

With newfound limits on his powers and a whole new world of experiences and interactions ahead of him, Armius felt like a starving man at a banquet. He would jump at the first 'dish' presented to him. In this case, the first experience offered to him. Chifu was quick to suggest poisoning himself publicly and the prince's schedule had suddenly cleared up so he obliged.

"Over there is where you'll be fighting soon." She said as she waved to the second most imposing building in the city.

Armius tilted his head at it. If a Kaligos had decided to create an interdimensional bloodsport, it would have been far more opulent and would be able to seat a small country. Yet a wish-granting Goddess settled for this small town, and a tiny arena. Armius understood, perhaps better than most here, that power was the ability to project your will onto your environment. If a Goddess wanted it this way, there was a reason for it.

"Prince Guppy? Getting lost in the big sea again? Or is breathing still troubling you?"

The air felt thick as syrup, but he wasn't going to admit it to her. He didn't have a problem looking weak in general, but Chifu had a smug way about her that made him uncomfortable.

"I'm fine. It's just..."

"I could find some lady to give you mouth to mouth if you need." She cut him off

"No, thank you."

"I could find some gentleman to give you mou...?"

"No."

She was already giggling by the time he interrupted her. Armius was starting to realize that she didn't annoy him, he just didn't know what to do around somebody who didn't fear him. They made their way to the most imposing building, a multi-story tower that loomed disproportionately over the rest of the city. In some cities this would have been a watch tower, a government building or some kind of historic landmark. Something that emphasized what the

city (and its ruler) valued. Here it was a hotel for interdimensional warriors, and right next to it was the Fox Den.

They slid into their seats at the bar and Chifu held up two fingers at the large, red skinned and horned bartender.

“Two Margaritas.” Chifu tilted her head at Armius. “That’s for me. What do you want? Some juice?”

Armius held up one finger. “One of her Margaritas.” Just saying the word gave him a tingle of excitement.

“Oh?” Chifu folded her chin into her palms. “Not going to drain our casks of fine wine and aged Cognac? I didn’t take you for a Margarita man.”

“I didn’t take me for one either since I have no idea what a Margarita is. I did drink a lot of wine back home though, so I’m not sure why I would drink it here.” He said with a boyish smile on his face.

“Oh my. Did I bring an alcoholic here?”

“Does it count if I can’t get drunk?”

The large woman behind the bar sat down two cups with salt rims and a wedge of lime as a garnish.

“Couldn’t.” Chifu corrected.

“Couldn’t.” Armius agreed before raising the glass to his lips with her. He enjoyed the energy the drink conveyed to him. It was something meant to be truly drunk, not sipped like wine. His eyes went wide and he set down the cup with a smile.

“Excellent choice. I’ll gladly take one of your Margaritas every time from now on.”

“You could order your own.” She pointed out as she swirled the drink in her hands.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.” He reached back for his drink, but found a hand there instead.

“The name is Quan, you can call me An. Nice to meet you.” A grinning boy with black and white striped hair was leaning over the counter and shaking Armius’s hand vigorously.

The prince flinched and felt his heart race for a moment when that happened. He felt his mouth say the word ‘Armius’ while his mind tried to catch up with what just happened. A young man was eagerly greeting him, and Armius hadn’t been able to see him coming. In some capacity he had just been totally outclassed, and he didn’t even know how. He felt what other people called fear rise up in him, but it put a grin on his face.

“So it was you! They told me my opponent blew off the opening ceremonies to get drunk.” An held the Margarita up to the lantern light to examine it.

“What? I was told I had ti...” He was cut off before he could defend himself.

“I tried to warn him.” Chifu said while sadly shaking her head. “He even forced me to drink with him in the middle of the day.”

The bartender let out a deep, rumbling groan when Chifu said that, and An looked between Chifu and him.

“Got it. You were roped in by the town drunk. Step outside for a minute. We should probably, you know, catch up and stuff. Friendly contest and all.”

Armius chuckled lowly, relishing the feeling of being so off balance in a conversation. He took his Margarita out of An’s hand and gave it to Chifu, who seemed happy as could be to have it back. If An had already heard he was at the bar when Armius had only been there for a few minutes, there were only a few ways to explain that and they all made Armius suspicious of the organizers

“How did you get my drink?” Armius asked as he let An lead him through the city.

“I have a fake license.” An smiled at him expectantly.

“Is that a power?”

“Oh right you’re a big fancy Prince.” An waved both of his hands when he spoke

“I prefer to be called Mr. Big Fancy Prince, but I’ll let you call me Armius.”

“Well Mr. Big Fancy Prince, if I told you what I did wouldn’t it make sense for you to tell me what you can do too?” An spun around and walked backwards but maintained the same speed, gesturing with his arms as he did and nearly smacking Civilians every moment.

“Well I’ve got this sword and I can do some magic. Anything else and your guess is as good as mine.” He was putting more effort into keeping up with An walking backwards than he had ever put into anything physical in his life. As far as he was concerned he was powerless here.

An looked Armius up and down, then he clapped the man’s shoulder in a motion that Armius almost reacted to in violence.

“You’re too tightened up. We’re in for a fun little tournament, we get all the food and drink we want and if we win we get a wish. It’s so absurd that taking it seriously would be crazy, right? I’m just going to enjoy not going hungry for once.” An asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Exactly!” Armius looked around at the small town around them. “It’s something totally new. I mean, aside from the food and drink thing. I’m used to that. But everything else. I get to... compete and earn something.”

The prince could feel his normal attitude slipping. This was like talking to his brothers, but without the small element of fear and jealousy that would always undermine it.

“Right.” An paused for a moment as he shifted his arm around Armius’ back. “We can only hope that whoever needs the wish most gets it. It’d be really annoying if somebody without a care in the world got it.”

“Is the wish really that important? I just figured that was a lie.”

The two of them arrived at the coliseum. It seemed even more petty and small once he was inside it, but Armius wouldn’t have it any other way. A few rows of bleachers, a few pillars and TV screens to broadcast the fight. It was connected to the Kit-inn as well. The whole city was focused on violence and alcohol. The roughness of it all sent shivers down his spine with excitement.

“So you don’t think there’s a prize and you don’t know what you can do, but you’re going to fight anyway.” An scratched the back of his head. “Well I guess as long as you have fun, Prince. For my part, I’m going to use that wish to guarantee fun for myself for the rest of my life. It will be like my birthday every day from now until the universe collapses!”

“Fun.” Armius echoed. “I am having fun, I think. Thanks An.” He shook the man’s hand firmly.

“Wait, did you just say you were going to wish for entertainment?” Armius frowned. In his mind that wish made sense. He understood the desire for entertainment, for fun, for meaning better than others. If he had been asked about it, Armius felt like he would have agreed. But hearing those words from somebody else gave him the bitterest feeling he’d had since coming to the Crossroads.

“What better wish could there be? You don’t even know what you want. But I’ll tell you what, after the match we can still hang out.” An said while showing off his pearly whites.

The crowd started marching in, some in uniform, some citizens, some clearly from other worlds. They were all here for entertainment too, after all. As the seats of the arena filled him, Armius had a familiar feeling creep over him. He was being watched, the focus of the whole crowd on him and An.

“Well, I’ll see you inside, Prince.” He patted Armius’ arm and winked, before making his way down the arena without a care in the world.

Armius walked to his side of the arena, feeling the joy-inducing fear and a pang of confusion. Going into a battle weakened and confused was an experience worth cherishing on its own. He decided to draw his sword before a fight for the first time in his life, just in case. He hoped he wouldn’t have to kill the second friend he had ever made. His eyes went out over the crowd.

How would they look at him if he killed An?

“Ladies and gentlemen!” A Feminine voice rang out over the arena “It’s time for the next match!

There was a pink haired woman standing in between him and his opponent who he hadn’t sensed before. Was this some sort of standard ability other universes had? An appeared out of nowhere just as easily.

“It’s me again! Your lovely announcer, Miss X. Now I think this calls for a pre-round interview, so…” She ran over to Armius and pointed a microphone in his face. It didn’t escape his attention that her feet didn’t shift the dirt on the ground.

“Prince Armius Tu El Kaligos. What is your name?” The girl’s heart shaped pupils bore into his soul.

“Prince Armius Tu El Kaligos. Nice to meet you, Miss X.”

“I see! And this is your first ever fighting tournament?”

“The only one that counts.”

“Favorite food?”

“My people enjoy seafood. There are these bite-sized portions of cut fish and other ingredients I enjoy.”

“That sounds like Sushi! Excellent choice. Any hobbies?”

Armius wasn’t sure if he had ever spent so much time answering questions or even just thinking about these small, irrelevant aspects of life which seemed to consume Miss X’s entire attention. When he heard the tone of his voice, he realized he truly did enjoy exploring and reading, and that his favorite holiday was his brothers’ birthdays. Before long she seemed satisfied for now, but then her gluttonous hunger for answers turned on An.

“Quan, what are you going to wish for if you win?”

“Immortality, money, power.” Quan beamed “Whatever I think will keep me entertained the most.”

“Quan, How do you feel about your opponent skipping everything up this point to get drunk?”

“I don’t think he’s underestimating all of this... that badly. I mean, after all, he probably can’t help it.” An said in a teasing tone. Armius recognized his brothers having used among themselves from time to time. They always laughed afterwards, so Armius did the same.

“Quan, your opponent is now laughing at you. What are your thoughts?”

“Something something something the one who laughs last.”

“Then I’ll have to laugh once the two of you have beaten each other into a pulp! Well, I think we’re just about ready.”

Miss X stood back and out of the way. When Ryoma looked in her direction he could see a figure with many white tails lounging and looking down on the battlefield with amusement. He’d never been the object of so many jokes and treated like a plaything, but he was scared to lose this new dynamic he had with others.

“Three!”

An shook his arms and hopped up and down to stretch.

“Two!”

Armius adjusted his grip on his sword, having to pay attention to its weight for the first time in his life.

“One!”

As soon as the countdown ended, Armius saw a knife coming straight for him. An was already within a few feet and closing the distance so quickly that the Prince felt like he was moving in slow motion. He dodged reflexively, with the normal amount of effort he put into it. With his new strength this effort was barely enough to move him at all. He tried to guard the attack with his sword, but An quickly circled his stance and thrust at his side.

The knife found purchase in Armius’ shoulder, each centimeter bringing a new sensation. His body was telling him to stop, that it was broken and needed time. He couldn’t stifle his first

shout of pain, but in that time An drew back his knife and jabbed at Armius again, hitting him in the left forearm. Armius was still letting out the bestial yell from the first attack, but the pain helped kick his instincts into gear. Survival instincts that ran deeper than his combat experience and demanded he get as far away from what was hurting him as possible.

He jumped away from An with his legs while his shaking arms swung the blade to fight him off. An dodged the sword swing but looked at the blade appreciatively before charging back in. Armius could see defeat and possibly death closing in on him. His training had failed him, his survival instincts had bought him a moment, and so now it was time for his mind to pick up the slack.

With his right arm he gestured an open palm at An, willing a wave of immolating fire to storm forth. By the time his severely weakened flames had started to emerge, An was already moving to avoid them. Armius used his hand to track An's movement. His hand couldn't quite keep up, but the fire felt like it was hitting where An had been an hour ago. Armius felt his mind work hard, coming up with another plan where one plan had always sufficed before.

His hand folded from an open palm into a pointing gesture. The difference in speed between these attacks had never mattered, but he did know lightning traveled faster than fire. A bolt of electricity cut through the air like a blade. An had already moved out of the direct hit but his cheek was singed from the attack.

Armius walked back into a corner of the arena, feeling his mana quickly leave his body through his fingers and his blood quickly leave him from his arm. The slick, wet, warm feeling spreading down his left side comforted him. Once he was safely in the corner he raised his sword and stopped casting spells, since he knew they were limited now. An looked at the dozen black scorch marks that dotted the walls now.

An rushed Armius head on, and right before the Prince's swing would have connected, An narrowly ducked it and swiped for Armius' legs. Armius tried to meet the attack with a kick, but it only gave An an easier target to hit. The glorious warmth and wonderful pain spread from



Armius' shin, but An wasn't done yet. The knife curved and made way for Armius' belt. Quickly calculating the movements, Armius adjusted so that the belt buckle blocked the attack. While he did so he brought his injured arm back into the fight despite his body's protest and fired another bolt of lightning.

It was deeply frustrating to feel himself willing the lightning to manifest, and as it was about to An had already moved far enough away to not worry about even a static shock. Before Armius could adjust the knife injured his leg again, cutting deeply into the thigh. With one hand Armius spread his cape out between himself and An, and with the other he thrust his blade through the cape straight at the kid. An would not have the reaction time to dodge it.

Because of that, he slowed the attack down at the last moment enough for An to back off. Armius wasn't slow enough compared to An to justify this level of a defeat. Armius' instincts and training were failing him, and he couldn't even bring himself to go all out against somebody that was killing him. The warm feeling on his left arm was starting to go cold and numb, but at least his right leg could still feel it.

"Out of gas already, Prince? I can make this faster if you like. Or you could step out of the corner and fight the homeless kid head on." An's wound on his cheek healed right in front of Armius' eyes.

Armius felt eyes burning into him. Not just the ethereal announcer, not An and not even the audience. The white figure above, the goddess who loomed over all, was looking down at him. Was she mad? Hopeful? Amused? Armius could only guess. But he had never put on a shameful display before anyone, and he wasn't going to start in front of a Goddess.

"An. Your wish doesn't make any sense." That got An to stop talking for a moment.

"Let me be more clear. You don't make any sense." An sized him up, clearly looking for an opening while Armius spoke.

"You have power beyond anything I could ever muster, you must be exceptional by your world's standard. You don't have to be how you are."

“Is this where the all powerful Prince tells me to pull myself up by my bootstraps?” An asked, his attention switching from the fight to Armius’ words.

“You have power now, as you are, and power is the ability to control your environment. The more power you have, the more the world around you is a reflection of your will. With all your power you’re alone, pursued, hungry, homeless and bored. What do you think adding more power from a wish will do for you?”

An’s smile seemed more like a mask by the second.

“If I wish for it, it’ll be done. Simple as that. What’s wrong with getting what you want?”

“If you’re going to spend your wish on something that can be achieved by talking with somebody new, drinking a Margarita and being stabbed, then you’re wasting the wish. Even if you wished for the universe and somebody gave it to you, would that much power really be enough to make you entertained if you’re bored now? You’re the common factor, not power.”

An narrowed his eyes at Armius and silently drew a second dagger.

“You’ll see, Prince.”

“No, I won’t.” Armius moved his injured arm in a chopping motion, two vertical and one horizontal with none of them aimed directly at An, so his opponent clearly didn’t feel the need to avoid it. This was An’s first and only mistake in the fight. The next moment semi-transparent panes of energy formed a hallway, stretching from the Prince all the way to the other side of the arena and catching An in the middle. The two of them were now trapped with no way in or out and barely enough room on either side of them for their shoulders.

The Prince pointed his fingers at his trapped opponent and willed all of his remaining mana to storm out as a mighty bolt. An’s eyes widened in realization. Faster than ever before, An assaulted the barrier and did visible damage immediately. Armius forced all of his remaining mana through his finger tips, but only shocked his fingers with a little burst.

“Old fashioned way it is.” Armius brandished the sword with a wounded arm and ran on his injured leg, ignoring his body’s warnings of death because he had never felt more alive. He

had to go faster right now to stop An from escaping, and if he didn't it wouldn't matter if he could walk later. This moment mattered, and nothing else.

An was forced to abandon his attack on the barrier to avoid an overhead chop from the Prince. His opponent moved in to attack while Armius' guard was down, but coming from only one direction made the movement a lot easier to deal with. Armius dodged the knife thrust and managed to land his first solid hit, a kick to the chest that sent An flying back into the wall of the Arena.

"You're... you're..." An said between ragged breaths. "...Risking all this... for nothing! That's not any better!"

Armius' heart was beating faster than ever, each thud affirming his life. The smile he couldn't stop from spreading across his face and the firmness of his resolve helped him fight off the pain. The Prince knew these were not nothing. He drew his sword back for a thrust, in that moment he stumbled slightly on his numb leg. An curled his feet behind him like a spring and leapt off the wall he had been up against to fly at Armius faster than before.

An threw one knife, which Armius barely managed to block with Crownoath the sword. This left him unable to block the tackle, and the second knife that found its way into his side. Armius rolled with the force of the slam and right and its apex, he moved his feet between himself and An. He kicked with all the force he could muster, the first time in his entire life he had forced his muscles to do all they were capable of.

An was sent flying up, shattering the roof of the hallway instantly and leaving his knife in Armius' side when he did. Armius dismissed the other barriers and slowly stood up, keeping track of An by the sounds of the boy's shouts. Armius had dropped Crownoath in the struggle, but it was just as well. All he needed was one more attack.

His opponent started plummeting back down towards Armius, all his speed useless during a freefall. At the last possible moment Armius' good arm lashed out and uppercutted his

foe, knuckles finding the chin of his opponent and sending him flipping into the wall of the stadium. Armius flexed his hand and chuckled.

“Hurting myself by hitting someone.” He thought aloud as he saved the sourness in his fist.

Miss X leaned over at An’s unmoving body and whistled appreciatively.

“Quan is knocked out! Prince Armius Tu El Kaligos is the winner!” The announcer declared, before she remembered she was supposed to have the last laugh and gave it her all.

The crowd cheered and clapped a fair share at the turn around. In Armius’ younger days millions of citizens would gratefully shout his name when he saved the day. Compared to that, this reaction was tepid at best. It stirred an alien feeling he had no control of deep in his chest. As unconscious as breathing or blinking, it made it’s demand known to him. Armius let out a primal shout of victory in unison to the crowd's own celebration. He was so bloody and sweaty from the exchange that only one person in all the city noticed the tears streaming down his cheeks from her view above it all.