

"Whatever good you see coming from this is just a result of delirium, delusion, or both." said the blue phox.

"You don't like it? Then, go back an' cry t'Nora, bro. I'm gettin' dat Cythraul foo' with or without ya." said the red phox.

"At this rate, it will be YOU who comes back crying to me, Naku." said a yellow phox, emerging from the shadows.

The trio of siblings assembled in a dark alleyway, the smell of rainwater from a shower, that ended only minutes earlier, masked the foul scent of the grit and grime. The red phox was called Zenaku, who embodied the flaming passion of rage, excitement, confidence, and even the flames burned these emotions so hot. He was the phox of his trio who tossed away caution, restraint, and strategy, for he felt they put weight on him to bear, restraining him for the thrill he sought. Despite welcoming uncertainty, things have always gone his way... until recently.

The phox sheathed in yellow fur went by Zenora, who served her element of electricity well. She not only used it as a weapon, but to heal, protect, and empower, even becoming it as well by bringing light and warmth to every day, like electricity itself does within a cozy home. Nora sees the world as a giant child, needing to be nurtured, protected, and cared for. And at times, such as when the scum and lowlifes of the world come to make a mess, must be disciplined, as if this is the world throwing a tantrum... however, there has been difficulty in doing so, as of late.

The phox of blue fur, named Zenium, bore the personification of pure, clear liquid, as well as its additional faces in the winter. The unstructured yet graceful flow of water was like a symbol of his unequaled elegance. The calm and quiet fall of snow resembled his unshakable composure. The ice was not unlike his deadliest weapon; the hard focus and his sharp wits of his astute and cunning mind. His gift for strategy greatly outshone his siblings and thanks to it, the bitter wine of failure stayed far from away his glass... until it was forced down his throat a short time ago.

Only two days ago, a familiar face behind the mask of a German Shepard crossed the paths of these three creatures, beginning with the least welcoming; Naku. Assuming and craving trouble, Naku trailed the supposed stranger and found himself on the wrong end of the pummeling. Thanks the intervention of his sister Nora, Naku was prevented from doing damage he'd be sure to regret. For Nora perceived an old ally behind the clever disguise; Lang Shu, an wolf of divine power who gained the favor and friendship of Zenion, the head of the Infinitium Phox Siblings.

Trailing him in hopes of discovering why such a wolf, who was born detached from the modern ways, would be skulking about the city in present day urban garbs and endeavoring to learn of a most peculiar and somewhat troubling subject. The wolf in Shepard's clothing was trying to learn of ongoing gang activity, and as the two phox siblings pondered why in mid-pursuit, they found yet another wolf, one who wielded the same heavenly powers as Shu, but wielded nowhere near heavenly. The Langren, as these wolves were collectively known, had a traitor in their midst.

This Langren's bloody red eyes pierced and perturbed the very souls of Naku and Nora, as his accomplices beat the two of them into submission and forced them to watch as their young Langren friend was beaten to a bloody pulp and tossed into a endlessly descending lake. All seemed lost until the third of their sub-faction, Zenium, arose from the depths with Shu in hand, and doused the flaming brutality of the three rogue Langren with his power to bend the mightiest oceans to his will. But even in his triumph, the rogues refused to back down.

As Nora learned all she could from about the red-eyed Langren from Shu, who was recovering under her care, Naku sensed their presence on his turf, and found the two henchmen from before, laying waste to his dance club. With the multiplying possibilities of how to torture these goons running through his mind, the two Langren and their natural power of lightning and soul, along with their equal street smarts in fighting, overpowered the rampaging red phox. Yet again, Naku's fate fell into the hands of his blue brother, and yet again, Zenium did not disappoint.

The loosened tongues of the two thugs, known as Gwilym and Heilyn, spilled to the Inferno Infinitium and revealed a way to their superior, the leader of this mob called the Red Talons, recognized for their tattoos of bloody falcon claws running down their arms. The Langren they answer to was called Brutus Cythraul Cadfael, and as retribution for the Red Talons laying waste to his pride and joy of a club, Naku vowed to bring ruin to that of Cythraul; his underground fight clubs. Even when learning Shu was participating as well, Naku refused to change his plans.

Following Shu's memory, retrieved and received from Nora after his revelation of the Red Talons, Naku led the three of them through the dim backstreets and to a bench, which was standing erect on its side, to block the outline of a closed door, which Naku shoved aside with no regard for who would hear it collapse. His two siblings covered their ears, squeezed their eyes shut, clenched their teeth together, afterwards glaring at their hot-headed brother, irritated by his lack of subtlety. Naku then pounded the door thrice and waited, tapping his paw on the damp asphalt.

"What do you want?" asked a voice as a slit in the door opened up, revealing a pair of green eyes surrounded by cream colored fur with oddly pink colored bangs.

"Whassup, dawg? Ah'm here to knuckle up with the foo's here who think dey bad." Naku answered with a slick smile.

"Hold it right there. You have to pay admission before I let you in." said the guard.

"You playin'? Nobody said I gotta bring cash!"

"Then you leave before I have the boss escort you home on a stretcher."

"Grr..." Naku paused as he turned and stuffed his hands in his pockets, then paused with a slick smile. "Wait up, ah might..." he then moved his right hand around in his pocket as he came back to door. "Ah might 'ave a few Benny Franklin's for ya, dun."

"Is that so?" the doorman grinned. "Show me Mr. Franklin and I'll even take your coat for you."

Naku's grin turned sinister as he lashed his hand out of his pocket as though it were a switchblade and whipped it across the air, releasing an expanding curved trail of flames, a portion of which slithered in through the slit of the door. The eyes behind it were no longer there and after waiting a moment, the three heard only a thud behind the

entryway. Naku smiled and he then prepared to bust through the door with more arson, but Zenium grabbed his shoulder and shoved him back and stood silent in front of the door.

Levitating and gathering water from the puddles and dripping ledges that formed thanks to the rain that had passed, Zenium bent them to slither into the keyhole on the outside of the door. Enveloping the tumblers within the lock and tightening the pressure of the water to give it a grip, the latch retracted from the lock hole and back into the lock itself, making a way in more subtly than Naku preferred. Zenium then pushed the water out the other side of the lock and used it to feel for the hinges, dousing them to eliminate any potential creaking as he gently opened the door.

"Leave no trace brother, that's the phox way." Zenium said, entering.

"Tch, yuh mean da 'Zen'yum and Nora' way." Naku scoffed. "Ah'm a rebel."

Following Zenium, they sensed the stench of singed fur as they beheld the would-be doorman, lying on his back with a raccoon's mask of burnt fur across his eyes, thanks to Naku. He then coughed out a puff of black smoke. He was a bizarre mustilian with a pink mohawk. He still breathed and remained conscious, overcoming shock in addition to the burn, proving that Naku had SOME restraint on handt. He watched as Naku walked to him and kicked him aside, while the other two phoxes gave their steamed scarlet sibling a glare of disapproval and disappointment.

"Put my- aghauck, money on the red fox. Aghauck!" coughed the guard sluggishly as he fainted.

"Naku, for shame." Nora scolded. "Poor thing."

"So patch 'im up if ya wanna." Naku sassed. "Might as well git started, cuz ah'm just gittin' warmed up."

"And you think fighting others, who are probably just regular brawlers looking for money and most likely have nothing to do with the Red Talons is a justified way to draw Cythraul out. Nora IS correct. Shame on you. At least hold your flames back. These other fighters may stand between you and that red-eyed rogue, but they've done nothing to you that deserves a face branding as penance. And for The Astral Guardians' sake, assume a disguise, will you?"

"Bla, bla, bla. Nag, nag, nag. Complain and criticize. Rinse and repeat." Naku said, fed up. "It's a FIGHT club. An ILLEGAL fight club. Ya come down here expectin' to see da fists fly, not one o'ya little sewing circle, Nora. And you, Zenium, ah'm the one lookin' to git even, and if it'll help shut ya trap, then ah'll make a disguise. Just stow the proper and smart way bologna and let me do it MAH way. Next to da dance floor, ah'm at home in any fightin' arena. You two are da new kids on the block down here, so you don't git to tell me how it's dun. Ya dig?"

The two siblings collected themselves after the lash out of their heated brother and waved him off to accomplish it his way. Despite being one out of thirteen siblings, or one out of ten who lived together, none of their unique ways nor behavior ever created a gap between them this wide. Even Zenaku's brashness, Nora's gentleness, or Zenium's nobility made for such a tongue lashing from each other. As he prepared, Naku thought back to what truly caused this mess, his first thought being of Lang Shu and his very out-of-character disguise. Suddenly...

"Why, Naku..." Zenium said in surprise.

"By Zenkura." Nora said astonished.

"Whut?" Naku said harshly, expecting more scolding.

He then looked down to his outfit, a white t-shirt with the Wu Tang Clan logo emblazoned in yellow upon it, and mostly covered by a leather black jacket with a red dragon patched with a yellow flame on the heart and back of it. He also wore blue jeans with red and black Nike's. As his concentration on anything but fighting, dancing, and partying in either sense was less than average among his brothers in sisters, his recollection back to Shu's resurfacing under disguise combined with his shapeshifting power to recreate that very outfit that Shu wore.

"What the..." Naku rushed for a closet door, which opened and sported a mirror on the other side, showing his form as that of a German Shepard, a form which Shu made himself into with hair dye. "Aw, dang it! Lemme try again!"

"No!" Nora said, grabbing his shoulders. "This is... this is brilliant." she grinned as Zenaku fell silent.

"You say what, now?" he said.

"You're finally using your head more." Zenium grinning. "Thinking past the end of your nose, as it were."

"You two playin' me? Whatchu talkin'bout?"

"A possible solution to our problem, if played wisely enough. We can drive Cythraul and his mafia from this city, and revitalize the efficiency of Lang Shu's disguise."

"A'ight, ah'm listenin'."

"We had hoped to stop you from fighting for fear you'd do harm to our young friend, since he is also entering and you never even consider restraining your power in the slightest." Nora began.

"Keep talkin' you gonna piss me off in a minute." Naku growled, only proving her point.

"The point being..." Zenium interjected. "Now the entire idea revolves around the two of you meeting in the ring, in THIS form."

"You want the audience to see two identical Shepard's? How's dis s'posed to work again?"

"Not exactly." Nora said. "I watched Shu leave yesterday, before I found the aftermath of the confrontation at your night club. Shu shed his disguise and left it at the apartment."

"F'real? Why?"

"Maybe because of a feeling that he would be overcoming a cowardice he felt by doing so, to come out of hiding."

"Could be. Or a deep passion for dramatic closure." Zenium chided. "Such a passion is a given for those who participate in grand heroics, humble or not."

"You fight him as his alter ego as he fights you as the true blue wolf we know, and all who witness it will believe once more that Lang Shu of Luoyang, and Sean Landon the German Shepard are two separate beings." Nora grinned.

"Cunning, to say the least. But the Red Talons are expecting your participation as Zenaku, as well. Disappointing them will arouse suspicion, and jeopardize the entire charade."

"Whut's da big deal?" Naku shrugged. "Ah git t'fight twice as much as the other ones."

"But Sean Landon must fight Lang Shu and one of your personas must lose." Zenium stated. "It will be awfully difficult to fight yourself in two forms. Even if you DID spend time perfecting your illusion skills, your personal style of the Ba Gua Zhang discipline is so uniquely offensive that Sean will seem to have studied the art with you and appear as your friend. Which, by the way, won't help sever Cythraul's enmity to the fictional Shepard, since we are his new nemeses."

"One problem more." Nora stated. "Neither disguise nor shapeshifting can fool a Langren when they look in deep enough to the soul."

"Again, Nora, no big deal. We'll just beatin' down Cythraul and his thugs 'till we kick 'em to d'coast and then ah'll send 'em back to da UK wit' some fireworks." Naku grinned, conjuring flames over his palms.

"Still, the Langren are spread worldwide. It would not surprise me if half the wolves at your club are of Langren blood."

"But Cythraul and the Red Talons are the only ones we know of who have been corrupted." Zenium pointed out.

"Yeah? And if there're more, why din't dey step up when Cythraul got Shu? Why din't dey jump in when mah club was those two Red Talon foo's were crashin' mah joint?"

"On behalf of your settling into a club in this city, we linger about here as you do, when not called upon to assist Lord Zenion. Maybe they sensed us and left. Being part kitsune, from which the feral foxes are descended, they may have detected a feral quality in you. That of being territorial. You don't strike most as the kind to share the title of defender. You don't want anyone to rob you of the pain and fear you inflict on the city's most troublesome varlets, do you?"

"Naw, no way. They wouldn't help, anyhow. Look how dat Shu kid stood against Red Arms. They messed'im up REAL bad." Naku chided, causing Nora to glare at him. "Seriously, whut was dat kid thinkin'. Whut's he even thinkin' comin'ere? He'll be up to his neck in trouble."

"Don't look down on our young friend." she scolded. "In fact, it wouldn't be surprised if he defeats both of your entries."

"Heh, yeah right." Naku chuckled, then paused looking at her. "Whut, you serious? You think dat Shaolin Mutt can throw down wit' me and get THAT lucky. S'like you two forgot who ah am."

Suddenly the sound of lightning sparks faded in, and Zenaku felt a bolt of lightning bash against the back of his head, in an upside slap manner as it crackled and disintegrated into the air after impact. Standing behind them at the door was their young ally, obviously expecting to find friends there, but saw nothing but an enemy in Naku for his brash actions and even less tactful tongue. He then walked in as Naku growled, rubbing the singing fur on the back of his head while Nora and Zenium stepped aside to make way for the young Langren.

"I come here weighed down by guilt, holding myself responsible for the misfortunes that have recently plagued you." Shu growled. "My disguise that led to a pointless fight between us. Your suffering at Cythraul's hand. Your club's destruction. Even considering that I may have been overly ashamed, I wished to lift this burden by asking for your forgiveness and fight to make right. Yet here you are, talking down on me for battling the calamity I've led here. Now I understand that you are owed nothing from me. Yet, I WILL wish you luck. Because, that is all that will save you, now."

Shu then walked past Naku, bumping shoulders as a sign of contempt. Naku's two siblings followed him beyond their brother, Zenium's face expressing dissatisfaction with Naku and his foolhardiness, and Nora looking into his eyes hoping and failing to find the Naku she loved as a brother. Naku huffed and rolled his eyes with boredom of this constant treatment of scolding and knelt down to the unconscious guard. Using his power of fire, he retracted the heat from the doorman's face and healed the burn as the black mask of scorched fur faded.

"Huh..." Naku said, looking closer at the guard's face and lifting one of his eyelids to see the emerald irises. "Dis dude looks familiar. Yo, no hard feelin's right, dawg? A'ight? Word."

With these words posing as an apology, heard or unheard by the dazed doorman, Naku snapped his eyelid back into place and stood up, feeling confident, as usual, that this minor deed would serve as the wind Zenium and Nora would use to glide off of his back. He then peered around the corner, seeing his siblings observing Shu, as he practiced his techniques. The fact that lightning followed his hands indicated that his aggression towards Naku still remained. Enough that his eyes glowed purple, making it impossible to tell if he was looking at the red phox or not.

"Do not judge Naku too harshly, youngling." Nora said to Shu, as she reached out to his shoulder, but lightning instantly shocked her hand, repelling her electric body. "Ow! Ahem, he is not the beast he poses as."

"Indeed, Naku's tongue is probably his sharpest weapon, but they can only conjure words." Zenium assured. "Unlike most weapons, it is your choice of how deeply you let his insults cut."

"I do not judge Zenaku at all, nor do I let his words form a gash." Shu said. "But regardless, I didn't want his ego outweigh his strength, not in this arena. If you enter the ring with Cythraul, and you let your confidence control your actions, you would be safer leaping through a garbage shredder. In Naku's state back there, he would not last ten seconds against such a cruel Langren. I threatened him to open his eyes. Not because I bear ill will to him."

"It's Naku, he'll blaze his way through anything, and never give up." Nora said.

"Then he enjoys the ultimate power of a Phox far too much, I think." Shu scoffed. "Brave he may be, strong he certainly is, but indestructible? I wish I could believe that."

"We ARE part phoenix, lest you forget." Zenium said.

"Is that so?" Shu asked as the glowing of his eyes dimmed a bit. "Then why do you constantly pride yourselves as 'Guardians' of Zenion? If he is a Phox such as the two of you, sharing the power of the immortal phoenix, why would he need guardians? You are his family, but you constantly refer to yourselves as guardians. If a Phox is immortal, what do they have to be guarded from?"

"As they say, they are fates worse than death." Zenora said. "Ones that even a Phox needs to be shielded from."

"That is exactly my point." Shu said as he took a deep breath and ceased his kata. "And such fates would make one BEG for death. Defeat by Cythraul is such a fate. And he keeps the generosity of death out of reach from his victims. I do not wish to see anyone, especially not my friend Zenion nor any of his flesh and blood, suffer such a savage fate."

"Heh, I would dare say Zenaku is starting to rub off on you." Zenium chuckled. "The both of you care so much for your friends and family, yet in the correct order of circumstances, you have perplexing methods of showing said devotion."

"Perhaps you are right." Shu grinned a little. "As I do any Infinitium, I admire him. His taste of music and fashion puzzles me even more than his ways of showing care, but his confidence, while excessive, amazes me."

"Astonishing, though it is, it can brew trouble. Yet, he would not change it for the world for that very reason."

"I only hope that enough of him can rub off on me to make me a fraction as confident as him. I know I can do better with the conviction to shed the guilt I place on myself for many unfortunate happenings. Like allowing the Red Talons to infest this city, for instance."

"Shu, that is NOT your fault." Nora assured, finally able to put her hand on his shoulder.

"I know that, here." he said, pointing to his head. "But I just cannot FEEL that." he then placed his hand over his heart.

"And so you are here, to find who is truly at fault, Cythraul, himself." said Zenium.

"So is my hope." Shu sighed. "Great Father Above bless Zenaku. Overconfidence, impudence, and all."

Zenaku then withdrew from the eavesdropping, taken back and touched. While always admired among mortals for his music and dance and complimented for his indomitable skill in fighting, no one outside his siblings had ever before approved of him, let alone revered him, for his overbearing resolve and fearlessness to say what he wished to whomever. The Langren were not so easily understood. Lang Shu had seen both sides of Zenaku, a fierce and warrior with a conquering spirit, and an arrogant punk with a mouth, and held the whole they formed in high regards.

A legion of bloodthirsty spectators could be felt flooding the arena with their stampede, promised satiation for their cravings of grueling skirmishes and deadly scuffles. Their cheering demands for this brutality caused a quake throughout the decaying structure, which shed a few pebbles of its ceilings within, as a result. Zenium and Nora beheld Shu, looking in the mirror and taking a deep breath, his bright purple eyes held a blend of bravery and uncertainty. In his heart, he formed silent prayers for protection. Not for himself, but for Naku and his two siblings.

Turning away from his reflection, he faced the two doors that led to the ruthless ring, in which all participants were set on each other like rabid dogs. No one was praised for their effort, but their glory was measured in how much blood they spilled, how many bones they've broken, how close to death they had brought their victims. It was a spectacle to see how many creatures out there could compare to Cythraul and his gangsters. The rate at which Shu's blood pumped through his own body caused his limbs to quake, as his fist tightened and lightning sparked from it.

"Yo, Shu. Ho'd up." Naku said, coming in around the corner.

"Hmm?" Shu turned, their eyes meeting as he stood silent, as did Naku while trying to form the right words.

"I dun't blame ya for anythin' dat's happened dese last few days, a'ight? Ah'm the one who should be sorry. Ah just don't do apologies. So, instead, lemme wish you luck... not dat you gonna need it. You a regulah warriah, dawg."

"Heh." Shu grinned. "Thanks, Naku. I don't hold your brash tongue against you. Or you're grammar, either. And, I know you aren't one to just say things out of vanity. You are sincere in every word. And those few mean a lot to me."

"Well, you a good kid. Ah just say what ah see, ya know?" he shrugged.

"Aww, Naku. You can be very inspirational when you want." Nora smirked.

"Well, Shu. Do you feel a ounce more of conviction with Naku's motivation?" Zenium asked.

"Indeed. Very much." Shu said as he faced the doors once more and walked to them, standing silent for a moment. "We all enter this world covered in blood." he said. "Thanks to Zenaku, I have no qualms of leaving it the same way. For now I'm certain that whatever my reward or consequence, survival or death, I will make a considerable difference in purging Cythraul from this place once and for all, and reestablish its rightful protection from Zenion and his family."

He then walked through the doors as the crowd threw their cheers, scorns, and emptied refreshments at the young wolf, still he remained unswayed. He looked back as the doors slowly shut behind him. Naku grinned and hammered his knuckles down into his palm, clenching his fingers around his fist, encouraging the young wolf to thrash his opponent. Shu grinned and nodded just before the doors shut, and walked to center of the arena square, where the crowd were gathered behind concrete dividers placed against the chain-linked enclosure.

"Well, well, well. My beloved spectators, would you look at this?" Cythraul's voice echoed. "A ghost of my past is here to strike terror into me. Gaze upon that short and scrawny frame and tremble. So frightening, isn't he?" he continued to ridicule as the gathered galoots of the gutter joined in with a roar of laughter at Lang Shu.

"You wish to see terror, Cythraul? You should have invited Zenaku to your little event." Shu chided back. "Maybe then, some of the fecal matter you've shoveled into your hole in the wall here would rethink their evenings ahead."

"You hear that, blokes? Not only does this rail of a wolf have the nerve to show his face in my territory, he's has the gall to label you as sacks of sewage. Back in the UK, we don't forgive such disrespect. How 'bout you lot?"

"BOO...!!!" the individuals of the crowd repeated.

"We'll glad you think so, otherwise, I'd invited me new mate along for nuthin'. Hope you're ready to be bled dry, 'cause this crew gathered 'ere want a new red paint job for the floor. Gotta give 'em what they want."

"Then bring new ally. But, I won't let anyone stand between me and the liberation this city truly needs." Shu claimed.

"Anyone, eh?" Cythraul grinned. "Good luck with that."

The two more subtle phoxes settled within the crowd after hiding their extra tails and wings as Naku watched the other fighters arrive in the front room, awaiting their share of the blood-soaked limelight. One of which stepped ahead of the others toward the door. Though hidden beneath a hooded black robe with red spider webs sewn onto the shoulders, the nonchalant Naku didn't consider this fighter worth a second look. However, that consideration hanged when the dim light reflected into the phox's eyes, via an oddly deep green blade sword on the creature's hip.

"Whoa, ho'd it, money." Naku said, grabbing the creature's sleeve. "Whatchu doin' wit dat sword? Dis is a fight club, not a fencin' class."

"Hmph." the creature scoffed, still hiding his faith beneath the hood.

"Yo, ah ain't playin', son. You try to stick mah wuff Shu, and ah'm gonna roast you with that sword shoved up yo- hey!"

The creature then grabbed Naku's wrist and shoved him into the wall. His reflex was so rapid that Naku took a moment to recover, finding his entire hand enclosed in an adhesive shell of strange fibers. They resembled spider silk, and were stuck by swathes of the substance. The creature narrowed his eyes at the stationary phox, their hue as green the blade at his side. He then turned and entered the ring, welcomed by cheers of the spectators while Naku suffered snickers from the other fighters as he tried to yank and burn loose from the spider silk.

"Ahh, there he is, blokes. The syringe that's gonna put are little friend to sleep, tonight. And what good is a syringe without its needle? Show them yours, mate." Cythraul said as the fighter before Shu drew his emerald rapier and demonstrated his swift yet graceful skill with the piercing blade.

"Wait a moment." Shu said peering closer, as the eyes within the hood lit up like the blade in the arena' lighting.

"And now, my dozens in attendance, let me introduce my newest crew member. All the way from Italy, the only living heir of the Spidaria lineage. His kind were thought to have been wiped out by the secret genocidal organization known and feared as Ano. And I've had the peerless pleasure of inviting him into my own little organization. He's ready to liberate his kind those extremists, but first, let's have him deal with the scum that stands before you in the form of Lang Shu." Cythraul said, motioning to the Lurker of Luoyang. "Please welcome, SILVIAN ELBAR SPIDARIA ESQUIRE!!!"

"..." Shu stood still and silent, until he found the words that could sum his shock, but only one came out. "WHAT???"