out of the way.

Hm. Good reflexes.

“Most assuredly, most assuredly.” Ooh, he does not get the right to look that smug if he’s not even fighting. Or is Quan imagining it? He could be- he’s always been bad at reading people.”You have been most helpful, with these bits and bobs you’ve given me. I’ll be quite sure to adorn the front page with them! It is a lovely little tapestry I am weaving, like spiders of old, all full of the secret threads of this auspicious tournament. It is so full of character, color, and texture! But I fear I must admit preference in my weaving, for I have rather a propensity for the story of the man, and there are many a man in this story. It will be quite sensational, a tremor they shall feel through time immemorial!” He winked at Quan, with the playful manner of a friend sharing a secret. “Perhaps you, my little rattlecap, will be felt in that earthquake.”

Quan stares unamusedly.

“I’m not so sure about that.” Quan proceeds to turn back to Piano, to try and strike up another conversation before Mezzo tries to grab their attention again- only to find her nowhere to be seen. Shit.

Mezzo flourished his pencil with gusto. “Ah, but my dictation is not nearly at its final curtain yet! What other yarns have you denied the scarf of my story, little tortoise? I find myself longing for every fiber I can get for my craft, every past and present thread that can be grasped at. Have you any lovers, any squeezes, if you’ll pardon the peasant colloquialism? Perhaps some employment, or heroic adventure? What is your tale, oh mysterious one? Surely there is some great novella of success and victory behind those feet of yours, hidden in your footprints in the sands of time?”

“What’s there to tell? Let’s see... I ran away from home when I was twelve, I’m known for fighting things and exploring what I shouldn’t, and I’m homeless. That’s about it, I think. Also, I’m a hedgehog, not a tortoise.” Quan lists them off with a casual counting on his fingers. That’s about it, if you cut out and simplified a very large portion of Quan’s life.

“Ah, mm, I see.” Mezzo wet his finger and flipped over the page, before looking back up at Quan once more. “What of your forefathers, the ones most immediate? I’ve heard it said your matron was the one who gave you your speed, the tricks and magic you claim to have? Perhaps, did she teach you restraint, leashing in the dogs and demons of Hell? For surely, you must be exercising the control you do have?”

Quan hesitates. Control. He knows a lot about control, thank you very much. “She gave me the things to teach me how to manage it.”

Wait, Piano was gone. And it wouldn't hurt to tell him just a little more information. Along with a few other things Quan wants him and probably Piano to know. "And I have these gold rings." Quan pulls down his scarf to show a seamless gold collar around his throat. "They stop me from going too fast. But they also stop me from healing! She also told me to never take them off on pain of death, but y'know. She could've been lying. Not like me, I never lie. That came from my dad."

Mezzo's forehead creased in... concern? "How tragic, indeed. What a great sorrow must Atlas have felt, to be so shackled by the world! And you, little Atlas, must feel this same weight. But how does your world weigh you? Does it threaten your end at her hands, or perhaps that without it, you would be but a crumbling pillar of salt in the wind? Pray, has your tongue sung only the truest of songs since that day? It is such a thing of ease, to slip betwixt your lips the words of the fairies, all white and yet untrue. And worry not, as my sir bids, I will follow, if you so wish for none to hear the next little white lies from your lips. I am as able to withhold as I am to give."

He closes his eyes, tugging his scarf back into it's wonderfully safe feeling cocoon around his neck. It looks like he was starting to catch on to this! Hah, beat that, *Mezzo*. "She did both. But I think she specifically said I would die if I took it off. But it's impossible. I've tried for way too long to figure out how to." His eyes flare open. "And no, first of all, I've never lied. Never. It's mean and horrible. And people trust you more when you don't lie- and I need every ounce of trust to get by like this. Second of all, it is not a fae thing, that's kind of shitty of you to say, huh? It's like saying all demons are sadistic, are gonna steal my soul, and should be banished with a nice dash of holy water. None of which are true, by the way." He eyes Mezzo for a reaction, but the only one is the slightest quirk of the lips, and quick swipes of a pencil across the sheet. Quan can't get anything out of that, no emotional reaction in regards to Piano. "I wouldn't lie to save my life."

"Ah, but how hidden can a lie be among the truths! For even the statement of truth can be a lie, and perhaps even those were wolves among the sheep, lies among your truth..." He notes this almost offhandedly, as though he didn't mean to.

Quan snaps. "It wasn't."

Mezzo looks up. "Hm?"

"You said it might be a lie. It wasn't." Quan points out coldly.

“Ah, and therein lies the folly of the wordsman! My leaps from platform to platform of words oft leave my balance amiss, and I see that I did not land with grace this last time. Forgive me my blunder, and pardon me my queries.” Mezzo isn’t sorry, fuck him. “But if you will allow another, pray, can you see the morrow? How do you see your bout with Piano, your tet a tet, tomorrow? How might the poets describe it?”

“She’s really strong, but I think I’m stronger. And everyone here is more skilled than me, but it hasn’t come down to skill yet. It’s been all reflexes and quick thinking because nobody has the same skills. So. I think I’m going to win. Unless something really bad happens, like our match gets sabotaged or something. I’m going to make sure nothing will mess with us by making this fight *fast*.”

“With haste you say?”

“Of course! And with any luck, it’ll work. For me, of course.”

“Ah, my thanks for your assistance in my journey to the truth. Do you see pain, that red hot regret of the mortal form? Do you feel your body burning with it, or perhaps hers as such? How will you fight, with the shackles constructed of entertainment by Madame Chifu, or unfettered and ferocious? Will you draw it out for the cheers, or end it quickly to their disappointment?” Forte leaves his pen poised over his notebook, posing his question.

Quan raises an eyebrow. “I don’t need to drag it out to be entertaining. If it’s entertaining, it’s gonna be because Piano is really strong. Which she is. But don’t worry about her! She should be fine, and if she isn’t, she has you. Not a huge deal.” His voice grows a little bitter at the end.

Unlike Piano, Quan won’t have anyone to fall back on. That’s why he *has* to win.

“Ah, your kindness knows no bounds, sir, as you have shown with your indulgence of my curiosities. I am most grateful for your time, and your patience with this simple wordsmith.” Mezzo gives a cheeky salute, and off he goes.

Quan waves goodbye. Wasn't he forgetting something?

Dammit! He was trying to talk to Piano!

"Ah, the Artemis to my Apollo, the Pollux to my Castor, I have returned!" announces Forte, with all the pomp and circumstance of a ringmaster at a circus, vibrating with gleeful energy. "I announce with the croon of a poet and the battle cry of a warrior, I have obtained the truths and stories of this fleet-foot boy! Our victory is assured by the fates, with this intervention! Like the kitten, you must go for his scruff and lift him, or failing the separation of his feet from the great earth, simply tell him he has the tongue of a deceiver, to raise his ire and collar for easier grabbing, or simply to bring his reign to a close. Or, as you are so skilled in doing, simply see into the dance chart of his steps and be ahead of them by two or three. It will not tire you so as to defeat, and it shall be but a simple task to outwit the mouse who thinks so much of himself. He plans to move with the speed of the sun's own rays, for he rightly knows of your skill!"

Piano patiently waits for Forte to stop monologuing. He still hasn't changed out of his disguise, white, glossy hair moving around like a cloud, his dark cloak working against his efforts to gesture. "I know. I was right around the corner, if you don't remember."

"Your wisdom knows no bounds, does it not! He is small, but you have the eye of the hawk and must simply swoop upon him. He will be quick, but is not also the gazelle? You must be the cheetah, my sister, as I know you will. He will be an easy catch for one so powerful as you, so long as you do not lose your faculties." He laughed. "But I trust you will not, in your infinite knowledge!"

"I know what to do. Have a little more faith in me." She chuckles a bit. Forte's been nervous about her matches when he truly doesn't have any reason to. It's sweet.

"Claim victory, my kin. There is no doubt in my mind, my heart, eyes, that I will be here to celebrate your victory and his defeat. Take my courage, my cunning, and show to the birds why they must not sing so brash when there are cats around!"

She stands, and the two of them smile at each other. A matching pair, brawn and brains, a left eye and a right eye.

Together.

Piano was approaching the colosseum, quietly walking. She didn't want any more attention drawn to her before her match. In fact, she needs to prepare to fight against Quan as long as possible, and accidentally initiating a brawl would do her no good.

Quan was.... Quick. And not dumb, unlike what Forte thought. But Quan sounded like he wouldn't be planning at all. And he likely wouldn't be able to do anything against her blood, from the sounds of it. If she went for the collar.... She just had to come at him from the side, and not the front. And she needs to make it fast. If it comes to an endurance match, she won't make it to the end, unless she initiates the final blow quickly. Which is likely, if she wears him down enough...

"Piano! Why'd you disappear like that earlier?" She turns to see Quan, suddenly at her side again.

She jumps a little, before composing herself. "Ah. Hello Quan. I just needed a break from him. And I didn't want to interrupt his interview." And people tend to put down their guards around Forte, when it's just him. "I knew I would meet you again, anyhow."

"Well, I just wanted to ask you- what are you doing this round? I don't want to get hurt too badly or anything, and from the sounds of it, you're a much better fighter than I am." He has since turned to walk backwards, still facing her as they go down the street.

"You'll find out. Don't worry so much, I don't plan on doing anything that'll leave lasting harm." She says with a smile.

“I don’t either! But I guess we need to keep it entertaining for Madame Chifu!” He laughs, and spins, before continuing his walk backwards. “I’m sure you heard by now from Mezzo that the match is going to be fast. How about we both promise a fast match?”

She thinks about it. Quan’s fast is probably faster than she could manage. But it would also make him sloppy, and that’s the real thing she needs. He’s inexperienced, and she doesn’t want it to come down to power. “Sure. Let’s make it as fast as we can.” Although, she would likely drag it out... but the boy looks so hopeful about it that she doesn’t dare to break that hope. He must have been really nervous about her.

“I told him we’d make it fast. But it won’t really be fast, if I have anything to say about it.” Piano explains to her brother.

“I know, I know, Piano said she should make it fast... I should probably watch out for my neck a little bit more, huh?” Quan says to himself.

Amid the cheering roar of the audience, equally shouting Quan’s name and Piano’s name, a microphone screech reigns supreme and quiets them to a low rumble.

Miss X in all her pink glory, now reappearing in a slightly spiced up outfit, waves to the crowd, floating high above the arena. “Welcome! To round 2 of our lovely fighting tournament! Are you guys ready to rock?!” She cups her hand to her ear in an exaggerated listening motion as the crowd whoops. Miss X waits for it to die down before continuing.

“You all know him, you all love him, here’s Quan, who bested the strongest! Man! In! The! Universe!” A spotlight shines down on Quan, while a round of applause sounds, with also a fair bit

of booing. He'd become infamous in the past few days for causing trouble around town, whether that be from stealing wares, or from knocking over things in his rush to get places. He doesn't care, though. They'll forget Quan soon enough anyway. After all, it's not like they ever asked why Quan was stealing food, did they?

"On the other side, we have mysteriously powerful Piano! She beat the intense warrior armed with acid rain and metal arms, one of the most experienced fighters we've got! Let's see how well she can do against her next opponent, eh?" When the spotlight illuminates Piano, she stands unsmiling. She's stoic, a paragon of solidity- but when she hears some voices from the crowd swooning at her, she blushes, and looks down.

"This match is going to be simple and easy! You know the drill- take your opponent's tag for thirty seconds, or knock 'em down so they can't get back up again. And today, we're going to have no changes to the arena- except for some elegant ole moving pillars. Powerful *and* unpredictable, my favorite. Keep your eyes on the ground, or keep your eyes on your opponent- and make sure you wait for me to say go." She says, winking at Quan.

"On your mark~" Piano seems to be... hopping? That's weird.

"Get ready~" Quan watches her carefully, as she moves.

"GO!"

He almost misses it, it's just that fast. A knife whizzes past his face and embeds itself in the slowly rising stone pillar behind him. He swings back in time, totally prepared for a frontal attack from her, but she's nowhere to be seen. He frowns. He expected her to be a head on fighter, using her wiles only when it was necessary, much like in her first match- and the whole entire point of this was so she would underestimate him.

But Mezzo *ruined* that.

He curses loudly when he hears the slight whoosh of another knife cleanly dropping from above him- saved only by his reflexes jerking him to the side. He looks up, and sees a shadow disappear from one pillar falling to another one rising, and he decides to do what he does best.

Run.

He goes directly to the pillar, and with a combination of a solid jump, a knife, and climbing skills learned from all those years of climbing buildings to find a place to sleep, he's face to face with Piano, who promptly stabs him with a knife.

He's about to fight through the regular stinging of a stab wound when it suddenly flares in agony. His eyes glaze over for just a second, just long enough for her to go for another stab-

He can't see much through the pain, but for fuck's sake, he can see the red blob against the sandy background of the pillars. He growls, and he sees her hesitate for just second-

Before they're both tumbling off the rapidly lowering pillar, Piano thoroughly tackled by Quan. He slashes her with the knife- there's nothing in his mind now but *defenddefenddefend*- By the time they land, Piano's arms, used to save her body from the knife are bloody, and so are Quan's.

It hurts. It hurts so much- this isn't *fast*- and she's still not down, why is she not down and what the hell is *that*-

Another knife, this one a solid red, slashes open his cheek. A long cut, a deep cut, and it wasn't healing. It wasn't healing, and it hurts more than the time he got thrown into a bonfire- He scrubs furiously at his cheek to try and clear away the blood and it only hurts more-

Piano was getting closer again, and Quan had to dodge out of the way of one of the moving pillars. He wasn't healing, and every movement hurt more than he could imagine. If he's honest, he's never really been hurt before. Not by anyone except those close to him.

For once in his life, Quan decides to stand his ground. Running into a wall wouldn't work, and if he got himself trapped in a corner he would be so doomed- He doesn't even know what her tag is, why hadn't he asked? Because he was too distracted by her stupid friend ugh-

Quan's eyes focus just barely on the swinging sword, and he can dodge something that big at least, especially since it was going for his neck-

Please don't get the collar, please don't get the collar-

- but he missteps a lunge with his knife and slashes not her thigh, but her knee- and she doesn't seem to be bleeding at all! What the fuck!

He grunts as she stabs him in the leg, and it just adds to the building amount of pain that's getting to him. He pushes himself to run- and he gets only a few steps before Piano gets to him again. He's not in control when he hurts this much and when he's not healing- each movement is jerky, but faster than the way he's moved before.

But it means he misses when he goes for her leg.

It means he isn't hit by the sword swinging for his neck.

That doesn't mean nothing happens, though. Each time Piano misses his upper half- she simply redirects it into a strike somewhere else- one of his limbs, a slash that got dangerously close to the bare skin of his torso. Each time Quan tries to disable her with a knife, he misses the important things- but he would still hit flesh. Her outfit didn't do much to protect her.

Piano was in the worst case scenario. Quan had managed to get them to an endurance match somehow? He seemed to be panicking? But about *what*, she wasn't really certain. He hadn't

panicked like this in Armius's match, and he had certainly looked completely ready to fight through the pain of a stab, and probably through the pain of her blood.

And she was preparing for more quick swipes, to make him lose so much blood he would pass out. But he had started standing *still*, in his panic. She thought he was a runner, not a freezer.

All of the blood loss was starting to get to her, and she knew if she waited any longer she would lose her opportunity.

It's back to her backup plan. Go for the finishing blow, and pray Quan will move just jerkily enough to get in the way of her sword.

It's a stalemate. The battlefield is bloody, and the pillars had stopped moving a while ago, and Quan can only barely hear Miss X.

"It looks like we're at a stalemate, folks! Let's see who's the last one standing."

Piano's heaving with effort, and it looks like she's using everything she has to stand, before launching herself one more time at Quan.

Who stands. And waits. And waits. Until she's in his face and stabbing his chest with her sword having given up the idea of denting the collar off his neck, and Quan had ducked under to deliver a slash to her forehead- with a bit of wobble that causes him to lose his grip and punch right at her head, knocking her out.

And this time, she stayed down.

Quan's sleeves dripped with blood, his knuckles made ugly cracking noises as they tried to heal, and he collapsed to his knees. His vision swam. He had never lost quite so much blood before, and he had never felt this dizzy before, or quite this hurt. Not since he was younger.

"Quan is our winner for this round! Cheer for him folks, that was one rough and tumble bloodbath!"

Does an audience really matter to him anymore? All he really wants is to not be hurt, right now. He can see Mezzo running onto the field, carefully holding up his friend. He can only wish to have someone like that to rely on.... It would be nice.

He closes his eyes and flops onto his back. All he needs is a second- a second to stop bleeding, a second to stop thinking, and he only opens his eyes when he hears shouting.

It gets closer, and when he opens his eyes, he sees Mezzo, carrying his friend, glaring, stuttering insults instead of eloquence. "You- You- You were so cruel to her. You promised fast. You truly are a liar."

He blinks slowly, and a smile spreads across his face in a daze. He didn't lie. He only said he would make it fast. No one ever said anything about blood or pain. Delusional, but sweet. "I didn't lie. I won. Suck on that."

He flops back to the ground, and ignores more angry cursing and concerned noises from Mezzo. If only he could have someone like that in his life... Someone who could take care of him, who he could take care of.... There wasn't anyone like that that he had met, huh. Could he even wish for it? Would it be worth anything if he wished for it?

Chifu laughs, as much of a triumphant sound as ever. *Of course not, silly boy,*

Even a wish can't save you from your loneliness.

Quan closes his eyes.

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