

One of the cruel truths of this world is that tragedy is subjective.

20 years ago, there was a man named Anthony Freemont. He was the father of two talented and bright daughters. He was the husband of a salt-of-the-earth woman. He was the friend to a lonely and weary carpenter who was just about to turn his life around. He was many things to many people, but nothing extraordinary.

When his name was printed on the obituary, the world just kept on spinning as if he was never real. To the world, he was just another increment on a very mundane heart attack statistic no one bothers to keep track of, but to Eliza, he was the son she was cursed to bury.

She sat there in the privacy of her tiny dusty apartment, staring at the crimson envelope pinched tightly within her fingers.

That godless tournament...

She would've slaughtered every last contestant in it with all the wrath a lioness would show to anyone between her and her cub if it meant the chance at wishing him back, but sadly, these were not the claws of a lioness holding the letter, but the twigs of a pathetic old hag.

Time had robbed her of everything. Bones had become as brittle as sand, muscle had melted into fat and jelly, and eyes that could once see a mile away now needed glasses so that she could read and read and read obsessively that godless letter down to the last letter, comma, and period. She desperately wanted to believe there was another loophole. Something that would just let her skip it all and let her win, but no, not this time.

The letter was completely and utterly worthless to her now, yet she still held on. Why? Was it greed, was it blind sentiment, or was it some bizarre logic left unexplained? We shall never know, for the dead tell no tales, and they have no obligation to answer your questions.

-----

Rum stewed on this story, or at least the half he actually knew. Could that have been her wish or just a red herring. Would a dead person wish someone they would never see back to life?

"Hey, daydreamer, anyone home!" Saki waved from the other side of the bar

Rum turned to her and nodded "Good morning, Saki"

"Yeah yeah, good morning to you too. You've really been sitting in that same chair since last night I see. You should probably know that sitting around is bad for your health, that being something you need to take care of now that you're as flesh and blood as the rest of us" Saki pulled up a plate of french toast. "Speaking of which, eat up. There's no way in hell you're competing on an empty stomach"

"You sound like a mother talking to her child." Rum winced "It feels a bit embarrassing to be lectured like this."

"Don't worry, it can't get any worse than when you showed up at the doorstep naked."

"Pardon?!"

"The boss just kinda left you there like that unconscious after explaining your whole situation to me. That's why you're wearing the spare uniform. It was the only thing I could find in your size."

Rum picked up a fork and began poking at the meal in front of him in an attempt to distract himself from the mental image forming in his head. Then it dawned on him. "This is the first thing I will ever eat."

"And?"

"I've never tasted anything before. Shinigami have sight, hearing and touch, but not taste. It's not something we'd ever use because eating is something reserved for mortals. What is taste like? How is it different from sights and sounds? And why do mortals obsess over it?"

Saki scratched her head while trying to piece together the right words "I wish I could tell ya, but anything I could say wouldn't do it justice. You'll just have to see for yourself."

Rum shrugged before picking up a knife and cut into the meal, mimicking the actions he had seen thousands of times before. He went through the motions, placing the food in his mouth and chewing. Then it hit him. The soft fluffy texture, the sweet sticky syrup. It may have been the only thing he had ever tasted, but it was still the greatest meal he had ever had. He shook himself out of the dopamine kick. This was sustenance. A means of ensuring he wouldn't faint when confronting his opponent.

There was a light moment of fear as he wondered what if he couldn't figure out how to swallow, but luckily, instinct took over and guided the nutrients to his stomach. He cleared his throat and mouth. "Thank you very much. This is quite generous of you."

"Nah, it's nothing. The boss made it my job to make sure the contestants are in fighting condition. Mostly, that just means patching up wounds and whatnot, but if I left you to go into the colosseum malnourished, it would be my ass on the line probably."

"Regardless, I thank you" Rum did his best to exercise his table manners, eating, talking, but never doing both at the same time. "Speaking of which, what can you tell me about this first round?"

"I was gonna get to that. I'm not gonna sugar coat this and say it will be easy. You'll probably need to tap into some of that shinigami magic you have."

"Right, with the powers of a shinigami, no foe will stand against me." Rum lied through his teeth. Much like eating, fighting was an activity reserved only for mortals, and much like this meal, a confrontation with an opponent would be as painfully drawn out and awkward for the death spirit. He gulped "Go on."

"Your opponent is a human named Pembroke Artysup. He's a soldier decked out with a bunch of guns, knives and what not, but the real kicker is that this guy has his own goddamn mech. No clue how that thing is tournament legal given that it's the size of a house, but it's not my place to judge. You probably should see it for yourself before your match. It's parked on the bay. The crazy thing looks like the sci fi movies I watched when I was younger, pretty otherworldly."

"...otherworldly?..." Rum murmured "Saki, this may sound like a random question, but have you ever heard of a band called Dance Gavin Dance?"

"Oh, well sure I do. They're one of my favorites."

"And could you list the band members?"

Saki's brows curled in confusion "Will Swan, Mathew Mingus, Tim Feerick, Tilian Pearson, and Jon Merth"

"And you're sure that last name is Jon Merth and not Jon Mess?"

"Yes, I am sure. Where the hell is any of this going?"

"Nowhere, I need to get going."

"What? Now?"

Rum didn't bother responding. He abandoned his half finished breakfast and dashed out the door.

Saki felt disappointed. She knew his reaction had something to do with the question, but she couldn't pin down what it was. A shinigami couldn't be this upset over simple rock n roll trivia, could he?

-----

Pembroke sat on the warm sand, taking in the cool breeze. He wiped the sweat from his forehead after a good long hour of maintenance. Checking fuel, assessing damages, he was going through the motions that were drilled into his skull at boot camp. Most of it was

unnecessary, but it kept him grounded. He felt a little proud seeing that he was done fast enough to enjoy the sunrise. Or atleast, that's what he thought before realizing that it was past 9 o'clock according to his watch. There was only one sun in the sky and assuming his watch was right, it was rising slower than it should have. This place was truly alien to him, he thought, and that's when he heard the stranger's voice.

"Mind if I join you" a winded Rum called out.

"What is it?" Pembroke replied with a lack of enthusiasm. At first he mistook the death spirit for another one of those attendants until he saw the tail. Only a contestant had one of those from what he was told. He quickly jumped to his feet. "Ah Hell..."

"I want to talk, but before that, I want you to shoot me."

"They told me my opponent would be a jackass who named himself Rum, but I didn't think you were that stupid!" Pembroke jeered in his confusion.

"If I am being that stupid, then what do you have to lose. The rules said nothing about prematurely killing your opponent. All you would need to do is show up to the colosseum and declare yourself the winner. Surely you can kill. You're a soldier. That's what you've been trained to do."

"It's going to cause one hell of a panic if people start hearing gunshots."

"You have no idea how many guns I've heard over the course of my existence. I can assure you that we're far enough from town that all anyone will hear is a pop of what sounds to be a firecracker."

Pembroke pulled out his pistol from inside of his coat and took aim. "If you have a death wish, far be it from me to tell you what to do!"

Click

Bang

And then there was nothing. No blood, no corpse, just Rum standing exactly where he was, unharmed. He walked forward. Pembroke took another shot.

Bang

Same thing

Another

Bang

Rum was now at point blank range. It would be impossible for Pembroke to miss as his ironsights perfectly lined up with the center of Rum's forehead.

Bang

"As you can see Mr. Artysup. I am not merely a silly man with a silly name. I am an immortal. A being who cannot be touched by Death, for I am its servant. Would you be willing to follow me down the rabbit hole and listen to what I have to say?"

Pembroke lowered the gun, gripped in trembling hands. "It doesn't sound like I have a choice."

"Everything in existence is finite. It is finite because that is how it is meant to be. Your loved ones and the moments you share with them along with every pleasure you have or will ever experience has value because they are finite. Death is what makes them finite. Death is what gives every instance of Life meaning. I have dedicated my entire existence to upholding this principle. However, the concept of the multiverse spits in the face of it all. Everything reoccurs infinitely with no start or end, with no meaning, only madness. Even if the concept is real, you must pretend that it isn't in order to preserve your sanity." Rum lectured "The reason I am explaining this to you is because anything otherworldly to me is not real. I wish to avoid fighting, and settle this match between you and I through a logical debate, but I will not listen to whatever sad story you may use to guilt me into forfeiting because you are not from my world, and therefore you are not real to me."

The soldier gritted his teeth. He understood what Rum was saying, but that didn't mean he had to agree with any of it. Life had beaten him down and told him that he was worthless. Would he just stand here and let Death tell him the same? "Fuck that! You can go on and on about how many infinite copies there are of me, all running around the multiverse, but despite all that, there's only one version of me here. Not two of me, not three, and not a billion. I am the first 'me' you will talk to and the last, and I'd say that makes me just as 'finite and meaningful' as anything else, so if you want to keep this 'logical debate' going, you're going to have to acknowledge that I am just as real as you!" As the agitated adrenaline wore off, Pembroke took a step back in regret as he realized what he had done. He had lashed out at a supposed angel of death, and there was no tell how he'd react.

There was a pause. Rum took in the words. He looked at Pembroke with a small chuckle and a pleasant smile. "This is the second time today I've been embarrassed. To think despite all the years I've been around, I still have so much learning left to do. You've reminded me of an old proverb, 'inchi-go inchi-e', "one time, one meeting". I may butcher it, but essentially, it means that every moment of life is a once in a lifetime moment. A conversation, even with a total stranger, will change you in ways that will stay with you. Perhaps, you are right. Perhaps despite everything, you are the realist thing there is. After all, there's no one else at this present

moment, and the present is all we have. Why are you here? What is it that you want from this tournament?"

"A new motorcycle..." Pembroke looked away, knowing what a weak answer that was.

"But surely it's not worth risking your life ov-"

"I don't know what else to wish for. Ok?!" Pembroke got defensive. "I became a soldier, so I could get a scholarship to college, and I'm trying to get into college so I can get a shitty desk job and work my ass til I croak. I have nothing going for me, nothing that any wish would fix."

"You should be careful. The military has a way of taking advantage of souls that believe such lies about themselves. I've seen many men die and just as many survive and do horrible things at the orders of their commanding officer."

"Do you expect me to just defect, go home, and live with my mum for the rest of my life? I'm not a grim reaper like you. I need food, shelter, and a job that can pay for both. Even then, the military would just find someone jackass to take my place."

"That's not what I'm saying at all. I may not be mortal, but I understand how hard it is."

"Then what?"

Rum rolled his eyes "This is what annoys me about humans sometimes. You treat destiny and fate as something open to interpretation. If destiny is something good, you refer to it as something you need to achieve, but if it's bad, you refer to it as something that must be defied or overcome. The truth is that it is neither. Sometimes life will put you in situations where you have no reasonable options than to submit to what fate has dealt you, but other times you will get the opportunity to decide for yourself which road to take. Your current situation may be the former, but the latter will come, and when it does, you need to remind yourself that your thoughts and feelings matter as much as anyone else because you are real. Never make such assumptions about your future that you have nothing to look forward to. That's something you will decide later when your moment comes."

"That's pretty damn corny."

"Only because I've had centuries to rehearse, watching soldiers willfully throw away their lives on this cursed assumption that their death is all they can achieve. For that long, I have kept quiet, but with this tournament and my current situation, I've been forced out of my shell. I have an old friend to thank for that."

Pembroke looked at his watch. He saw the few minutes that had passed by, but that wasn't what he was interested in. He took it off and tossed it to Rum.

“What’s this for?”

“It’s my tag. I don’t know what I want to do with the rest of my life, or if I’ll even make it past my tour of duty, but either way, I sure as shit don’t want to risk my life fighting weird magical creatures in a weird fantasy world like this. I’m going home.”

-----

Rum made his way back to the Fox Den with his prize in hand. Saki was just as surprised to see him back as she was to see him run off.

“Hey there.” She greeted him

“Hey to you too.” Rum waved “I want to apologize for leaving in a hurry. That question I asked about the rock band was a test. I was curious whether you were from the same world as me, but after talking to someone, I’ve learned that it doesn’t really matter. You’ve helped me quite a bit so far, and I’m happy to have met you.”

“Well shucks, that’s nice and all, but where did you run off to?”

“I met with Pembroke”

“And how’d that go?”

A woman cloaked in a black dress popped in behind Rum and interjected “It went wonderful!”

“Hey boss.” Saki nodded to Madam Chifu.

“You were watching me? Who are you?” Rum asked

Madam Chifu replied in her brash and confident voice “I’m the one managing this tournament. It’s my job to keep track of everyone. I must say that you did quite a decent job pulling the little soldier boy’s strings. He was so shocked by your bold stunt, and so easily distracted by your sugary words that he never bothered to realize that he could have simply knocked you out with a clean punch. You’re a servant of death, but you don’t have much power over a nice long nap, do you?”

Rum scowled at this mysterious lady. He may have done what he needed to win, but every word he said to Pembroke was genuine.

“There’s only one small problem.” Chifu continued, her voice losing some of its sarcastic pep. “I have a tournament to run, and settling your match outside of the colosseum on your little date at the beach is a real let down to all the spectators. My poor little X was heartbroken when I told her your match up against Pem had to be cancelled because you already won. The tournament

is going to be very dull if you keep pulling the same trick over and over. A good trickster should have more than one up their sleeve, and I'm expecting your next round to be a tad more entertaining for my audience, so here's my proposition. Your next round will take place inside the arena. There will be a proper fight, and I will make sure your opponent is read up on every strength and weakness you have. You can either agree to these terms, or I will never tell you about who Hana was."

Chifu's words were laced with venom. She could have easily threatened to kick Rum out of the tournament, but she knew that it would drive him mad to never find out what Hana's role in this story was. He had disappointed her, and now her eyes were focused on him. What would he do now?