“A-are we really doing this?”

Piano looked a little uncomfortable standing with some of the other contestants of the various Cross Tourneys outside of the Fox Den. All of them had serious expressions on their faces- those whose faces could be seen, of course. Most of them had their weapons ready, and seemed battle-ready.

To her immediate right was Raku and Inari, the two normal rivals standing side by side as they cracked their necks ready for combat as they got spear and iron-like fists ready respectively. Next to them stood Pembrooke, checking his pistol to make sure it was loaded for combat as Jackie stood next to him, giving a couple practice swings of her bat in preparation. Aude likewise swung her bat, flipping her hair as she gave an excited grin at the prospect of what they were about to do. Quan was bouncing on his feet to her right, his nearly boundless energy on display as Senko held Kaku to her chest almost as a comforting mechanism for what she was planning to do.

To Piano’s left stood Vilivian, who held Exaclibur at the ready to plunge into the ground as a symbol of her beginning to fight as well. Taleus stood next to her, the slightly taller male looking bloodthirsty as he licked his lips on his wrist as if to prepare to bite down at any moment. Wendy and Valentine stood next to each other, discussing plans to combine their magics together as the zombie’s sword rested its tip in the cobblestone ground next to her. Teekee also stood at the ready, listening intently as Ad was beginning to pump him up for the coming conflict with loud cheers. Angelique was busy flexing all of her metallic fingers as if checking they all were in working order before the big battle truly kicked off.

And standing in the front, like two large guardian beasts preparing to spring forward on their prey, Yamarashi and Viola both stood imposingly, waiting for the word behind them. Viola already had Recombo out, the soul weapon radiating with power as she stood ready to attack. Yamarashi hadn’t drawn a weapon to his hand yet, but every weapon sticking out of him almost seemed to rattle with a thirst for combat as the immortal warrior stood silently at the ready.

As if to further spur them on, Angelique responded to Piano's nervous question. "Of course we're going to do this. You've heard from that blabbermouth of a brother you have that all of the Crossguards have the ability to get a wish granted for them from the God Eater. And we all agreed it wasn't right that they get that for free when we fought hard for only three of us to even have a chance. So we're just going to go up to that drunken fox and convince her to give us the same treatment."

"I-I get that… but fighting a goddess doesn't seem like a good id-" Piano tried to argue but she was quickly cut off by Aude.

"The point our blonde friend is making is that all of us have important things we were willing to risk our lives for, and a bunch of guys in blindfolds get to ask for whatever they want everyday. We're just going to even things out, that's all."

"O-oh… ok…" Piano finally agreed, getting nods of approval from the other fighters, as well as looks of self-reassurance as if the Devil Blood approving gave them the encouragement they needed to actually go through with this as well. All sixteen individuals turned to the door preparing to fight once more. Then, as if on a silent signal, Yamarashi walked forward first, his large frame approaching the equally large accommodating doors leading into the bar as the small crowd that gathered around them outside began to back up.

With a sound almost like a shotgun blast, the immortal's chest and back exploded with blood as the Crossguard on the other side of the door thrust forward with his spear seven times in the span of an instant. If anybody else had walked through the door first, they would likely have been instantly taken down by the furious assault of the male Crossguard standing before them.

But Yamarashi was certainly no ordinary fighter. Even as his wounds began to heal, the masked man gave a scoff. "Foolish boy. You look upon me with weapons piercing my back from men who changed history by stepping onto the battlefield and you think your thin spear would be enough to take down the likes of me? Let me show you what a true weapon looks like."

Reaching up to his back and drawing a greatsword from near his spine, he held the weapon in both hands for a moment as the Crossguard in front of him adjusted the grip of his spear. For a moment, both men didn't move.

Then with a flash, the spear lunged forward to pierce Yamarashi once more. But with a flexing of his muscles, he trapped the metal point in his abs as he readied his own weapon. The Crossguard pathetically struggled to pull out his spear as, with a twist of his torso, the Contractor swung the grand weapon and slammed the side of the Crossguard full impact. There was a faint shimmer along his side that instantly shattered as he was sent flying, slamming into the wooden wall and falling to the ground unconscious as Yamarashi cracked his neck, before pulling the now cursed spear from his chest and adding it to his collection on his back.

To his left, a female Crossguard with several spines coming off her arms and back and thick metal gauntlets covering up to her elbows sparking with electricity came flying towards him, attempting to stun him with a powerful electric punch. But before she could make it all the way, Vivi jumped off Yamarashi's shoulder, Recumbo hefted on her shoulder before swinging down with powerful force. The Crossguard managed to block it, but was sent hurtling to the ground, wooden planks shattering on impact as the Crossguard barely held her composure.

She looked to find Vivi, having expected her to be stunned from the blow, only to not see the demon woman near the immortal. The Crossguard then noticed she couldn't feel her arms and glanced down at them. Both of the golden gauntleted hands were shaking uncontrollably, the impact from the demon woman more powerful than she had expected. Before she could understand what was happening, a foot slipped between her arms and slammed into her chin, sending the spined woman to the ceiling with a sturdy impact. Before she could recover, Recumbo was slammed into her stomach, causing her to spit up blood as she fell into unconsciousness like her companion, falling bodily to the ground to land next to a bored looking Vivi.

“Really? Is this the best a goddess can muster up for protection?” Vivi asked, cleaning off the blood from Recumbo as she glanced around. There were no more Crossguards in the main bar area, though there were a fair few patrons who looked somewhere between ecstatic at the fight and fearful of the people fighting.

Across the way, setting down a glass she was just cleaning on the counter, Saki looked at the pair that entered the bar with an intense glare, which she also shot past them towards the fourteen warriors behind them. “Normally I would tell you all off for picking a fight in my bar. But a little fox has told me you are all up to something even dumber than that. So…”

She reached under her counter and pulled out a glass bottle full of boiling red fluids, swirling it in her hands once. Popping off the cork, she took a deep swig of the concoction, draining it in a few gulps. As she was finishing it up, Piano’s eyes grew wide as she felt the oni’s already powerful ki surge with energy as her horns began to grow on her head. Her hair grew wilder, her muscles bulged to even greater mass, her teeth grew longer and more fang-like, and her nails became dangerous looking claws that looked like they could rend steel. A billow of steam exhaled from her mouth as she took a deep breath, placing a massive foot upon her counter.

“... I hope you all are ready to face the consequences for your actions.”

“Get down!” Piano grabbed Raku and Vilivian, bringing them to the ground as everyone else recoiled back slightly from the normally shy girl’s sudden outburst. At almost the same moment, there was an explosion of motion from Saki as she charged towards Yamarashi, who barely raised his sword in time to block the fist that slammed towards him. The giant of a man, caught off-balance, was sent flying, his large frame slamming into the neon-fronted shop across the street as his blade went flying several streets down as the demonic looking Saki stepped out to chase her opponent.

“Volley! You’re up as well! Help your Aunt protect what’s important!” Saki called as she raised her clawed hand to block the spear that Yamarashi tossed her way, before she leaped forward to meet him in melee combat once again. Each titanic blow that they exchanged sent shockwaves rippling out that shattered glass as they slammed their way up the quickly clearing streets of the Business District as people ran in a panic.

“You got it!” a cheery young voice called, the door behind the bar being kicked open as the younger oni burst into the room. He glanced around, then saw Viola at the ready in the center of the room. Grinning wildly, he grabbed a couple potion bottles from underneath the counter and rushed forward to meet her.

Vivi readied her weapon for a moment as he approached, then gave a swing, sending vibrations through the air to disorient the young oni. But instead of red skin, a blue glass bottle instead met her weapon, shattering the glass and sending the blue fluid cascading towards her. Everywhere the liquid touch instantly froze, locking her arms and weapon in place as Volley grinned, cocking his fist to slam into her face for a quick knock-out.

But flames suddenly surged from beneath the sheet of ice, the ice shattering as she swung once more towards Volley. He managed to catch the spiked club with both hands, barely stopping it with his own strength. But with a grin, he used her own strength against her as he lifted himself up on her club and kicked her powerfully in the face, sending her head rocketing back as he landed and slammed a fist into her stomach.

“Oof!” She stumbled back for a second, clutching her stomach before looking up at her new opponent with a grin. “Now that’s more like it! Someone I can beat up on for a bit while Angie and them take care of business!” She rushed forward, her fist meeting Volley’s as both strong fighters slammed their heads close, matching grins as they pushed against each other with all of their strength as the wood beneath their feet quivered and cracked from the force of the exchange.

Piano glanced back towards Yamarashi and Saki, watching as the former was set on fire by a potion flung by the latter before he swung his spear out to force the oni woman back. She then looked at the people around her. Before she could speak, Angelique instead spoke up. “Alright people, they’re keeping the two most troublesome people busy! Let’s get going!”

Everyone gave a noise of affirmation, before charging into the Fox Den and running around the brawl in the center of the room, making their way up the stairs towards the VIP lounge that had the elevator that led up to Chifu’s room. Pembrooke made it to the top of the stairs first, his eyes going wide at the welcoming party waiting at the top. As Quan got to the top next, the soldier grabbed the boy and dove behind cover.

At the same instant, the wood on the wall behind their heads exploded as a sniper shot rang out, piercing through all material with ease. It was quickly followed by a barrage of gunfire which tore into the surroundings, focusing fire on the cover Pembrooke and Quan were hiding behind.

Vilivian ran up hearing all this, before producing a blue barrier so everyone else could come up and assess the situation as Pembrooke began to blindfire over his cover towards the small group of Crossguards waiting for them.

There were five in total. The one closest to them, hidden behind a black barricade of her own, had a pair of submachine guns in hand that she fired in sweeping arcs anytime someone stepped from behind cover. Her skin was rocky in composition, showing her to be tougher to take down than her otherwise dainty form might imply. The one next to her was a larger male, with large gazelle-like horns holding a shotgun the size of Yamarashi’s arm, which bored holes the size of bowling balls into anything the slugs hit.

In the center, grasping at his head in concentration as he maintained the barriers, a silver skinned man maintained the defense of the group. Just behind him was the man holding the sniper rifle, a lanky male with dark skin and a thin, rat-like tail swishing behind him as he waited for the next opportunity to take a shot without destroying the barrier around him with his all-piercing shots. And lastly, a small, rabbit-like woman fired shots from her revolver, but the medical supplies on her indicated her true role in this composition.

"Damn, they really were prepared for us, huh?" Pembrooke cursed, firing off more shots as Inari brought out Green to fire back with guns of her own. The shieldmaster switched around the configurations of the barriers, protecting the front two from attacks while allowing the sniper to fire again. Vilivian barely moved out of the way as the shot easily punched through the barrier, but the enemy's defenses were forced to shift again as Aude sent a golden baseball flying towards the sniper, which was barely deflected by the magical shield.

Both sides continued exchanging ranged attacks, both side's barriers holding up thanks to the clever manipulations by their creators as Pembrooke and Inari slowly moved forward between booths to get better angles. Angelique took Pembrooke's old spot, finally getting a view of the situation herself. Seeing that the female gun-wielder was pretty close to the shadows, the magic-user got an idea. Focusing her energy carefully, she soon created a shadowy tendril that suddenly lashed out, pulling a submachine gun from the rock woman's grip and sending her stumbling out of cover.

Seeing an opening, Inari quickly created three floating guns. "*Triple Shot!"* Sending three spinning projectiles outwards, the ghost girl planning to take her out as quickly as possible. The shieldmaster Crossguard quickly reacted, shifting some of his defenses to guard her whole body. But he had to take away from the larger man's defenses, a fact Pembrooke took advantage of to get a couple of shots on the man's arm and forcing him to drop the powerful shotgun that had been tearing through the soldier's cover.

As the large man howled in pain, the medic rushed forward, firing shots to force Pembrooke and Inari back behind cover before reaching her ally. A green glow emanated from her palm as she placed her hand on the man, the wounds beginning to seal shut from her aid. As they both grinned at each other though, a single crimson throwing knife slammed into the barrier shielding them.

The trio looked down at it as it fell to the ground, looking confused as to why it was sent. But then the shieldmaster noticed that the barrier it had touched was corroding away and he began to panic. Doubly so when Pembrooke tossed a grenade their way, slipping into the gap in the shield. Focusing his energy quickly, he covered the grenade with a double layer of barrier, containing the explosion with a quick sigh.

But with the majority of the barrier down, the speedier members of the assaulting party were able to rush forward to attack. The sniper attempted to shoot down Raku as she charged forward, only for Quan to easily push aside the barrel and send the round through a wall and out beyond to the Crossroads. With a flurry of fast punches, he was able to knock out the sniper with ease.

Piano quickly grabbed hold of the submachine gun girl, twisting her arm and sending the gun to the ground. The sturdy woman swung a fist to try and knock Piano back, but with a quick Judo throw, the lithe fighter got her opponent to the ground and locked her legs around the Crossguard's throat. Within seconds of squeezing, the sturdy woman quickly began to get light-headed and she passed out, Piano looking guilty the whole while.

The larger man spun around, swinging his newly healed arm to try and take out Raku. But the dragon woman easily ducked under the blow, before delivering a withering series of martial arts blows of her own, knocking him out within seconds. The medic was quickly knocked out herself by a baseball bat to the head courtesy of Aude's golden swing.

As the rabbit girl hit the ground, only the shieldmaster remained. As the four speedy fighters turned their attention to him, the silver skinned man instantly focused most of his barriers around himself, sending some of it to block the one elevator that led up to Chifu's domain.

"Ugh, how lame." Aude complained, poking the barrier with her bat. The barrier forced the wooden tool back, to which the fox girl stuck her tongue out. "What a cowardly tactic. Piano, can't you just get rid of this barrier?"

"I could, but he'll keep putting it up. It might be better to focus on that." Piano pointed towards the elevator, pulling out one of her blood-forged throwing knives. Most of the rest of the crew gathered around as well, examining the barrier together as Piano raised her dagger to stab. The shieldmaster Crossguard looked around nervously, seeing the revolver near his feet. He lowered his personal barrier around him so he could grab a hold of the revolver…

… only for Jackie to pop out from behind one of the booths and slam the side of his head with her bat. The man instantly went down, the barrier over the elevator also disappearing as the group turned to Jackie with a smile. "Good job girl! You got them good!" Aude complimented, patting the robot on the back.

"Thanks." Jackie showed a cheerful face as the elevator doors opened up for them. All of them stepped inside, the elevator more than spacious enough for all of them, even the likes of Teekee. As Senko nervously reached forward and pushed the button, there was a soft chiming of bells as the doors closed. Everyone looked around nervously, but the feeling of the elevator rising seemed to reassure them. The ride took an almost uncomfortable amount of time, everyone staring at the door with determined purpose as they waited to reach what would be the fight of their lives.

As the doors opened, all of their jaws dropped almost simultaneously. Instead of the luxurious bedroom that was the God Eater's abode, instead an almost mind-boggling labyrinth of paper doorways, wooden halls, and dizzying large spaces stretched out before them. There seemed to be no end in sight for the twisting corridors, the jutting platforms, and the terrifying fall below that seemed to extend beyond the point where the Fox Den should be. The walls themselves seemed to exist almost deeper than existence should allow, making the idea of busting through the walls unthinkable.

"Well well, my rebellious travelers~" The God Eater's voice echoed out from all directions, making it impossible for them to tell where it was coming from. "I hope you enjoy my very special welcoming party for you~ I had to keep you all busy until I could get this place cleaned up for you~ I hope you all enjoy yourselves during your visit~"

"Quit screwing around, Chifu!" Angelique called out, looking up into the vertical abyss. "I'm sure you already know what we want, so just give it to us you drunk or we're going to knock you sober!"

"Oh my~ A very dangerous threat from someone who lost her first round~" Angelique's face flushed with embarrassment as Chifu's laughter rang out in surround sound. "Well, it will certainly be fun seeing if you guys can find me and beat me~ Maybe I'll let anyone who can touch me get a wish if that will make you happy~"

Her voice trailed off, leaving the group in silence for a few moments, looking around for some sign of where to go. Then Quan stepped forward, looking confident. "Well, this all reminds me of the time I got lost in a fairy maze for several days. But this place seems smaller, so I'll run through all the rooms and find her for us. Be right back!"

Before anyone could even protest, Quan took off at spectacular speed, rushing through several doorways and clearing entire hallways in mere seconds. He was running up the twisting corridors, seeming to run straight upwards as gravity seemed to shift in certain locations to facilitate the visual changes that seemed to be rife throughout this strange dimension they found themselves in.

But everything changed with the ringing of bells. Suddenly, where the doors led shifted and everyone's positions shifted as well, though they could still see the open abyss in the center. The door Quan just ran through suddenly led to a solid wall, with the fey male slamming into it at full speed and being stunned. Another chime of bells shifted the gravity where he was as the door beneath him now led into the vertical abyss at the center.

"Quan!" Raku called out, flying out as her wings expanded behind her with a burst of wind. Flying up, she managed to catch him before he fell too far as he clutched his head. "You gotta be careful here! We're dealing with a goddess after all."

"My bad. Just thought I'd get a good run in." He gave a woozy grin, giving her a thumbs up as he looked around. "But I suppose finding her won't be so easy, huh?"

"Not at all." Raku said, shaking her head. Suddenly, the bells rang again and the scenery around them shifted. They suddenly found themselves on a platform, the others nowhere in sight now. "Dammit. Guess we're on our own now."

"Guess so." Quan looked around, before getting out of Raku's arms and hopping into a window to head inside to start exploring as the dragon grabbed hold of her Windcutter Naginata once more as she followed closely after him.

The rest of the group found themselves at a three way intersection between passageways, with all of them looking nearly identical to the lost group gathered at the center of it.

“Well now what do we do?” Aude spoke up first, looking down each path hoping for an answer to appear.

“Well, there’s twelve of us now.” Inari pointed out, gesturing at all of them. “And there’s three paths. We’ll split into groups of four and go down each way. Whichever group finds her should just start taking her on and hope for the best.”

“Works for me.” Taleus chimed in. “I’ll go to the right.” He began walking that way. Wendy, Senko, and Inari joined him in that direction.

“I think our two heavy hitters should be on different teams.” Pembrooke pointed out, gesturing towards Vilivian and Teekee. “How about you and I go left, Vil, and the big guy can go straight?”

“That’s fine.” Vilivian said, gesturing towards Piano. “Blackblood, you’re with me.”

“O-ok.” Piano quietly agreed, going that way along with Jackie. That left Aude, Valentine, and Angelique to join the golem on the straight path, but they didn’t seem to have a problem traveling with such a large figure to hide behind in case of traps.

With the groups all decided, they gave each other confirming nods before they each set off on their paths towards the irreverent God Eater once more.

The right path group began to follow their way, which seemed to descend downwards towards some unknown pocket of rooms. Senko and Wendy walked nervously in the middle, while Taleus led the charge from the front and Inari covered their rear, knowing things could change at any minute.

As they crossed another threshold, the group suddenly found themselves in an old Asian-styled garden, complete with cherry blossom petals descending down into a small pond. Sensing danger, Taleus bit his wrist to draw out a scythe of blood while Inari called upon Red to create a sword for safety.

As they reached the center of the "room," Chifu's plans were revealed as several of her fox familiars began to appear like white flames erupting from the ground. For a moment, they simply looked at the group as they all cocked their heads. Then, with a collective growl from them all, their limbs began to elongate as their bodies grew to the size of wolves, their muzzles snarling as they bared their fangs and revealed the blue glow of their internal fox fires and the piercing red eyes hidden behind their once cute squints before they all lunged forward to attack.

Taleus gave a wild laugh as he launched forward before the others could protest. He quickly closed the distance with the first fox, slashing it in two with an almost casual ease as he went to spin beneath it to attack the next one. But the others watched in horror as its bisected body began to bloat before exploding in blue fire, sending Taleus sprawling to the ground wreathed in flames as the others began to charge forward.

Stabbing Red into the ground, Inari reacted with a quick "*Blade Garden!*" Red blades began to sprout from the ground, slaying a number of foxes to clear the area around the fallen assassin as Senko and Wendy rushed forward to help cover him.

As Senko used a slashing backstep to cut down the foxes while avoiding the resulting explosion, Wendy helped Taleus to his feet while using some ice magic to put out the fire on his body. As he got back to his feet, a wild grin was still on his face as he sent his bloody scythe flying, the weapon spinning like a buzzsaw as it slashed through foxes to cause them to explode a safe distance away.

With them working together, they were able to keep the foxes at a distance for now. But there seemed to be an almost endless wave of them, rushing at the small group with almost suicidal tendencies, threatening to overwhelm them with pure numbers and firepower.

“Wendy, box them in a bit!” Inari shouted, slashing through a few foxes herself, making sure to fly away before they exploded. Wendy nodded and began to draw a blue magic circle in the air with her finger as quickly as she could. With the spell finished, she unleashed it, creating a set of ice walls that cut off the flow of foxes for a moment.

But quickly, the sound of scratching on ice soon overwhelmed the air as dozens of foxes all attempted to dig their way through the wall to continue their suicide bombing attempts. Inari gave Senko a pat on her shoulder, making her jump slightly before the ghost’s comforting voice reassured her. “Hold for now. Wait for them to gather up more. The rest of us are looking away. Wait for it… wait for it… NOW!”

Senko glanced around to see that everyone was looking away, and the foxes couldn’t see her either. Breathing a sigh of relief, she got into striking position as Inari told her to wait. The moment one fox’s claw broke through and Inari gave the command, there was the sound of her bell. In an instant, she broke through the ice wall and dashed in about every inch of the closed off garden, stopping at a door on the other side of the garden. With the sound of a massive explosion, the shockwave from Blink shattered the ice wall as all of the foxes exploded simultaneously.

Senko sheathed Kaku, looking back as Wendy and Inari cheered while Taleus looked upset that all of his prey was cut down so quickly. Inari was beginning to float forward to congratulate her for killing all of the foxes… when the paper door slammed shut between them with a ringing of a bell.

“NO, NO! DAMMIT!” Inari shouted in anger, pounding her fist on the paper door as it slammed shut. She quickly dug her fingers into the crack and shoved the doors open, only to be met with a nasty surprise.

A larger fox, nearly double the size of the previous ones, lunged forward and tackled Inari to the ground with snapping jaws going for her throat. She only just barely got Red into its mouth to keep it from chomping down, but fire began to billow in its mouth towards her as Taleus and Wendy rushed forward to help.

Senko, meanwhile, was now all alone in a seemingly empty room. Tatami mat flooring cushioned the ground beneath her feet as there was a large paper screen door that took up most of the wall in front of her, and mirrors set up in various places on the walls to either side and behind her.

Well, she was mostly alone. The God Eater soon revealed her presence, appearing in a swirl of white tails as she stood in front of the speedy swordswoman, grinning as she smoked her pipe. “Well well~ I certainly didn’t expect such meek fighter like yourself to make it to me first~ Consider me impressed~”

“B-but you made it so I was the first one here!” Senko complained, drawing her sword. But instead of rushing forward to swing her sword, she instead sent some of her bandages to try and constrict the goddess.

Unfortunately, a flick of her wrist and some blue flames were enough to burn away the attacks as she gave a tutting noise. “Now don’t be so quick to attack me so~ Though I guess you can’t while I’m looking at you like this, can you?~”

Senko rushed forward at a normal speed, attempting to cut into Chifu with Kaku in a vertical slash. But a wave of her hand brought one of the mirrors over to defend the God Eater, sending the blade to appear out of a mirror on the far wall as the attack ineffectually missed. The same was said for the next few slashes, each one sent away by Chifu’s space-altering abilities.

“You know, I really expected better from you~ Oh well, guess I’ll just move on to the next person~” The God Eater turned away after shoving the mirror towards Senko to drive her back, making her way towards the large screen doors as they opened.

Senko sheathed her blade and looked towards Chifu, intent on taking her down with Blink. But just as she activated it and rushed forward, the God Eater's tails flicked up and the eye-like designs on them looked directly at Senko. She came screeching to a halt a couple feet from the goddess as she crossed the threshold, the blade falling well short of its target.

Senko shook her head. Those weren't real eyes looking at her. They were just a design made to look like eyes to trick her. Chifu wasn't looking at her, so she should take her out now! Now! Now…

As Senko opened her eyes and looked up, a monstrosity of a fox was waiting for her next to Chifu's feet. From the top of the muzzle up the head and towards the ears, eyes covered the top half of its head, looking around in all directions but especially looking at her. All of the eyes blinked at different intervals, ensuring that there was never a moment where Senko wasn't being looked at. It had four tails that all flicked behind it, with several eyes looking upon her from there. It's mouth was mostly full of teeth, though its tongue also had a few eyes that blinked at Senko from the slobbering maw as Chifu giggled at the shy warrior.

"Oh, and I hope you like my little pet here~ I thought him up just for you~ Good luck facing him~" As she finished speaking, the beast gave a loud roar, before two of the eyes on the tail blinked and sent out blue beams in Senko's direction. The mummy girl barely dodged the beams as everywhere they touched burst into flames. As she stood back on her feet ready to fight, she could see that the God Eater had already disappeared, leaving only her and the monstrous fox.

Readying herself for combat, Senko tried to move forward, but three more beams fired towards her, forcing her to roll out of the way. But even as she recovered and tried to move forward, an intense pain struck her back and she was knocked to the ground as her shoulder caught fire. Looking back, she can see the trail of two of the beams that set fire to the ground. She then saw the third trail that led from the front of the room to the back wall… and right towards a mirror.

Realizing that these beams could be reflected in the mirrors, Senko shook her shoulder as her freezing body slowly put out the flames even as a good portion of her bandages burned away. She could no longer use Grappler as effectively anymore, and Blink was useless against this thing. With its multiple tails for firing lasers, it would be difficult to close the gap, and that's not even considering if it can fire beams from the eyes on its head. Chifu really had designed an enemy that could counter her pretty well.

But if she was going to have any hope of getting a wish now, she would have to somehow overcome this trial and get back to Chifu. She charged forward again, quickly sidestepping this time as the two beams fired once more. Glancing back, she saw one beam hit a mirror. She tried to quickly judge where it would ultimately come at her from, but it moved too quickly to tell. She tried jumping away, still barely getting clipped by a beam to the leg as it passed where her chest would've been.

She fell to the ground with a scream of pain, quickly batting away at the fire before rolling out of the way of the next trio of beams. This time she was ready and was already moving forward before the two beams that would hit her could finish being reflected. But just as she was about to close in on the fox, its fourth tail fired a beam that made her jump backwards as it swept the ground in front of it, creating a wall of fire explosions.

'It even knows to keep one tail ready to fend off my attacks? She's really thought of everything!' Senko thought, trying to figure out a plan of attack. Another two beams shot out, one of which managed to clip her side as she was slowly getting battered down by the beams grazing her and setting her on fire. If this kept up, she was sure to be killed by this thing.

Seeing her right arm on fire suddenly gave her an idea. She stood in the center of the room, waiting for the next barrage of beams. It did not disappoint, quickly sending a trio of beams her way. Quickly shrugging off her jacket, she flung it forward, letting all three beams hit it and set it fully ablaze. The amount of fire between her and the fox shielded her from its sight for just a moment, and none of the mirrors could reflect her image with all the fire and smoke. The sound of bells filled the room in that instant…

…and the fox was sliced in two as Senko stood on the other side of it. The shockwave behind her erupted all at once, shattering all the mirrors, putting out all the fires, and fully tearing apart the fox's body entirely. It soon dissipated in white flames as Senko began walking forward.

"Have… to go find… Chifu… have to go find… Inari… have… to… go… find…" She only managed to take a few steps before she suddenly collapsed, the damage her body took too much for her to handle. She reached forward to try and drag herself forward just a bit more, before her vision began to swim and she fully collapsed, passing out on the floor.

Back with Inari and the rest of their group, the larger fox was still active against them, breathing a cone of fire that set the cherry blossom tree ablaze. Fiery petals rained down on the group, serving as a distraction for the fighters as the fox charged forward to try and take a bite out of Wendy.

Inari slashed its side, knocking it away, but the fox quickly recovered as its wounds regenerated quickly. The same held true as Taleus gathered blood from a chest wound he had sustained in the fight and sent bloody daggers its way, impaling it multiple times. The daggers were soon dislodged, the gaping wounds where they had pierced quickly sealing as a burst of blue flame shot towards the assassin.

It was all the two melee fighters could do to keep it from ravaging Wendy, using all of their strength and speed to knock it aside with each attempt at the mage, at the cost of them receiving bites and scratches in response. And Wendy could not cast a spell herself due to the speed of the fox and the frequency of its attacks, her circles constantly being interrupted by jets of flame shot her way.

Inari glared over at Taleus, who was still wildly slashing on his own. But seeing that it was backing up for now from his assault, she could at least prepare her own attack. "*Falling Godslayer!*" She leaped in the air and gave a wide slash, gouging out portions of the stone and dirt below as the fox was nearly sliced in two and launched back. But it quickly began stitching itself together once more, though it was standing in place the whole time.

Wendy took her cue, channeling another ice spell as clearly destructive methods of attack wouldn't work. Instead, as she finished casting the spell, a pillar of ice rose up around the large fox, encasing it entirely as it was now frozen in place unable to move. The trio waited to see if it could escape. Eventually, it became clear that it couldn't even finish regenerating, much less move.

So with that problem cleared up, they quickly ran through the door that Senko had disappeared through, hoping to find which way the mummy warrior had gone. But they didn't even make it halfway down the hall before the section of it Wendy and Taleus were on separated off from the rest of the hall, sending them elsewhere.

Inari cursed as she spun around to chase after them, only for a new section of hallway to arrive. It was a three-way intersection piece, with a hallway leading to a large room. Inside said room stood Chifu, along with three more of the wolf-sized foxes.

"Chifu!" Inari shouted, rushing forward down the hall. Two of the fox leaped forward to attack, but Inari cut them down with ease and sent them flying away to explode. But in the brief moment she couldn't see the goddess, the God Eater had crossed the distance as well and grabbed hold of Red from Inari's hands.

Instantly, the ghost returned to spirit form, before being pocketed away by Chifu as Inari looked confused. This gave the third fox a chance to leap onto the ghost girl's back and bite into her shoulder, which she had to shake off.

“Oh no~ You lost one of your friends~” Chifu taunted, checking her nails. “Whatever shall you do now?~”

Inari said nothing, grabbing hold of Green as he made himself ready, firing an arrow towards the last fox. The lithe creature dodged the shot, rushing for her once more. Inari dodged and tried to get distance to fire another arrow, but the fox maintained a chasing pursuit on her, making it difficult for her to do anything.

Realizing it’s pointless to do a direct shot against the fox, she instead aimed up, loosing an arrow straight above her as she backed up. As the fox closed in to where the arrow was fired, Inari’s trap sprung. “*Arrow Rain!*” The green arrow split into many, piercing the fox multiple times before it could dodge and caused it to explode a safe distance from Inari.

Inari then turned her bow at the goddess, who giggled at the threat. “Oh my~ You tore apart my poor foxes~ How awfully cruel of you~ But they’re no match for you, so I’ll just take care of you myself~”

Inari loosed the arrow, aiming directly for the goddess’ heart to try and get the victory. But with a flash of Red, Chifu deflected the arrow with a very familiar blade. The ghost girl snarled in anger seeing her friend get used against her, loosing several more arrows in response that Chifu easily deflected. As Inari fired a splitting arrow to try and catch Chifu unaware, the goddess caused the blade to float and deflect one arrow, while the other was burned by kitsune fire.

Chifu then suddenly vanished in a swirl of her tails, disappearing from sight. Inari looked around for the goddess, but didn’t see her anywhere. Suddenly, the kitsune trickster grabbed hold of Green as well, siphoning him from Inari’s soul tether as she moved away once more. She then revolved Green and Red around her head, taunting the ghostly warrior with a smile.

“Now you’re down two friends and are all alone~ Whatever are you going to do now?~” Chifu’s tails flicked with amusement as she assessed the flaming haired girl. The cursed spirit curled her fists, the blue glow on them becoming accentuated as she charged forward, a blue trail following like a comet trail as she intended to smash in the smug goddess’ face.

So much so, that she didn’t notice the large hole in the floor beneath where she floated. A large mass suddenly slammed into her back, sending her plummeting down as another large fox attempted to bite down on Inari as the pair fell to a space far below. As she kept one arm in the familiar’s mouth to keep it from biting something important, she reached her other hand out towards Chifu. The goddess merely smirked and blew a kiss, walking away as Inari plummeted into the darkness below.

The group that had gone down the straight path had also begun to encounter the exploding familiars, though they had the advantage of having Teekee, who with his long, stretching arms and resistance to fire damage was able to keep them all at bay. The occasional one that got past him was batted away by Aude, while Valentine and Angelique served as the last line of defense in case any got too close.

Unlike the right path team, Teekee’s team was more than capable of advancing progressively through the infinite fortress maze while saving Angelique and Valentine’s magical reserves for when they found Chifu. Opening up another door and charging in as a group to ensure nobody gets separated by the shifting layout of the God Eater’s whims as they entered a large room that descended down, with several platforms beneath them to go down. At the bottom was the next doorway for them to go through.

“Well, looks like it’s time for us to go down.” Valentine commented, taking a few steps back and taking a deep breath before running out and leaping towards the next lowest platform. Landing with a hard impact, she was glad she couldn’t feel any pain as she stood up fully, looking up to the others and waving for them to follow.

Angelique looked down with disgust, clearly not keen on the God Eater's choice of interior design, before leaping off with shadows coating her feet as she descended down a level below Valentine. Just before she hit the ground, the shadow stretched down and connected with the wooden floor, slowing her fall as she landed. Teekee, meanwhile, stretched himself out all the way down to Valentine's platform, shifting his wooden plates to allow Aude to descend down safely.

Aude dusted off her hands like she accomplished much as she watched Teekee pull himself over. She then looked down to where Angelique was… and her eyes went wide. "Behind you!"

Angelique reacted instantly, kicking out behind her as she caught the jaw of a fox familiar and knocked it away. A strand of shadow still on her foot attached itself to the fox and slammed its head into the wall, smashing it in completely as it began to fade. The blonde claimer glared at the fading fox, before glancing down below.

Several more of the foxes were arranged on the platforms below, yipping in anticipation of taking on the fighters. Looking at them distantly now, she could see that they had three tails each that all coiled together above the foxes. One of them looked up at her and aimed the mass of tails at her, a blue glow emanating from inside the furred coil. She managed to pull her head back as a barrage of three blue darts shot up at her, each one exploding into blue flame as they made impact.

"Great. Of course they're all snipers now…" Angelique grumbled, gathering more shadows to fight back. She leaped out once more, a large ball of shadows gathered behind her. As all the foxes below fired upon her, the shadow ball shot out more tendrils, blocking the projectiles and redirecting the explosions away from her. She dropped a few levels and landed on top of one of the foxes, using the last bits of shadows to cushion her fall and apply gravity to the fox to crush it beneath her with immense pressure.

Teekee gave a cry of his own, hopping down without a second thought to help Angelique. Most of the foxes turned their gazes up to him, firing more shots. His wooden armor adjusted itself to block the barrage, as his arms stretched out to grab the next highest two, pulling them down with him. With two powerful throws, two more foxes were crushed by their thrown compatriots. Two more were grabbed before he reached the ground, which the golem slammed into the ground with monstrous power to utterly destroy them.

Up above, Valentine and Aude started raining down what projectiles they had, firebolts for the former and golden baseballs for the latter. When some of the remaining foxes took their aim up at them, Valentine created a magical shield to protect the two of them from the fiery explosions. The two returned fire again, taking out a handful with their ranged attacks while Teekee and Angelique took care of things up close.

“You know, I never realized how many familiars Chifu could make until they were all trying to kill us.” Valentine commented lightly, raising another shield to protect her and her fox companion.

“Yeah, well, you’re not going to kill them any faster by complimenting their numbers. So less talking, more firebolts!” Aude shouted back, bringing her bat back as one fox managed to climb up to their platform and attempted to swipe a claw at them.

As that fox fell, Valentine grabbed hold of Aude, holding her under her arm against her torso. “It’ll be easier for us to hit them when we get closer!”

“Wait closer? What do you mea- wait, no no no NO NO!” Aude tried to protest, but Valentine quickly leaped off the edge, hurtling down several stories to the platform Angelique was fighting from.

The blonde woman looked up at the falling two, before gathering more shadows to help lower them safely to her platform as she shook her head. “I would ask if you have some sort of suicidal hero complex, but then I remembered something like this wouldn’t effect you.”

“Sorry. I just figured you and Teekee needed help.” Valentine said as Aude stood panting next to her, mustering up the air to swear the zombie girl enough to override her curse with the superstar’s own.

“Well, I certainly like the backup, but I doubt lava boy down there needs any of our help.” She gestured down at Teekee, whose arms were stretching out to slam into and grab hold of various foxes and throw them to their deaths. “Honestly at this point, we’re merely backup for him in case he gets too in over his head.”

As if on cue, a large, white hand with several red eye designs suddenly burst through the door at the bottom level and grabbed hold of Teekee. The lava golem looked up at his allies with surprise as they all looked down at him with horror, before he was suddenly pulled into the passage beyond.

Before the three could go down to help him, a handful more foxes ran out of the door before it shut behind them. These ones had long hind legs that extended up above their bodies before heading back down to the ground to rest like coiled springs. Their front claws were also much longer, their purpose clear as half of them immediately sprang upwards, clearing half the height of the towering room in a single bound and latching onto the walls above them as the ones below began to aim towards the trio of girls.

“Dammit!” Angelique cursed, shaking her head. “Maybe if she put an ounce of the creativity she used to make all these monsters into her name and disguise, maybe it wouldn’t be so obvious to everyone that looks at her in disguise that she’s the same goddess running this show!”

She kicked her leg out as one of the foxes lunged up at her, slamming her heel into its face and knocking it back down before it could swing. But it did manage to drag her down with him, making her roar in annoyance as she gathered more magic to slam it hard into the ground as she readied to face the others, while her companions above prepared to take on the higher stationed foxes with their sword and bat.

Teekee was dragged down several corridors, going through various twists and turns at a dizzying rate that made it hard for him to tell which way he was going and which way he came from. When he was finally released, it was done by having him slammed into the far wall, which his jelly-like body easily absorbed.

As he landed on the ground and looked around, he realized he was thrown on the only bit of solid ground in this room. The rest of the room consisted of floating pontoons that bobbed on top of a large tank of water. And standing on a pontoon on the other side of the room as the enlarged tails that threw him went back down to normal size to be her swishing tails once more, Chifu stood with casually crossed arms, flanked by two large suits of armor.

“Why hello there, Teekee~ I see you’ve been doing quite a wonderful job rampaging through my little maze~ I just knew I had to pluck you away to make sure you didn’t keep all the fun to yourself~”

Teekee looked at the mocking goddess with a look of concern. “I don’t want to have to hurt you, Chifu. I just want my friends and I all to all be happy and get a wish. Is that too much to ask for? I don’t want anyone else to get hurt.”

“Oh?~ Are you going to make demands of me now too?~” Chifu giggled, putting her hands behind her back. “Sorry, but you guys started this fight~ And I’m not going to make things easy~ But you’re going to have to work hard to make sure nobody else gets hurt~”

Chifu pulled her hands back out, revealing Senko’s mask, slightly burned in her hands. Teekee’s face instantly shifted to anger. “That’s Senko’s… what did you do to her?”

“Hmm?~” Chifu played dumb, putting away the mask. “Well maybe you should come over here and beat me so you can get that wish to find out~”

As she said that, the two suits of armor next to her began to move. In the gaps between the armor, white fur began to appear as a set of five tails began to sprout from an opening in the back of each of them. Red eyes seemed to gleam from the slits in the armor as they both came to life, possessed by large fox familiars.

Teekee gave a cry of anger as he charged forward, heedless of danger as he stepped onto the first pontoon after her. The two golems also moved forward at Chifu's commands, both sides sending waves through the water with each step. Teekee and one of the golems met on a pontoon near the middle, their fists clashing together as they pushed against each other.

It was only when a cloud of steam began to billow up from beneath them did Teekee reexamine what was going on. With the weight of both of them on the pontoon, the wooden raft sank a few inches in the water, dousing Teekee's lava body with water as he could feel himself weakened. With a shove, the fox golem overpowered the lava one and sent him flying back a few pontoons.

Getting back up quickly as the other approached, Teekee stretched his arm to punch it, sending its head careening back from the force as it stopped its approach. He then gave it a hammer blow to the top, the golem blocking the blow but completely plunging into the water as the pontoon broke.

As the sunken one tried to swim back to the top, Teekee turned to the other, only to see that it had picked up another raft and was swinging it towards him. Teeke managed to raise both arms and shift as much of his wood armor as possible to block the blow, but he was sent skidding off his current pontoon and took a slight dip in the water. He jumped to another pontoon to get out of the water, only to see the first golem had re-emerged and was leaping in the air to crush him.

Teekee leaped out of the way, only to feel it had grabbed onto his arm. Before he could react, the other golem had caught up and punched Teekee in the face. With the pull of the first still on his arm along with the power of the strike, his arm was torn off as he was sent flying Chifu's way. Teekee grimaced, looking back at the pair of golems to see that the one holding his arm had glowing red on his armor from the heat before it tossed the limb into the water in a plume of steam.

Getting an idea, Teekee reached over and grabbed a raft, before charging forward. The golem with heated arms reached forward, pushing back against the raft as it caught fire from the combined heat of both people holding it. Teekee then stretched one leg out, letting it grow slightly before slamming it onto the pontoon the golem was on.

Its partner managed to jump off, but the one with heated limbs fell directly into the water as it was launched into the air. The moment the arms hit the water, there was an explosion of steam and its arms were burnt off entirely. It could do nothing more as it pointlessly sank to the bottom of the water, where it eventually lost the light in its furious eyes.

Turning to the other one, Teekee began fist fighting it, though his lack of an arm made things difficult. Its armor was pretty durable, making each blow weaker in effect than he would like. He had to shift his own armor often to try and avoid taking too much damage himself, as well as to make sure he didn't get pushed back into the water. And all the while, the golem kept leaping after him, trying to get on the same pontoon to sink the island-born golem.

But with his better intelligence and ability to stretch his limbs, he was slowly battering away at the fox's armor. It was soon rather dented along the chest, creating an opening near the top of it. Grabbing hold of it, Teekee pulled with all of his strength until the front breastplate was flung behind him to sink into the water. With a mighty roar, he extended his arm back as far as he could and punched forward, slamming into the large fox's chest with massive strength.

The fox's body exploded from the blow, unable to handle Teekee's strength without the armor as the remaining pieces scattered along the wooden raft. As Teekee began to pant from the exertion, he heard a clapping sound coming from behind him as he turned around.

"Wow~ You're certainly impressive~" Chifu stepped onto the pontoons herself now, her tails swaying behind her with each step. "I set everything against you in here and you still prevailed~ I guess I'll have to take care of you myself~"

"I don't want to hurt you, Ms. Chifu." Teekee tried to reason, but he still readied himself to fight.

Chifu gave a small laugh, putting her hands together in a clawed stance. "That's cute that you're worried~ But you'll need to prove that you can actually keep up with me~"

With that, Teeke rushed forward, shifting his armor to protect his core from her attack as he landed in front of her. Meanwhile, she merely put her foot back to get ready to push off. "Fox Claw…"

With a burst of speed, the God Eater was on the other side of Teekee in a flash of white and red, the golem now missing a good chunk of his torso along the left side. His core now gone, his body slowly fell apart as Chifu stood up straight.

"...Prison~" Behind her floated a blue ball with Teekee's core, some of his lava, and some wood floating in there. "There we go~ Now you just stay here like a good boy while I take care of all your friends~ Hoo, this is pretty tiring, dealing with you all like this~"

She gave another gloating laugh, walking away as Teekee could do nothing but float in place, waiting for his friends to rescue him.

Raku and Quan made their own way through a winding, twisting corridor as they explored on their own. Raku tried to fly them around to different areas, but after flying a certain distance, some invisible force would start dragging them away from the direction they were going. With that plan scrapped, they instead decided to go on foot, with Quan carefully scouting forward with his impressive speed.

So far, they hadn't encountered any threats. Raku was worried that it was because the others were currently under attack, but she would have to find them in order to make sure they were ok.

But what was most worrying was that Chifu hadn't messed with them since they got separated. She had gone through the effort of putting Quan and Raku somewhere else, so the least she had expected was for the goddess to taunt them in some way. The quiet was almost worse for Raku's nerves, her grip white on her naginata.

But her worried thoughts were interrupted by the sound of falling water. Looking to Quan, the two nodded to each other before making their way forward together. Entering the room in question, they were greeted by a large waterfall descending down to a stone floor, the water steadily moving through the room. Several rounded rocks protruded from the streaming river, as well as rows of tall reeds near a large section of land.

Behind the reeds, two fox-like figures stood waiting for them. One was a lean, long bodied beast with a muzzle that extended almost a foot out from its face. Its five tails lashed behind it like whips, the air stirring from the motion as they moved so quickly. The other was bulkier, its muscles bulging out obscenely as it stood with legs out akimbo in front of it. Its claws were razor blades nearly a foot and a half in length, digging into the stone beneath it like it was nothing and its five tails smashed into the ground with cracking force.

"Guess we shouldn't have expected things to stay quiet forever." Quan quipped, rubbing the handle of his knife with a finger as he looked at Raku. "But they don't look too bad, honestly. We'll just beat them up a little and get back to finding Chifu."

He turned his head back, but the lean fox had disappeared from sight. Raku's eyes went wide at the same moment, her mind a little slower to process it despite the fact she had been looking in its direction when it disappeared. Quan, with his faster thinking, looked around at high speed to find it.

On the wall above the door they had walked through, the fox had positioned itself above them, its mouth opened wide as blue flames gathered. With a burst of strength from his speed, he shoved Raku far away before moving out of the way himself. But the speed of the projectile that rocketed out of its mouth meant that even his speed wasn't enough to get out of the way as the ball of flames exploded near him, sending him flying. At that same moment, all of the parts of the water the fox had run through splashed up as time caught up to the speed the fox and Quan had been moving at.

As Raku stumbled from the sudden shove, she felt something large approach her from the side. She brought her spear up to block it, managing to avoid being turned into dragon sashimi thanks to the metal blocking claws. But the immense power behind the blow couldn't be ignored, and she was sent flying across the room, slamming into the stone wall with enough power to imbed herself half an inch into the solid stone. The dragon woman gave a gasp of pain and surprise, pulling herself out of the stone as the behemoth fox roared in anger before charging towards her once more.

The muscular beast lunged forward, only for its claws to sink into the stone as Raku leaped high in the air above it. She quickly burst back down with a gust of wind, stabbing down into its back with a powerful dive. Her spear hit her foe straight in the back… and stuck between the muscles of the beast after only half an inch of piercing the flesh of the familiar even as the ground beneath it nearly shattered from the force of the dive moving through its body.

It roared, swinging to try and throw her off and claw her to death. But she managed to pry the Windcutter Naginata free and fly upwards before it could catch her. She kept a steady height above it, avoiding its claws as it jumped to try and get her. She gathered wind at the tip of her spear and swung it towards the behemoth, the wind slashing only the surface of the skin.

It gave a cry of pain, before grabbing a chunk of smooth stone from the water and tossing it up at her. She did a rolling dive to move out of the way, getting close enough to stab it once more despite knowing she couldn't strike deep. But this time, its tail swung out just as she made impact, slamming heavily into her chest as she was knocked back. She slid along the water, leaping up in the air before landing behind the waterfall. With a roar, Raku sent a blast of air from her mouth that parted the falling water, slamming almost ineffectually against its front as it charged after her.

Meanwhile, a high speed battle was taking place all around the room at a speed too high for the two bruisers battling currently to even comprehend. Quan was moving as fast as he could, dodging consecutive blasts from the lean fox's mouth as the room exploded with fire at various spots. While Quan mostly had to stay along the ground to run, his opponent could use its claws to climb up the walls and even cling to the ceiling, meaning it could attack from any direction.

It didn't help that it was clearly faster than him, a fact proven when it fired a blast that he dodged, only for it to close the distance and slash him with its claws just as he finished recovering. His skin only stayed open for a few moments, however, before his regeneration kicked in to put him back to good health. He tried to stab it back in retaliation, but it easily moved out of the way, sliding a bit away from him to fire another blast while he pulled back his missed swing.

Quan looked back over to Raku, seeing her struggle to do damage to her opponent as well. But unlike him, she couldn't just regenerate from the wounds she was taking. She was already bleeding from the head from the earlier impact, as well as several scrapes and scratches she accumulated from the ferocious beast. They needed to start working together or the pair of foxes would eviscerate them.

But he realized his mistake as he turned back to where his opponent was, only to feel claws across his back as it rushed behind him. But the roar of pain in response meant his plan had worked, as he had stabbed back at the same time, managing to catch its side. And unlike him, this thing couldn't heal. When it tried to move away, its side began to hurt from the wound, so it couldn't move as quickly right away. Even as Quan's wounds were healing, he launched forward, stabbing into the lean fox's shoulder as it gave another cry of pain.

As Raku held back another strike with all her might, this time holding her ground as she got used to her opponent's strength, she heard the cries of anguish behind her. She jumped back to gain distance from her opponent, looking back to see Quan doing well. Grinning now that they had a chance, she turned back to the behemoth, only for it to immediately leap over her head towards its companion. Quan turned just in time to dive out of the way just as the behemoth landed where he had been.

The lean fox began to climb up gingerly onto the muscular one, curling onto its back for apparent safety. But then the white fur of the foxes began to twist and change, as the lines between them seemed to slowly fade. Soon, the lean fox's legs and sides were merged onto the back of the larger one, only its head and tails really standing out as anything more than just a lump on the bigger one's back.

"Well, that's something new." Quan quipped, moving over to Raku.

"I'll say. Well, at least now we can focus on one." The dragon spun around her spear, pointing at the one on the back. "And since that thing's slowed down, I can finally stab at it."

But almost as if they heard her, the larger one roared, while the one on its back began firing explosive darts. But now, their explosion was much larger, forcing the pair to dive with all of their speed or strength to just barely get out of the way.

The main body of the pair rushed forward towards Quan. To his surprise, the lumbering beast was now moving at a much faster pace, making it much more difficult for him to dodge the wide sweeps it threw his way. But even his impressive speed would prove to slow, as its sharp claws managed to graze his chest. Just as he was backing up from that blow, a blast of fire sent him flying through the air, his body singed slightly as he landed bodily clear on the other side of the room.

Raku didn't fare much better when it turned its attention towards her, crossing the distance as she dodged a pair of blasts flying her way. While she could better defend against its strength than Quan, each one required a lot of power on her end, and with its newfound speed, keeping up the defense directly was really difficult.

But even with those new problems, Raku was still able to find an opening. Thrusting her spear into a wound on its shoulder, she was surprised to find how much deeper the weapon managed to pierce. She realized that it must have shifted some of its mass merging with the other, weakening its defenses. Now she could better attack it.

Her joy didn't last long, as a muscular arm slammed into her side with a disconcerting popping noise coming from her torso. She was sent rolling along the floor, struggling to get up as she came to a stop. The sound of a dart being fired wasn't enough to motivate her to move fast enough, as she got caught in the blast and sent flying once more as she screamed in pain.

Quan suddenly reappeared on the beasts back, stabbing at the lean fox with his dagger as he gave a roar of anger. The two creatures roared in anger back, the larger one shaking its massive frame, sending fur flying as it tried to shake the young fae off of it as it lost more and more flesh from the stabbing dagger. The fox responded by standing on its hind legs, before slamming its back onto the stone wall in an attempt to crush him.

Quan gave a pained groan, but held strong as he waited for the beast to pull away from the wall to stab again even as he felt the skin beneath his fingers twist as the larger kept giving more of its body to the leaner fox to repair the damage it was taking. But with each slam into the wall, he was losing strength himself. His regeneration was taking too much of his strength, and he couldn't take it much longer.

With a bigger running start, the large beast slammed into the wall one last time, and Quan was finally knocked off the creature, falling in a heap onto the floor. Both beasts roared, the top one gathering energy for another blast of fire towards him as he looked up at them. He gave a laugh, shaking his head.

"Took you long enough…"

Up above the monster, Raku flew on high, her scales covering her arms as her muscle mass was much larger in her transformed strength. The seven foot tall dragon woman aimed her spear towards the weakened beast just as the leaner one looked up to see her. With an almost panicked scream, it began firing darts up at her. Raku seemed unphased as the first one exploded next to her, taking the shockwave like it was nothing before she began her dive as she had finished gathering as much wind into the tip of her spear as she could.

The beast fired a few more blasts in the short time it had, knowing its larger body couldn't avoid the attack. Each one slammed into the wall of wind that pressed itself in front of the diving Raku, keeping her from being blown apart instantly even as the heat and the shockwaves damaged her further.

With a burst of speed, Raku roared a dragon's roar as she plunged her naginata straight through both foxes, the screams cut off as their bodies were blown apart by the pure force of the diving attack. Raku stood in a crater of her own making as the water that had been flowing there was blown in all directions, her body shaking from all the pain she was in. She looked over at Quan, who gave her a shaky thumbs up, which she gave in response.

Then, with a rolling of both of their eyes, both contestants promptly passed out from their wounds, no longer able to gather energy for themselves as the sounds of falling water filled the room once more.

The trio of girls Teekee left behind quickly took care of the foxes that had been sent to stall them thanks to Angelique's powerful magic and Aude and Valentine's physical strength. But they didn't spend a second celebrating, as they had to go rescue their friend before Chifu could beat him. With Aude in the lead, the trio charged forward, confident they could handle anything that came next.

The golden superstar in particular seemed impatient to get the show on the road. But it didn't entirely stem from a desire to rescue Teekee. "We've already had to deal with so many sideshows. When can we start getting onto the real show?"

"Is now really the time to be thinking about your next chance to be on camera?" Angelique shook her head, checking her prosthetic limbs to make sure they hadn't been damaged destroying all those foxes. "In case you forgot, we're fighting a goddess that apparently decided that today was the day to be sober."

"And that's why we should be fighting her now!" Aude countered, walking backwards to face Angelique as they argued. "When are you going to get a chance to face an actual goddess that's out to beat you?"

"Knowing my luck, I'll be getting the invitation when we're done here…" Angelique certainly didn't sound thrilled at that prospect, looking at the shadows for more weapons to use if another fight broke out.

"Well if you get one, make sure you invite me al-"

Aude was suddenly cut off as she disappeared from view. Angelique and Valentine were stunned for a moment, looking around for the golden superstar. The zombie knight stepped forward to call her name, when she felt her foot slip. It was only thanks to Angelique's quick reaction that she was caught and pulled back to safety as the hologram on the floor disappeared. A pit that took up most of the central part of the hallway stretched before them for about eight feet, neither of them able to see their friend as she descended below.

"We have to go after her!" Valentine called, preparing to jump down herself.

"What are you, crazy?" Angelique stopped her with a grip on the zombie's shoulder. "Even for you, such a fall will kill you if you land wrong! Aude knows what she's doing, I'm sure she'll make it out ok."

Valentine bit her lip, looking down at the pit again before calling down, "You better not die like that Aude! It's not like you otherwise!"

Her voice carried down quite a ways as the remaining two girls continued forward to look for Teekee and a way down to Aude.

The orange fox, meanwhile, had fallen a good way before she fully comprehended the fluttering sensation in her stomach and her speeding surroundings as her falling. Her eyes went wide as she spun around in the air to look down at where she was falling. As she started formulating a plan to land safely, Valentine's voice echoed out from above.

"You don't need to tell me, zombie girl. I'm just fine on my own!" As she saw the ground get closer, she generated a pillar of gold beneath her, creating a slide at the top of it that led most of the way down to save on energy when she could. She slid down the makeshift ramp, rolling on the ground as she hit the soft dirt before leaping onto her feet with her bat at the ready.

What she saw certainly was a sight to behold. A long corridor of dirt flooring and steel walls stretched out before her, with the end of it being a large stage with various cat motifs all over it. Fireworks shot up into the air as Aude finally arrived, and soon music began to play from speakers all over the stage, as a monitor at the top showed heart animations playing as the voice of Miss X sang a few notes of one of her best songs. When she finished singing a few bars, Miss X appeared at the center of the stage, her pink hair bouncing as she got into pose.

"Hello again my wonderful kittens! How's everyone doing today? I nyaow you're all surprised that I'm putting on a surprise concert from a place you've never seen before! But have no fear, my darling fans, you're not missing one of your precious shows! I would never deprive my fans of the chance to see my meow-velous shows in person! No, this time your cat-tastic idol is instead stepping onto the battlefield herself!"

She gave another idol pose as fireworks went off behind her, the sound of an audience cheering seeming to come from nowhere as Aude's ears went flat against her head. "What the hell…"

"Now, I know what you're all thinking: 'But Miss X, aren't you incapable of actually touching people? I know you couldn't shake our hands during the fan meet-ups. So how can you fight?'"

Miss X had a fake teardrop come from her eye as an animation of a sad cat face appeared on the monitor. The singer gave a dramatic sniff, wiping away the tears before she instantly cheered up.

"But luckily, my mom was kind enough to create a room in her Infinite Fox Den all for me! One where I can connect and control every aspect of the room myself! All full of deadly traps and dangerous implements with which to bludgeon my fellow performer! And don't worry! My mom isn't going to send any of her familiars to help me, nor did she come up with any of the traps you're about to see! Every bit of this will be all me!"

“Whoa whoa whoa! Hold up there, kitty cat!” Aude called out, resting her bat on her shoulder as she pointed at the cat-based idol. “You just said it yourself that nobody can touch you. How am I supposed to fight back against you if I can’t even hit you? I don’t mind having you as an opponent, but I at least want to make sure it’s fair so there’s some excitement for the crowd.”

“Are you saying I would put on a poor show for my loyal kittens?” Miss X looked offended, the heart pupils in her eyes breaking for a moment. “Well don’t you worry! Cause when I said that I control everything in here, I might have made a slight omission! There is one thing I don’t control that’s important for me to be here!”

With a presentation of her hands, the center of the stage opened up and a large device in the shape of a cat’s paw rose onto the stage. The claws were clearly some sort of makeshift antenna, and the paw pads were the monitors showing various readings.

“This right here is a receiver made especially to allow me to project myself into this special dimensional space! Otherwise, this place is so far outside of my normal projection range that I’d instantly have to go back to the Crossroads for my safety! So Aude, this is your goal! Smash this thing up and you win and get to go back to trying to beat up my mom! But…”

Miss X’s face darkened, her normally cheery demeanor gone as she glared down towards Aude with a look of confidence and a desire to win. She clutched her microphone tightly as the orange fox adjusted the grip on her bat, clearly excited at the look Miss X was giving her. Despite only being a presenter so far, it was clear that the idol was not going to be a pushover.

“...I’m not going to make that easy.” As she finished her statement, she put back on her cheery mask, jumping up in the air excitedly. “Now, let’s get started! Ready? Set! GO!”

At the exact moment “go” was said, Aude started moving forward, only for the ground beneath her feet to move and put her off-balance. The dirt beneath her soon made way to reveal a large conveyor belt that was moving her backwards. And just as she sat up and looked back, she saw that the back wall was now covered in absurdly large spikes, each point gleaming with malicious intent.

“Wow, we’re really starting off strong, huh?” Aude commented, rolling onto her feet and taking off. Luckily, the belt couldn’t move faster than she could, meaning she was gaining ground towards Miss X, if only a tad slower than she would normally accomplish. “But that’s ok! Two can play at that game!”

Aude created an orb of gold, catching it in her hand before tossing it up. With a small grunt, she hit a homerun shot towards the stage where Miss X was dancing as she was putting on a concert as she fought. But before it got halfway, Miss X gave a swinging motion from the stage as a large club emerged from the wall and slammed into the orb, sending it back towards Aude at twice the speed. Thinking quickly, Aude gave another swing, using as much of her strength as possible to hit it back once more, trying to avoid the club. But another simply sprung up to knock it back with as much force as the first.

The golden superstar was eager to knock it back once more, only for her to feel an impact on her side as she was shoved by a section of wall emerging at high speeds as Miss X gave a push-like dance on the stage. The wall took the impact of the golden baseball, denting heavily even as it inexorably pushed Aude towards becoming a foxy pancake against the wall.

Aude was prepared, quickly creating a small golden pillar that launched her upwards to avoid that fate, grinning down at Miss X as she was now freed from the constant motion of the conveyor belt.

Miss X grinned back, having easily seen this move coming. After all, she was able to not only know of the various alternate dimensions the God Eater created, but she was able to process many different ones simultaneously and gather information from them all at once. In this very moment, she was reviewing the actions of Audes in multiple dimensions and analyzing her every move and tactic, and planning out her own moves to counter each one.

Like this one. As Aude was still hanging in the air, a set of arrow launchers emerged from the wall aiming up at the superstar. With a series of explosions, the projectiles raced towards the baseball player faster than any pitch she's ever thrown. The first couple of arrows were knocked aside by her bat, but the overwhelming barrage meant that a fair few managed to graze her as she grit her teeth. With a twist of her torso, she began to spin all the way around, swinging her bat out in a flurry as she dove back towards the ground to try and deflect as many projectiles as possible even if it was impossible to keep all of them from hitting her.

Landing back on the conveyor belt, she quickly launched into a sprint while the arrow launchers were reloading, trying to cover as much ground as possible before the next barrage. As the launchers turned to fire again, Aude created a wall of gold to protect herself, the shield working to deflect the arrows so she could press on.

"Oh my!" Miss X called, looking out towards the ever approaching fox woman. "It looks like Aude's really stepping up her game! Guess I'll have to turn up the heat too!"

Miss X gave a spinning dance before a holographic set of weapons appeared in her hand. A backpack shaped like a cat head on her back connected by a hose to the nozzle of a flamethrower, with a white fox paw holding up a blue flame to ignite the propellant. With a sweeping motion, she released blue flames as the stage went alight with fireworks and pyrotechnics.

At the same time, Aude was suddenly hit with a wave of heat from the direction of her golden wall. She watched in horror as the wall quickly melted away as a flaming wall burned through her defense and washed towards her. She barely rolled out of the way, though she felt her legs and tail get singed by the fire as she shot a glare towards the singer on the stage.

“Ha, how cute. Just try and make your jokes when I’ve smashed that little device of yours.”

“I’m liking your spirit!” Miss X shot back. “Too bad you don’t have the skills to back it up! I thought you were all about putting on a good show too? Guess you’re only big talk when you’re beating up people weaker than you!”

“Oh, you’re dead, lightshow!” Aude grit her teeth, diving underneath another steam of fire before making another gold ball to slam into the mechanics of the flamethrower to finally disable it.

Miss X frowned, shaking her head. “You get mad and break someone else’s toy in response? How childish!” She then turned around for her next dance move as the conveyor belt quickly switched which directions towards the stage as Aude looked confused. Her confusion was replaced with concern as Miss X clapped her hands and two walls sprung out full of spikes.

Aude had to come up with a solution as fast as possible. With no time to really think, she used another golden pillar to try and leap over it despite knowing it would make her vulnerable.

Sure enough, a metal whip sprang out of one of the walls near the stage, grabbing around Aude’s ankle and swinging her around for a few moments before slamming her into the backside of the spike walls that had been just about to impale her. As she had all the air driven out of her, the whipping motion picked up again, slamming her into various walls and the floor multiple times while she tried to recover.

“Looks like someone’s running out of that fighting spirit she’s known for real quick! Guess she’s mostly bark with very little bite!” Miss X taunted, knowing that would push Aude to try a little harder to prove the idol wrong.

A flash of emerald eyes towards the stage proved her deductions right, as a wedge of gold materialized right near the next impact point, slashing through the metal cable as Aude took a moment to rest and recover as her head bumped against the wall thanks to the conveyor belt. Her body was battered and bruised, and it was taking all her focus to remain conscious from the assault she undertook. Eventually, she pushed herself onto her feet as the walls opened behind her, and she had to move before they closed in on her moving back towards them.

With a last burst of speed, she managed to get her hands on the edge of the stage, pulling herself up with great effort as bruised ribs screamed in pain. As she rolled onto the stage, Miss X’s music began to get louder in intensity as if it knew the fight was reaching its climax. Aude stood to her feet and glared at the holographic idol, who gave a big smile back.

“Now that was certainly a harrowing approach! I didn’t think you were going to make it at several points there! But you did it! Congratulations! Now all you have to do is take a few more steps and you’ll become a shining star!” Miss X gestured grandly towards the receiver, knowing she was unable to physically stop the fox girl from smashing it.

“Become?” Aude questioned, raising an eyebrow as she began to cover her bat in a golden sheath for her Solar Homerun attack. “I’m already one. But I want to make sure you broadcast for everyone just how shining I am!” She took a step forward…

…and a hatch opened in front of her as a firework shot up. The rocket’s fin caught a hold of Aude’s shirt before she even realized what was happening, carrying her up on the flare’s trajectory. As the golden superstar’s battered mind finally realized what had hit her, she gave a roar of anger that was soon drowned out by the sound of an explosion as orange and pink pyrotechnics went off below.

The image of Miss X's face appeared in the firework's explosion as the burned and knocked out Aude fell below, hitting the top of the stage before falling back onto the main platform with a heavy thud. Miss X walked over with a wicked grin, bending down to "poke" at her defeated opponent.

"Oh, don't you worry Aude! I made sure everyone could see just how much of a shining star you truly are!~"

Bang! Bang! Bang bang bang!

The sounds of gunfire rang out as Pembrooke thinned one side of the approaching horde of fox familiars. Just as the five he shot at exploded, the slide of his gun stayed exposed, making him curse as he realized he had fired off the last shot in the mag without realizing it. He must've lost count with all the shooting he had to do as he quickly reloaded while the others covered for him.

The left team had been encountering just as many of the suicide bombing foxes as the other paths, though like the center path they had an easier time dealing with them thanks to having the powerhouse that was Vilivian here to throw them back with immense force of physical might and walls of magic to keep the worst of the blasts from effecting the party.

Jackie was also helping on the front lines, using her bat to knock them back with her near limitless stamina to let the other two fighters of the group maintain their strength. Piano was assisting from the middle of the group with her throwing knives to kill them from a distance without wasting too much energy.

Between the four of them, they proved to be an effective team, driving back the familiars after just a bit of combat, leaving the group unharmed. When a group of the large, regenerating foxes came to attack them, Piano and Vilivian leaped into action. Vilivian rushed forward and grabbed the muzzle of the fox, holding it shut before lifting the beast up and slamming it to the ground behind her. As its tails lashed angrily, Piano's blade flashed like a crimson blur and cut its head off, preventing its regeneration as its body faded with death.

The Devil Blood then spun around to face the next one, just as two gunshots rang out to blow out its left knee. Jackie made a slide in from the other side, smacking the back of its right leg with her bat to send it face planting into the ground. Piano flipped into the air, stabbing down into its head to finish it off. At that moment, Vilivian threw the other one into the air with her immense power, so Piano had to leap up to slice off its head in midair with a clean slice.

As both parts landed heavily on the ground a distance away, Jackie and Pembrooke gave each other high fives at their success so far. Vilivian stood tall, glaring at the fading monsters with a look of disappointment. But then she looked around as the fog that was kicked up prior to the fighting began to dissipate. Slowly, the realization of what she was truly seeing dawned on her and she reached towards Piano. "Blackblood, move quick!"

Piano looked surprised, but was too slow to react as two sliding walls slammed shut in front of her. In that very moment, Vilivian could no longer sense the Blackblood. The Trickster's magic had already spirited her away elsewhere as the wall reopened to reveal more of the large foxes.

Now deprived of their regeneration halting companion, the trio faced the monstrous beasts with grim expressions. "So, think we stand a chance?" Pembrooke asked, aiming his weapon between the first fox's eyes.

"We must. We are preparing to defeat a goddess next." Vilivian said simply, before summoning her magic to shatter the earth.

Meanwhile, in a distant room, Piano looked around with wide eyes at a forest of trees, tall pines that stretched up as far as her eyes could see. The dark woods were further obscured by the faint mist that permeated the environment. The faint ki of life flowed slowly through the trees, confirming to Piano that everything here was alive despite how deep inside this place must be, which further proved Chifu's powers to the Devil Blood.

"Welcome, Piano, to my little forest~ It's a lovely place to take a walk, but I'd have preferred to bring your brother here with me~"

Chifu's voice echoed from everywhere at once, making it impossible for Piano to track her even with her eyes closed. And the goddess was not nearby, given her ki wasn't within Piano's range. The red skinned woman bit her lip. "I'm sure my brother would be interested in exploring this place. Maybe I can go and get him…"

"Now now~ As fun as that would be, I have to entertain you since you're here~" Her giggle echoed through the woods. "Hmmm~ I know, let's play some hide-and-seek~ It's been a while since X and I have played, so I might be out of practice~"

Piano moved forward silently, trying to see if she could narrow down Chifu's position before the "game" began. After a few steps, she started to feel another lifeforce in the room about fifty feet ahead of her. Stalking closer with silent steps, she crossed from tree to tree getting within striking range of the goddess.

When she was about ten feet from the source, she saw the swish of a tail quickly move behind a tree. Piano got ready into a sprinting pose, then gave a burst of speed to cross the last bit of distance. Rounding the corner, she struck at the source of life with a solid punch to where the goddess' solar plexus would be, going for a knockout blow.

But instead of the red and gold dress of the God Eater, she was instead greeted by a humanoid shaped white and red fox familiar in a similar shape to the goddess. As the martial artist's fist made contact, the fox glowed blue as its lifeforce- which perfectly matched the goddess'- before it exploded into a mass of kitsune flames that blasted Piano back and slammed her into a nearby tree with a painful gasp, too surprised to toughen her muscles for defense.

"Oh?~ Did you not think I would have a punishment for you if you guessed the wrong hiding spot?~" Another laugh rang out from the mist as Piano realized that there were now multiple sources of ki that matched Chifu's as her familiars stalked the forest. "Each wrong one you guess will explode in your face, so you better be careful~ But find me quick, or you'll be trapped in here forever~"

Piano began to sweat, her head swiveling around as she tried to see if there were any differences in any of the ki sources that she was sensing. But most of them felt exactly the same, with the only different ones being less than the average, which she doubted a goddess would be.

Clambering up a tree to get a better vantage point, she thought she had an angle on what looked like the right number of tails for Chifu. But rather than approaching this time, she drew a throwing knife and flung it into the hiding spot, the sound of metal hitting flesh hitting her ears even from the distance she was at.

At that same moment, a white fox with a knife in its chest suddenly appeared next to her and exploded, sending her careening back towards the earth with a heavy thud as Chifu giggled once more. "Oh, sorry~ Did you think you could use range to avoid being blown up?~ My bad~ These guys will always get right up next to you before they go kaboom, so there's no avoiding the punishment for a wrong guess~"

Piano groaned, having just toughened her muscles at the last minute to avoid major back damage again. Standing up slowly, she re-evaluated her strategy. She couldn't sense a difference in ki, and just random guesses will just keep blowing her up. This was a bad match-up for her, as she should have expected from the goddess that selected her to be here.

And the environment they were in would normally be advantageous to her. All the trees, with thick trunks and the slight hint of moisture on them from the heavy mist, made it a perfect playground for her stealth talents to hide her away from prying eyes. If the trees were all gone… wait, that was it! All she had to do was cut down the trees and she'll create a better opportunity to find Chifu.

Smiling to herself at the clever plan, she drew her crimson sword and began slashing through the trees, the corrupting influence of her blood allowing her to eat away at any of the toughness the thick pines presented her as she felled trees one by one with a series of cacophonous crashes behind her, creating an auditory trail one could follow if they wished to find the normally gentle wallflower.

But as she went to slice through another tree, the space in front of her suddenly shifted violently. The space in front of her suddenly contracted massively, several yards of trees and earth shrinking down to but a few inches just as her sword made contact with the tree. Looking in horror, she saw that there was a humanoid fox just on the other side of the new tree that had suddenly come within striking range, but she had already committed to the swing at this point to stop it.

With a clean slash, she cut through wood and flesh alike, as two foxes teleported in position to explode. Piano had stepped forward as she swung, the top half of her body going through this strange, contracted space. She had the sudden, vertigo-inducing feeling of suddenly shooting forward the contracted distance, meaning she had no time to dodge as the foxes exploded, forcing her to toughen her muscles. But as she flew back, the space once more expanded back to its normal proportions as not one, not two, but eight trees that had been once bound to the same space were separated once more, her slash having gone through them all within that boundless space. Several more had large gouges as they hadn't been perfectly lined up with her cleaving blow. The air seemed to explode from having a powerful blow swiftly cleave through the air faster than normally possible. A wide swath of forest was instantly cleared due to Chifu's trick.

Likewise, when Piano slammed into the tree behind her, her lower half experienced the force at the level she had expected, her toughened muscles somehow withstanding the impact. But her upper body and head received a level of damage far beyond what she could've expected, much less guard for. As if her upper half had been flung at the expanded distance, the impact shattered the bark of the tree as stars danced in Piano's eyes, her vision blurring from the immense damage to the back of her skull. Her sword went flying from her limp grasp as she nearly passed out from that blow alone, no longer able to see where the sword was.

No longer able to see properly, she had to rely on her ki senses to guide her towards her opponent. Using the trees' ki as markers, she moved forward, ignoring the weaker sensations as she suddenly felt an almost overpowering one up ahead. When she felt like she had a clear line between her and what she had to assume was Chifu, she flung a dagger forward. There was the sound of an impact, followed by the creature teleporting in front of her and exploding as she was sent tumbling with more burns across her body.

She was heavily bruised and burned, her head bleeding heavily from the impact to the back of her skull, and her vision was going. Piano knew she was going to pass out soon as she heard the giggling voice of Chifu nearby. "My my, you poor dear~ That was certainly a fun game, but I have to go though~ It's a shame, really~ The distance between you and I…"

As the goddess began to walk away, Piano's vision cleared for just a moment. Seeing her target, her tails swishing with a pleased arrogance in front of her, Piano grabbed one more throwing knife and flung it desperately to hit the goddess even once.

But the space between them suddenly expanded as the God Eater came to a stop. The throwing knife seemed to almost slow down in Piano's eyes, as its speed slowed down as it was crossing the same distance, but stretched out visually somehow. Chifu merely ducked down and crossed the expanded space in an instant, putting a hand on Piano's head, careful to avoid her caustic blood.

"... is infinite~" The God Eater finished taunting, before turning back and walking away in an instant as Piano passed out from the pain.

Vilivian and Jackie pinned down the last of the regenerating foxes, with the Matriarch grabbing hold of the muzzle to pry it open as Pembrooke came running over. Pulling out one of his rapidly dwindling supply of grenades, he yanked the pin out and let the spool fly, before shoving the rounded metal container of death into the maw of the beast. The trio backed up as the creature attempted to spit out the bomb. But a second later, with a loud explosion, the head and a good portion of the upper body was torn apart by fire, shrapnel, and shockwave as the grenade exploded.

"Whew, that was the last of them." Pembrooke congratulated them, wiping his brow of sweat. "She's sure got a lot of these things. Hopefully we get this done sooner before I start running out of ammo and grenades."

"The Blackblood has likely fallen at this point by herself." Vilivian said pointedly, wiping away Pembrooke and Jackie's growing smiles. "As strong as she is, not even she could likely face the full might of the Trickster on her own. We better hurry if we want to rescue her from certain doom."

"That's pretty harsh." Jackie commented, but began moving forward. "I thought she was some mythical figure your people pass stories down about or something?"

"She certainly has qualities I would expect of the Blackblood." Vilivian responded simply. "But that doesn't mean I've built up the woman we talk to any more than necessary. She is still a mortal woman, and she is not infallible. Against the God Eater by herself, she stands little chance. Most of us don't. That is why even the strongest among us banded together to defeat her."

“I suppose that’s true…” Jackie looked away, not sure how to feel.

“But it’s a little worrying when it’s you saying things like that.” Pembrooke added, putting to words what Jackie was feeling. “If you’re worried about your chances, then all of us are in trouble. Hopefully we meet up with the others soon.”

“That would be best.” Vilivian agreed, opening the next door as she looked back to the other two. Their wide, terror struck eyes told her of the present danger she was in as she turned back.

An enormous fox, the size of a three story building, stood stooped low to look at her, blazing crimson eyes glaring at the Matriarch with unconcealed hatred. Raising a clawed paw, it swiped through the wall and door between them, shattering the wood to pieces as Vilivian erected a barrier. Unfortunately, the quick spell she cast proved insufficient, and she was sent flying through a nearby window.

The gargantuan fox pursued her, it’s serpentine neck twisting while revealing to the other two a pair of wings that unfurled from its back, flying after her as she made impact with the wall on the opposite side of the infinite pit that ascended and descended the spire of this Infinite Fox Den. Before they could think to help further, the sound of bells rang out and their environment changed, surrounding them with bamboo shoots and swift moving foxes darting towards them that they started to deal with using gunfire and bat swings.

In the center of the tower, Vilivian was hanging off one of the platforms that floated along the walls of the tower, looking at her now flying opponent as her shoulder and chest bled freely. This was clearly a dragon of some sort with fur instead of scales, an opponent that would always be dangerous even for a Matriarch. Even with the fox exterior, the wings and the brimming fire billowing from its throat in preparation for incinerating her were clearly that of a dragon. Which means that Vilivian did not need to hold back in the slightest to get a worthy fight.

The blue breath of flames shot like a column at the demon, engulfing the spot Vilivian hung from in a blaze of glory. For a moment, it almost seemed like Vilivian was destroyed right from the word go as the drake roared in victory. But then with the sound of an explosion as wood shattered from the force, the breath attack was slowly ballooning out as the Matriarch leaped forward, her ward blocking the damage as she rushed towards her quarry.

As the flames died down, the sight of the fully transformed Matriarch would've been enough to put fear in the hearts of any other opponent. But the fox dragon showed no fear as it swiped its powerful claws forward. The hard exterior of the demon woman proved tough enough to handle the one swipe, her vastly increased strength allowing her to push back and fully deflect the blow, allowing her to crash right into its serpentine neck. Grabbing hold with muscular arms, she squeezed with all of her might, trying to choke out the beast with her impressive strength.

But with a strangled roar, the beast launched itself downward, plummeting towards one of the buildings with great speed. The two beastial warriors slammed completely through one of the wooden buildings without slowing down in the slightest, shards of wood scattering as the Matriarch was sent hurtling towards one side of the pit.

But just as it looked like she was going to plummet lifelessly to her death below, her tail lashed out to stab into the wall, stopping her fall and stabilizing her so she could aim her magic towards the dragon flying close to the wall. SHATTER.

The entire wall next to it exploded into shards, blasting the fox behemoth in the side with the force of several cannons, which would've felled any lesser foes. Instead, this one simply lost a layer of fur that coated it, revealing several undercoats protecting its core like its scales and muscles would've done if it were a regular dragon. Its long claws reached out and gouged itself into the wall, slowing its descent as flames gathered inside of its mouth.

Pushing off the wall, the monstrous beast flew upwards as Vilivian looked up with some confusion. But as it got close to its apex, it released its fiery blue breath, the flames flowing down to coat its body in a swirling corkscrew of blue fire. With a twist of its body, it turned to descend down the pit after Vilivian, becoming a fiery projectile that set fire to the wooden tower as it came down like a meteor for the powerhouse of a woman.

FOOLISH BEAST. With a mental shout, she reached her hand out to one of the floating modular units on its path down, grabbing hold of it with a telekinetic grip and slammed it right into the path of the dragon. But she seemed to underestimate the weight and power of the powerful fox beast as it plowed straight through the building, barely slowing down or losing much of its flames from the impact. She quickly erected a powerful barrier, which the fox slammed into as waves of fire washed over the blue barrier trying to incinerate her once more.

The nearby walls were burnt to cinders in an instant, whatever was in them becoming engulfed in flames as Vilivian forcefully shunted it towards the center of the towering gap, before leaping after it to land on its back. Swiping claws and tail down, she tore through as much of its furry exterior as possible as it thrashed around in the air, slamming into a few walls to try and shake her off. By the time it had jostled her more than three times, though, she had already bit into its flesh with a mental roar. Plunging her beak in, she went to take a drink of its blood… only to find there was no blood to drink.

A BLOODLESS BEAST? I DID NOT THINK THE TRICKSTER CAPABLE OF EMPLOYING SUCH A FAMILIAR. HOW UNCANNILY CLEVER OF HER.

But her praise did not last long, as the beast finally scraped its back onto the wall for a several yards, pinning her in and crushing her against the wooden barriers as she gouged the whole length of any remaining planks. As it pulled away to dislodge the partially broken and battered Vilivian, the Matriarch could almost grin if her beak would let her.

PERISH. With an unnatural widening of her jaws, a pink energy formed at the back of her throat before being unleashed in a dazzling burst upwards, lighting up as far as the eye could see up the Infinite Fox Den, surely alerting others to the fight as the terrifyingly wide beam destroyed all in its path.

This included a good portion of the right flank of the fox dragon, tearing off all the fur on that side as well as half the flesh on its torso, along with its right wing. Roaring in pain, the dragon fell after her as the exhaustion from using such a powerful attack hit Vilivian. She cursed to herself, having intended to defeat the beast with the rest of her magic as its weighty form quickly began to overtake her. There was nothing she could do as the beast closed in enough to take a swipe at her with its claws, barely raising her arms in defense as she was knocked aside like an annoying bug.

As unconsciousness overtook her, she began to revert to her human form as she broke through a wall and collapsed onto the ground inside of what looked like a random bedroom, full of pillows and furniture that suited the God Eater's taste. She didn't move in the slightest as the fox roared in triumph, its claws digging into the wooden wall to stop its own infinite fall before it looked around for its next quarry.

"You saw that, right?" Valentine asked, looking out of the window that they just saw the pink beam from Vilivian shoot by from. "That was Vilivian, right? That means she must be in trouble if she used that."

"Hopefully she managed to hit that drunken goddess with it at least." Angelique quipped, though she didn't sound too optimistic. "Come on, we shou-"

"Wait, I think I see Wendy and Taleus above us!" Angelique quickly ran over the window to join Valentine, who was pointing one of her decayed fingers up towards a large platform above them.

Sure enough, standing near the burnt off section of the platform they were on, Wendy was desperately trying to regain her balance before she fell into the abyss below. With a grunt, Taleus reached over and pulled her to safety, before swinging his blood scythe in order to drive away more foxes.

“Careful witch. Don’t need you falling to your death on my watch. The others will probably kill me if I let you die, even if I do beat Chifu.” Taleus gave a snarl, kicking away another wolf as he slashed its throat with a professional’s skill. As it exploded, another fox suddenly leaped through the smoke towards them, its fur and skin burned from the explosion.

At the same time, another rumble rocked the tower, knocking Wendy off balance again just as she finished conjuring a red glyph. As the fox exploded, her own fireball went flying crashing into the group of foxes and exploding with enough force to shake the platforms surrounding it as she was further flung over the abyss.

Taleus, acting quickly, attempted to reach his scythe out in order to save her, only for a large claw to knock him back as both of their eyes went wide. The large fox dragon pulled itself up to face Taleus, half of its face missing fur and skin to expose the muscle and skull underneath, a price it paid for fighting the Matriarch on its own. With a roar, it sweeped a fiery breath across the platform as Taleus rolled out of the way.

As Wendy fell to her apparent death, Valentine and Angelique gave a gasp. But before the latter could even think of a plan, Valentine’s body was already moving on its own as she backed up. With a running start and a cry of “Wait!” from Angelique, the zombie knight leapt out of the window and dove towards the falling witch, catching her in her arms as the two now fell into the near infinite abyss below.

But just as they fell about a hundred feet, Valentine noticed a room suddenly shift beneath them, an opening soon lining up just below them. Twisting in the air to shelter Wendy as best as possible, the armored woman made a severe impact with the wood, cracking it as the room they were in continued to move, taking them away from where they were.

“Damn it!” Angelique cursed, looking down at where her companions were being carried away, before glancing up at the dragon that Taleus was now forced to fight, only to see that it was also being carried up away from her. Now left without any allies, she swore again and swung a kick, kicking out a portion of the window frame and sending the wood spiraling down into the incomprehensible depth below.

So when she heard the sound of giggling behind her, she knew things were not going to get better for her…

Up above, on the ever lifting platform, Taleus was grinning madly as he dodged out of the way of a slashing claw, his scythe digging into its exposed flesh as it roared in anger. It slammed its claws down twice, pulling itself up further as it dragged its way towards Taleus to cut off his movement. But for the assassin, all that meant for him was that it provided him more weak points to exploit with his blades.

But he was surprised to see that no blood was coming from it, causing the assassin to be mildly concerned. Not from the lack of damage- he knew he would need to hit deeper to do real damage- but because his own body was beginning to shake from blood loss. He had used up quite a bit of blood fighting the foxes while protecting Wendy on his own, several times having his weapons stripped from him by foxes before they exploded and evaporated his blood.

As he dodged another swipe, one of the claws hooked around his weapon and yanked it from his hands, before a swinging tail knocked it down into the abyss and far out of his reach. He clicked his tongue in annoyance, going to bite his wrist to draw another weapon. But another slash from the dragon’s claws forced him into dodging mode, rolling out of the way as a breath of flame quickly followed it up, setting a good portion of the wooden platform on fire.

With his methods of movement limited by fire, he could only barely dodge another swipe. But with a whip-like motion of its neck, the fox managed to snag Taleus in its mouth, its fangs digging into him as blood began to flow.

As it gave a low growl as it went to chew on him again, it suddenly gave a yelp of pain as a sickle dug into the top of its mouth. With all of his blood flowing, he quickly created another sickle and slashed inside of its mouth, doing as much damage as possible as its jaws parted to scream in pain. Falling bodily out of its mouth, Taleus flung one of his sickles into its mouth, slashing more of its mouth area and even beginning to send the weapon down its throat before flames shot out to light the air above and evaporate the weapon.

But even as he slowly stood back on his feet, blood still spilled seemingly endlessly from his body, pooling on the ground around him. Snakes of blood began to rise from the buddle, each one as thick as a tree trunk with gaping maws fit for devouring. As the fox went to lunge forward again, the snake-like blood lashed out, tearing at chunks of fur and skin as the dragon breathed fire to destroy tendrils. More rose up from the ever-pooling blood as Taleus vacantly smiled at the carnage, ignorant of the terrible battle he was still engaged in, nor the fact that cracks were forming in the platform beneath his feet.

With a terrible crash, the platform fell apart beneath their feet, sending the dueling pair falling into the infinite abyss. As they plummeted, both sides still fought, with blood snakes biting into the fox behemoth and the draconic threat firing blasts of fire in retaliation. The walls of the infinite tower were catching on fire from errant blasts, lighting up the towering space as they fought fiercely.

With a terrible gnashing noise, the fox's front limb was torn off, causing it to shriek in pain as it breathed fire towards him again. Taleus' side was burned in the process, his vision quickly fading as he began to pass out. His Awakening, as if sensing this, lunged forward to the neck of the fox, three of the tendrils digging teeth into the weakened material. Streams of fire began to leak from its neck, until finally the head was torn free. With a pillar of fire, the body began twisting in the air, the tail of the creature still lashing in its dying frenzy slamming into Taleus and sending him flying into a nearby room.

The Awakening slowly began to fade as Taleus passed out in the room. The crimson Perpetual slowly began to stop bleeding on his own, laying in a pool of his own blood on his own as the fox's body fell forever into the abyss below.

"My my, Angelique~ If looks could kill, I think you'd be a serial killer~"

"And if being a drunken slob could kill, you'd be a genocider."

Standing across from each other, Angelique and Chifu looked at each other with varying looks. The former was glaring daggers at the latter, who was standing with her arms crossed and a smug smile on her face, clearly in charge of the conversation. Behind the goddess, several blue flames were floating in the air, ready to transform into familiars at the God Eater's command.

"You and your friends have hurt quite a few of my precious familiars~ And while I can always make more, it still hurts like losing a child for each one you all kill~ So I'm going to have to punish you all for what you've done to them~"

"Don't blame us that you're a bad mother." Angelique crossed her arms, looking around for options. The way she had come from had closed off the moment she heard Chifu's voice, likely the goddess' handiwork. She had doubts she could open the door easily with the normally drunken goddess' fury upon her. And the window just led to a bottomless pit below, with maybe a few rooms she could fall into if she was lucky. But it was more likely she would break something trying that method, and Chifu could probably still try something crazy to attack her with.

Which meant the only option the claimer had was to take on the goddess head-on. But with the number of flames behind her opponent and the fact that she was there in person, this certainly wasn't going to be easy. But Angelique had a trick up her sleeve.

With a snap of her fingers, Chifu conjured over a dozen familiars. Most of them were the suicide bomber familiars, but there was a single large, regenerating fox in the back gnashing its teeth in anticipation to attack. The God Eater shifted the hallway she was in around, so that she was behind her familiars, who were now arrayed in front of her like a battalion preparing to attack.

“Alright little ones~ Time to teach her a lesson~” Chifu waved a hand forward, causing all the familiars to rush forward.

But the large one acted strange suddenly, ripping into a pair of exploding familiars and tossing them among their brothers, blowing up groups of them. Some turned back to fight their fellow, confused, but were quickly torn into and exploded, the regenerating fox easily healing the wounds it took as it crushed the last one before turning towards Chifu with glowing pink eyes.

“Ah, the power of claiming~ It’s certainly an honor that you used it on my poor pets~” Chifu teased, opening a doorway in front of her and sending the pouncing fox away to deal with later as she faced Angelique. “Well then, guess I’ll have to deal with you myself~”

Angelique had her arms crossed, several javelins of darkness arrayed behind her as she gave the goddess a smirk. “Oh, you can fight on your own? I would’ve thought you’d run back to find someone else to hide behind instead.”

“Well, you did invade my home~ I have nowhere else to go really~”

“Fair enough. Now, let’s see if I can’t make you regret inviting me to this stupid game of yours.” With a wave of her arms, the shadows lances shot forward, going directly for Chifu’s chest.

The goddess simply smiled as the area between them suddenly extended what almost seemed like miles, the wood stretching as if to somehow occupy such an impossible length as best as it could. The shadow javelins now move at almost a crawl, but Chifu's giggle seemed to reach Angelique's ears as fast as light.

"Well there's no way you're going to hit me with an attack that slow~" Chifu stepped forward, crossing the distance in an instance like it didn't exist. Which, since she seems to have complete control over space, was likely true. "You should come here and hit me yourself~"

Chifu leaned forward, presenting her face for Angelique as the blonde grit her teeth. She knew this was a trap, but she also knew she didn't have a choice, as the goddess would simply reduce all ranged attacks to being slow and useless. Gathering herself, she rushed forward, aiming a roundhouse kick towards the goddess' face.

Or she would have, if suddenly the walls of the hallway she was in didn't immediately close in, nearly crushing her between them. Her prosthetic arms were both braced against the wooden walls, straining to keep the walls from fully pressing her into a human jam as Chifu peeked in from the gap in the walls.

"Whoops~ Guess I should've let you get close~ Oh well~"

Angelique cursed the goddess silently, looking around for a solution as the walls pressed in with even greater force. There were plenty of shadows by her feet, so she began to gather them into bubbles. Almost immediately, there was a series of explosions as parts of both walls began getting blown apart from the powerful force of each shadow bubble, giving her slightly more room as one leg was freed. A few more bubbles, and the wall to her right shunted Angelique out of the hole in the left wall so she was now sent flying into the open space of the tower.

Flipping in the air once, the claimer took a look around at her surroundings for areas to land. There was a decent sized platform not too far down, with enough shadows that she could reduce her fall. But just as she started working out how to fall there, she felt a presence behind her.

"That was cute~ But I suppose it's time to get serious~" The blonde flipped around, only for Chifu to grab a hold of her face. Watching the God Eater's tails collect behind her, Angelique's eyes went wide as blue flames burst from the tips of the tails, rocketing the two down several feet at high speeds.

"Foxfire Meteor!~" With a great slam and the crashing of splintering wood, she was tossed into a large room in a painful heap as Chifu floated down after her. The room had a number of blue flamed braziers, covering the room in an almost uniform light that flickers slightly at almost the same rate. There was not a spec of shadows, lighting up the large altar to the goddess of the Crossroads at the end of the room. Angelique gave a low groan, rolling onto her feet as she faced Chifu once again.

"Really? Are you so vain that you had a whole temple to yourself in your own home? And I didn't think you could have a bigger head." Angelique began to circle the goddess, waiting to see what trap came next.

"Oh, don't be silly Angie~ I have several temples to myself here~ My wonderful worshipers simply insisted on it~" She seemed to wave it off like it was nothing. This also had the effect of channeling some of the flames from a brazier into a stream of blue fire that attempted to blaze her on the spot.

Angelique leaped forward, dodging the flames as she tried to close the gap. But seeing several balls of fire light themselves on Chifu's tails, she was forced to roll out of the way as they were flung with casual flicks of the goddess' tails. She managed to gather some shadows, deflecting a couple of fireballs with some shadowy kicks, sending them careening behind her as she was able to stay close to Chifu.

Angelique tried to rushdown Chifu, but the goddess simply closed the space between two braziers between them, blocking the blonde's initial path and spewing fire in her direction, making her dodge out of the way as the jet of fire trailed after her. Another ball of fire was flung from the large tails swishing behind the goddess, knocking Angelique back.

As she tried to recover, the claimer noticed that there was a ring of fire now surrounding her. Realizing all the fire from before had still stuck around, she looked to Chifu as she was holding her arms out to either side of her. Realizing what was about to happen as the flames began to roar higher and some of the braziers just outside of the ring were also flickering more intently, she attempted to gather her still untested magic.

Chifu closed the space around the blonde warrior, causing all the fire to close in before bursting upwards in a pillar of fire. The braziers were also brought into a tight circle, before all of them unleashed a stream of fire, further building on the conflagration as blue flames rose up high through the hole in the ceiling, disappearing up into the infinite height above. Eventually, Chifu waved her hand to end the attack, the flames dying off as the space reverted back to normal.

As the smoke and flames cleared, Angelique could still be seen standing, the sleeves on her arms burned off from the flames. But around her feet, remnants of melted ice still stood, showcasing her defensive strategy. And since she was still relatively unhurt aside from a few burns, it seemed this strategy worked.

"Finally using those ice powers huh?~" Chifu taunted, leaning forward. "Imagine if you had used that during your match with Piano?~ Maybe you could've won~"

At that point, though, the goddess noticed that Angelique was chanting something. Realizing what was about to happen, she took to the air just as the incantation was finished. A dark swamp emerged from the wood, causing about half of the brazier to sink into a deep darkness, snuffing out their light as Angelique stared up at the goddess with a look of supreme annoyance.

“Don’t you bring that up to me right now!” Creating several bubbles of shadows, she sent them up at Chifu, who condensed space so that they all collided and burst in a large explosion. But Angelique had already leaped up, aiming a flying kick to the smug goddess’ face.

But with the ringing of bells, a doorway opened to Angelique’s right. Looking over, she had just enough time to see her shadow javelins from before picking up speed before they made impact with her, sending her hurtling towards the altar to the God Eater, pinning her against it. Before she could recover, Chifu had closed the gap by closing the space between them, kicking out herself with enough force to shatter the wood behind Angelique.

Her eyes rolling to the back of her head, Angelique passed out, falling to the ground below as Chifu floated down after her. She gave the girl a pat on the head. “My, I certainly wasn’t expecting to try today~ You really surprised me~ Guess I’ll have to be careful in the future~”

With the click of her heels and the ringing of her bells, Chifu walked away, ready to deal with the last few fighters arrayed against her.

Wendy and Valentine recovered from their fall after a bit of time, the former checking on the latter as they heard the titanic battle between Taleus and the fox dragon above. The mage checked over the zombie, making sure there weren’t any new injuries from the fall before the two moved on before something fell down on them.

They soon found themselves traveling down a well manicured garden, trees and topiary displayed beautifully as small streams flowed beneath wooden bridges. As they walked, they almost admired the scenery, nearly forgetting why they were here. But when they came to the small courtyard with a kneeling suit of armor sat in the center of it.

A set of traditional samurai armor, Valentine could clearly see that there was a living being on the inside of it. Drawing her sword and holding it forward, she threw her other arm back to stop Wendy who looked surprised. But before they could do anything more, the ringing of bells signaled the arrival of the God Eater, who appeared behind a pair of opening sliding doors, drinking what looked like tea.

“Ah, another pair~ Well, it should be fun watching you too fight my bodyguard~ He’s a pretty powerful warrior, so I’d be careful if I were you two~ Wouldn’t want to hurt either of your pretty faces~”

With a snap of her fingers, the samurai began to rise, four tails sprouting from the back of his armor as red eyes flashed in the eye holes of the helmet. He drew his katana, both hands on the hilt as he held it out in front of him, the tip of the blade pointed towards Valentine’s heart. The zombie kept their own blade crossed over their chest, keeping such an easy strike from being possible as the two began to circle each other. Occasionally, their blades would touch, both exerting slight pressure to push aside the blade for an easy strike, but it was just as easily pulled apart before either could create such an opening.

As Wendy began to sweat at the tension between the two of them, gulping as she prepared herself to cast a spell to help. In that very instant, a flurry of blows were exchanged, four strikes and parries executed in the span of a breath. The expert exchange was done faster than Wendy could ever have expected, stepping back for a moment as the ring of steel echoed throughout the garden.

Valentine, meanwhile, was cursing her lack of strength in this moment. Her rotted body, her decayed muscles, everything about her zombie body made it feel like she was being held back. If she was alive, if she had a living body, she should’ve already beaten this samurai. As she deflected a strike and went to strike back, it quickly brought his blade to block the attack himself, showing how slow she was.

Her anger boiled over as her brain began to glow blue, channeling fire magic in her free hand as she held back the fox samurai's sword with her blade. The fox, likewise, gathered blue flame in his free hand. With a thrust from each of their hands, two cones of fire were unleashed, the billowing flames impacting each other and spilling out to either side of the meeting point.

As the flames died down, Valentine's eyes went wide as a flame-sheathed sword came slicing through the smoke, cutting across their chest. While the blow should've been shallow, there was a sudden loss of strength and blood as they stumbled back, confused.

"Oh, did you forget?~" Chifu chimed in, taking another sip of tea with a giggle. "I made this little guy and I supply his fire~ And I'm a goddess~ Which makes my magic…~"

"Holy." Valentine finished, cursing her luck. The blue-flamed blade came thrusting towards her again, focing the zombie knight back as she now had to avoid the flames at all cost, as they could quickly put her down if she wasn't careful. But this added constraint made fighting more difficult, each blow now containing the full weight of a goddess' wrath. While she had fought monsters and powerful warriors in the past, none besides Raku pushed her as hard as Chifu was doing just by proxy.

With a powerful swing, the samurai knocked the knight to the ground, sending her rolling away in an arc of blue flames. As she started channeling her magic to protect herself as he approached again, there came a shout from the side. "Leave her alone!"

With a flash of blue light, a pillar of ice rose beneath the samurai's feet, carrying him out of range of Valentine. The zombie knight looked over, seeing Wendy stand with a blue glyph in front of her as she controlled her magic to help. Working alongside that, Valentine aimed her arm up, creating her shield in the air above the pillar. The samurai slammed into it with a loud clang, the sound of grinding as the pillar struggled to rise higher, crushing the fox in the process. The two women looked at each other, giving each other a nod of positivity at their teamwork, only for their heads to turn sharply as cracking sounds began to resonate from the frosted pillar.

With an aura of blue flame around it, the fox samurai began to melt through the pillar, chunks of ice cracking and falling off as the central support was completely destroyed. The blue meteor of a samurai collided with the ground with a burst of smoke, obscuring the fox warrior from sight. Believing themself to be in danger, Valentine raised their sword to block, managing to stop a blazing slice that sprung out of the smoke in a flash of blue from cleaving their head from their body. But the force of the force and the wave of fire that emanated from it sent them tumbling away, armor clattering on stone and wood.

The samurai charged forward to slice down towards her, but Wendy wasn't just going to stand around and let Valentine get cut down. She finished a yellow glyph, firing a stream of lighting to try and deflect away the samurai. But Chifu's bells rang as she waved her hand, causing the space around the samurai to bend and send the lightning spinning around it before sending it back towards Wendy.

Wendy was knocked off her feet, her glasses sent flying as she hit the ground a distance away. Now alone, Valentine was forced to roll out of the way as a wave of fire washed over her. Sent flying away, she could feel her strength beginning to fade from the damage. She looked over at Wendy, who was struggling to find her glasses before putting them on. The green haired mage and the zombie knight made eye contact, nodding as they knew they had to work together in order to defeat this opponent.

As the samurai closed in, Valentine's brain glowed as she gave a long swing, pushing aside the katana in its hand before unleashing a cone of fire at point blank range. The fire slammed into its chestplate, causing it to begin to glow with heat as the samurai was recovering seemingly unaffected.

Just as it was about to strike back, Valentine spun around the side of the samurai and slammed into it with her shoulder, sending it stumbling towards Wendy. The scholarly mage rushed forward, a blue glyph completed in front of her as she shoved her hands towards the samurai's chest. A plume of ice sprouted in the heated spot, causing a large amount of steam to erupt.

With a horrific shattering sound, the ice and the armor break into pieces, sending both of them flying back from the explosive force of it. As the samurai spun around as it stumbled back, Valentine gave a roar as they stabbed forward, piercing the familiar through the chest. The familiar went limp for a second, before disappearing in blue flames and the ringing of bells, causing the armor to fall empty on the ground.

The two contestants gave a sigh of relief, the knight going over to pick up the mage with a grateful smile. “Well, that was certainly harder than I expected. I’m glad you were able to help me out there Wendy.”

“Oh, it’s really no trouble at all!” Wendy tried to wave away the gratitude with her hands, shaking her head. “I’m just helping do what we came here to do.”

“Fair enough. So in that regard, let’s finish this, shall we?” The zombie and mage turned to face where the God Eater sat… only to see she was no longer there. “Damn! Did she get away?”

The clanking of armor behind them made both contestants freeze for a moment. Being the more physical one, Valentine turned quickly with her weapon raised to fight another samurai despite her lack of strength. The figure that stood before them was of a similar size than the previous, but now had nine tails that swished behind it, giving the impression that all of the eye symbols on the tail were blinking at them. But the outfit underneath and the white hair that spilled out from the helmet told Valentine of the true danger presented in front of her.

Ring.

Wendy’s eyes went wide as the samurai had slashed Valentine in the blink of an eye, crossing the sizable distance between them before either contestant could realize it. The knight’s breastplate easily split from the slash as blood spilled forth, blue flames blooming from the wound. The decayed warrior looked to the green haired mage and uttered a single word before her eyes went blank and fell into unconsciousness.

“Run…”

As the heavy clang of metal that fully signaled Valentine’s fall rang out over the garden, Wendy finished a yellow glyph and fired it towards the samurai, forcing her to deflect the attack with blade and flame as Wendy took her fallen companion’s advice. Running full sprint, she aimed for the distant doorway across the garden, hoping that she could get some distance from the goddess and find any of the others. Teekee, Piano, Inari, Raku and Quan, Angelique, anybody that could help. She reached her hand out to open the door, smiling as she almost escaped.

Crack!

With a snapping noise, Wendy’s glasses shattered as the back of a katana slammed at her with great speed, combined with the speed of her sprint. Knocked off her feet, she slammed painfully on her back as her nose began to bleed freely, her vision blurred without her glasses. Above, she could see armor-clad Chifu leaning over her, her Cheshire smile clear even in the blur.

“Oh~ So close, yet so far~” The goddess gestured to Wendy’s left. Looking over, the mage saw that she was somehow laying next to Valentine’s form. Her head hurting too much to even muster any curiosity on how this could happen, the green-haired girl’s mind went black as she passed out, unable to fight anymore.

Chifu giggled to herself, before removing the looping spatial corridor she had used to defeat Wendy. Connecting two independent spaces together to create a looping, enclosed space was child’s play for the goddess, but it was still fun to use such an ability for pranks or in this case, to defeat a troublesome competitor.

“Now, for the last two~” With one last look to the fallen two, she disappeared elsewhere in her Infinite Fox’s Den, leaving behind the sword and armor next to Wendy.

Pembrooke and Jackie could almost feel the isolation press against them as they moved through the wooden halls of Chifu's infinite tower. Any distant sound of fighting coming from Vilivian and Taleus taking on the fox dragon had long faded, and there was no sign of any of the others. Only the slight rustling of silken curtains provided any sort of motion, which was quickly dealt with by a shot from the gun of Pembrooke.

"...You think the others are all beaten by now?" Jackie asked nervously, looking around with her bat in hand. Her animated expression flickered with her movements, careful to spot any sign of the trickster goddess.

"Probably." Pembrooke confirmed, his gun held at the ready and a hand hovering over his last two grenades. Without the heavy hitters to keep most of the fox familiars back, he had been forced to burn through ammo and explosives to clear the path for them, really putting a strain on his fighting capabilities. If only he could've brought in his ATG to help with this, he could've provided cover for everyone.

As he was lamenting his equipment issues to himself, he suddenly felt a tackle to his side. He went to aim his gun as he was knocked to the ground, only to see it was Jackie pushing him down as a burst of fire ignited the space he had just been in. The two rolled onto their feet, with the soldier pointing his gun around.

Nearby, Chifu floated a couple inches off the ground, several balls of foxfire floating around her as she almost seemed to gloat at them with her arms outstretched with balls of fire emerging from them.

"Ah, you moved~ I was just going to make this quick~ Now you're going to make this more painful for yourselves~" She gave them a smile, causing the foxfire to swirl around her form as she prepared to fight.

Pembrooke fired off an entire magazine from his pistol, only for the rounds to be burnt up by the floating foxfires before they could reach the goddess. Cursing, he began to reload as a pair of fireballs were hurled their way. Jackie leaped in front of the soldier, swinging her bat twice to deflect the flames before they could make impact.

Shaking his head to clear away any doubts, he took careful aim this time. Firing shots off one at a time at seemingly random points, trying to see how quickly the balls of fire came to shield her. Chifu's ability over her fire seemed supreme, requiring her to make only the smallest adjustments in order to guard her form. There were very few holes in her defense, and even those seemed like planned openings for her to take advantage of them if they tried to exploit them.

So they needed another approach. "Jackie, homerun!" He pulled the pin on a grenade and tossed it over Jackie's shoulder. She quickly got in position and swung with all of her might, sending the explosive flying forward at high speeds directly where the flaming shield was thickest. Trying to use the fire to their advantage to catch her off guard as the green sphere came closer and closer to the goddess.

Jackie realized the flaw in their plan at the last second, turning around and shielding Pembrooke with her body as the grenade suddenly appeared near them. The grenade exploded, the shockwave knocking the pair of them over as shrapnel and flames washed over Jackie's body. The pair rolled a bit away, Jackie going further due to taking most of the blast herself as Pembrooke rolled back into combat position.

"Jackie! Are you ok?" he asked with great concern, firing shots at Chifu to keep her busy.

"I'm fine, just a scratch!" she called back, standing up. Most of her shirt was now burnt tatters, parts of her wiring now showing but otherwise her frame was still whole. She picked up her bat and turned to face the goddess, only to gasp in horror at what she saw.

Pembrooke spun around to see that Chifu was up close. She gave a wave of her tails, a trail of fire followed them as she slammed the fluffy appendages against him to knock him off his feet. He hit the ground hard, gasping for air as it felt like he got hit by a sledgehammer to the chest. Jackie ran over, swinging her bat to drive away the goddess as the latter floated away with a trail of blue flames.

With each swing of her bat, more blue flames were swatted away as the caution tape covering the metal implement was burnt away. Some of the flames washed over her mechanical arms, the heat barely bothering her as she worked to minimize the shield as much as possible as Chifu looked at her with some amusement.

But when Jackie wound her arm back for another homerun style hit, Chifu began to gather her last few flames to protect her. But the ringing of gunshots forced her foxfire to spin out to block the bullets, leaving her exposed to the bat. The goddess raised her tails in front of her, cushioning the blow with soft fur as she was sent floating back several feet before rising high in the air. She parted her tails, letting them see just how displeased she was with them.

“Oh.” Chifu sounded surprisingly cold, raising her hand as the deflected flames that were burning on the wood began to gather in her hand. “I just thought we could have some fun. But if you want this to be serious, then be my guest.”

A large ball of fire was now gathered in front of her, easily dwarfing either one of them in size. With a push, the ball of fire came crashing down towards Jackie, who took off at a full spring as Pembrooke did the same, taking potshots as he ran to try and make sure Chifu didn’t attack scott free.

The explosion was massive, sending waves of fire in all directions as Pembrooke and Jackie just managed to dive out of range. But as Jackie got back to her feet, flames washing over her feet, the goddess was suddenly in front of her, both hands gripping onto the glass dome that was her face.

With a burst of blue, flames began to erupt from Chifu's hands as Jackie screamed in horror. The android attempted to swing her bat to beat back the goddess, but three tails raised themselves to ward off the blow as the sounds of cracking glass began to be heard over the whooshing of fire.

Pembrooke attempted to save Jackie, firing shot after shot towards the goddess' exposed side to distract her, but a wall of fire rose up to block the bullets. Then with a wave of her tails, the God Eater sent pillars of fire shooting up towards the soldier, forcing him to make a tactical retreat. He turned back when the fire stopped to help, the sound of shattering glass echoed through the whole room.

All sources of fire died down as Chifu let go of Jackie, the latter's face broken as pink lights flashed a couple of times before she collapsed to the ground. The white-haired kitsune then turned her gaze to Pembrooke, smiling once more as she walked forward.

"Well, that's thirteen down~ Just one more to go~" A jet of flame emerged from her hand, which Pembrooke narrowly dodged and fired back. Fire shot out from the stream, burning the bullets as Chifu kept moving forward.

In frustration, he unloaded the empty magazine and tossed it at her as he reloaded his pistol. She caught the magazine with her hand, giving an amused chuckle as she tossed it to the side. As he raised the gun again and fired another couple of rounds, her foxfire embers melted them before she suddenly closed the distance, causing his eyes to go wide.

He attempted to pistol whip her, only to have the gun kicked out of his hand by the goddess, before her tails whipped into him, knocking him back. He fought back with some hand-to-hand he knew, throwing punches and kicks. But the goddess' tails easily deflected his attacks as they knocked him around. Each blow felt like he was getting punched by the likes of Raku or Inari, like a hammer to his body.

He could feel his body getting sore with each hit, the goddess looking like she was barely trying at this point. It was clear that the gap between them was simply too great. He didn't even know why he bothered coming with everyone else, when they were clearly strong enough to handle such a fight. He was just dead weight at this point without this ATX, only fit to pick off the weaker familiars so the stronger fighters could fight Chifu. But she had managed to beat them all, leaving him to struggle futilely until she decided to finish him off. He couldn't even protect Jackie just now…

He suddenly noticed movement behind the goddess, along with a flash of pink light. Bat raised as she leaped to strike at the goddess' back, Jackie tried to keep quiet for as long as possible as she swung. Three tails suddenly shot back, meeting the attack with equal force before grabbing the bat and throwing the android into the soldier who barely had time to catch her.

Her face plate was still broken, some of the components for the light display melted. But it was clear the flames hadn't reached anything important for functioning, and she still managed to give Pembrooke a smile with what lights she could manage. "Don't worry, I'm not out yet! Now, let's beat her!"

Pembrooke gave a smile, nodding towards her. "Right!"

With a final look, the two leaped into action, Jackie rushing forward to face the God Eater once again as Pembrooke ran for his gun. Chifu simply used her tails to deflect the bat and kicks from Jackie, still smiling as she was able to drive back the android after a few exchanges.

"You know, I wouldn't have hurt you any more if you had just stayed down after that~ I was being nice by avoiding burning you all the way through~ But if you want more~" Chifu suddenly planted her feet as her tails lashed out, grabbing Jackie's limbs and exposing her torso. "Foxtail Bell!~"

With a strong kick, Jackie's body was pulled by the tails as hard as possible to maximize the impact of the kick, to the point where the metal over her glowing heart dented as the lights from Jackie finally went out, signaling her defeat as she was released and sent flying.

Chifu looked over to Pembrooke, only to see a grenade heading her way. She looked smug for a moment, before seeing that he was aiming his gun right at the explosive. With a smirk of his own, he pulled the trigger.

With a burst of flame and shrapnel, Chifu disappeared from sight as Pembrooke gave a sigh of relief. He finally managed to hit her with something. Maybe now he could get everyone's wishes for them.

Suddenly, he felt something slam into him from the side. His gun going flying again, he turned his head to see what had hit him. It was Jackie's unconscious form, which he had seen flying in a different direction last he remembered. Before he could even finish processing that, he felt a sweep take out his legs, causing him to fling Jackie's body a distance away where she landed heavily.

Spinning in the air, he could see that it was an unscathed Chifu that had swept him, who was now flipping in the air herself with a leg raised ready to kick him. He crossed his arms to try and block, but the flaming trail of the kick told him such an act was already pointless.

"Foxfire Wheel!~" With a full three-sixty spin in the air, she slammed her burning foot into his chest, causing him to gasp in pain as the ground beneath him cracked from the force. He pushed back for a moment or two, before his vision went dark and he passed out, being the final contestant to fall.

"Phew!~ That was certainly more work than I expected~ They almost got a hit in~ I would've had to give out free wishes there~ I guess I should go check to see if Saki's still good to make me a drink after her fight~" With a last giggle, Chifu disappeared in a ringing of bells, heading back out to the real world once more.

With a roar of anger, Saki knocked aside Yamarashi's attack with her good arm, sending the sai he was using to strike at her flying before punching him in the chest, caving his armor in as he was sent sliding back. The two had fought their way through a good portion of the Crossroads, causing untold amounts of damage with their titanic strength as they smashed through buildings and turned cobblestone into gravel with the clash of strength their blows proved to be. They had managed to push each other into another dimension, allowing them to avoid causing more damage that she would have to clean up later. They were on the side of a mountain, their clash causing rocks to fall from the cliffside and nearly crush them.

His back was now mostly clear of weapons, since she had knocked most of them away as she drove him back further away from them before he could call them back. As his premier weapons were knocked away, he had to resort to drawing every weapon he had just to have something to use against her near unstoppable might. For her part, she had burned through nearly every potion she had brewed since she won her own Cross Tournament. Including all of her stock of Bone-Regrowth Potions, which she had to use all three of after Yamarashi had broken most of her bones several times throughout their fight.

She was seriously regretting using the first one too early as her left arm hung limply next to her, just about every bone in it shattered from blocking a club before sending it into a raging river. She sent another haymaker his way, knocking him back. But this time, he managed to grab her arm as he slid back, spinning around and slamming her into the mountain. The wall shattered from the impact, but she merely grunted from the impact.

But seeing all the falling rocks around her gave her an idea. If she couldn't knock him out or kill him, then she'd just have to keep him away. As he drew a sword and closed in, she gave a roar of anger and charge forward. Yamarashi swung his sword, only for her to block it with her horns. With a shake of her head, the sword was sent flying away.

With a quick grab, she threw him back where she had just been, further shattering that part of the mountain. She grabbed one of the last of her potions, clutching it in her hands.

"You damn Contractors are too tough! Just lay down and STOP ALREADY!!" With one last roar she slammed her fist into the immortal, a large explosion erupting from the potion as she was sent flying back. He was driven into the center of the mountain from the blast as the rock above him began to tremble. With a series of cracks running up the mountain, the whole top half of it shattered and collapsed down, dust rising high as the rocks finally settled into place.

Saki slowly stood up some distance away, her arms both broken and the right side of her body burnt as she listened carefully. After a few moments, she heard the rumbling shouts of the Contractor buried deep in the rocks, having apparently recovered enough to begin shouting in anger at his situation.

"Good. Now stay there for a few months and let me recover. Now, I gotta go see if Volley's kept the bar in good shape while I was gone." As she slowly got to her feet, a small fox familiar jumped up the mountain next to her, looking up at her with a wagging tail.

"Well well, it's certainly been a while since I've seen you beat up like this~" Chifu's voice teased, the fox tilting its head.

"Yeah, well I don't fight Contractors every day. You better make up for all the potions I used. Those were some rare ones I used up just to beat him." Saki glared down at the fox, getting to her feet as the ringing of bells declared the appearance of a doorway back to the Fox's Den.

"That's true~" Chifu admitted. "Well, either way, you won, so good job~ Now, you should probably go rescue Volley~ Vivi's certainly worked him over while you were gone~ And they're smashing up all of my alcohol~" She had a whine to her voice at that, as if that was the part she was really worried about.

Saki gave a sigh as the doors opened up. Stepping in, she saw that most of the tables in the main area of her bar were completely shattered, the counter at the bar split in two. Most of the bottles lined up on the back wall were shattered, alcohol leaking down the wall as potion bottles on the ground still sparked with latent magic in the shattered glass. The walls had several holes punched into it, giving views of the outside while the floor of the tavern was mostly splintered wood at this point.

In the center of the room, a heavily bruised and injured Viola was standing on the chest of an unconscious Volley, blood trickling from his head from the blow to the head that knocked him out. A single whole potion rolled away from his hand, his last act failing as Vivi had managed to overpower and outspeed him in most regards. Vivi was breathing heavily from all the effort it had taken to beat the young oni, who had managed to hold his own despite such a powerful opponent.

“YOU LEAVE MY NEPHEW ALONE!” Saki screamed, rushing forwards as the demon woman leapt with surprise at the sudden return of the proprietor of the bar. Vivi readied Recumbo to drive off the powerful oni, only for Saki to kick the potion bottle at her face. The electric potion exploded in a shower of sparks, blinding Viola for a moment.

By the time her vision recovered, Saki’s foot was in her face, kicking her clear out of the Fox’s Den. Slamming into the same wall Yamarashi cratered earlier, Vivi gave a gasp of pain. Just as she landed on her feet again, Saki charged her again and slammed her head into the demon’s stomach, knocking her out as she was struck with immense force focused on the bartender’s two horns. She folded nearly in half from the impact, before slumping to the side with a groan as Saki stood up straight.

“Wow, you’re still as brutal as you’ve ever been Saki~” Chifu teased, now in her disguised form as she walked down the stairs. Miss X appeared next to her, giving the oni woman a cheer of celebration. “I should have you fight contestants more~”

“No thanks. I’d rather run my bar if you don’t mind.” Saki shook her head, walking into the Fox’s Den and sat down in the most solid thing still in one piece. “So, what are we going to do about these rowdy contestants?”

“Well~” Chifu said, walking over to grab one of the few whole bodies remaining and taking a drink directly from the bottle. “I think we should make sure none of them die and let them get all rested up~ Then, we’ll punish them by making them help repair all the damage you and Yama did in my town~ And then fight a few more fights to raise some money for all the repairs to my alcohol supply before the next Cross Tournament~”

“We get to have more fights? That sounds like a great idea, Mom!” Miss X cheered, jumping up in the air. “I’ll start writing my speeches for all these extra fights! So who are we going to have fight who first?”

“Now now X~ We’ve got plenty of time to get that figured out~ Let’s just let everyone settle down for a bit~” Chifu leaned back onto the wall, smiling to herself as she thought about all of the makeup fights she’ll have them do. And all of the fun she’ll get to have with them all sticking around for a bit longer. Things had turned out really well for her.

In the end, she was the only one that got what she wished for out of this whole ordeal.