
Repentance

Dear Varila,

I hope this letter finds you well. Forgive me for writing to you on such short notice, but I've recently come to understand that you are to be the final opponent of someone who used to be very close to me. You may not know who I am, but I've come to learn much about you during my time in the Crossroads... and if there is one thing that I've learned from watching you fight, it is that your final match will put us all in very grave danger.

It may even jeopardize all of existence.

I will not mince words. The one you are about to face in the coming battle threatens the safety of not only my world, but all worlds. They have fallen victim to the influence of a cruel and twisted god, and it is for this reason that I implore you to meet me at the Fox Den as soon as you receive this letter. The fate of many worlds may depend on it.

~~Yours in faith~~ Sincerely,

A

With a low, contemplative hum, Vari squinted her eyes at the last sentence she read before begrudgingly folding the letter up and placing it into her back pocket.

Great, she thought with a sigh. Another fucking god.

How many did that make now – three? Four, perhaps, if she counted the orange dragon; though despite the power he concealed, she still couldn't be too sure what exactly he was. Regardless of how many divine presences were at play, however, Vari was starting to feel rather out of place in this tournament. Not only was her final opponent supposedly going to be incredibly dangerous, but the danger of facing them in battle was apparently so great that it risked the destruction of innumerable worlds... or at least, so this letter suggested.

How was that fair?

Vari continued to ponder on this particular point for a while as she idly wandered her way through the Crossroads, her lavender eyes sternly fixated on the narrow path she walked as she made her way even deeper into the bustling streets of the Business District. Though the words written in 'A's letter seemed genuine, Vari still had a hard time believing them. How could one person, influenced with divinity or not, threaten 'all of existence'? To her, it laid firmly within the realm of impossibility; though then again, she'd performed the impossible before.

Or rather, her fox companion had. It felt a little tight around her head now, but the ADT was indeed fully operational again – just as Korinth had said it would be. She once again recalled the story he had given to her during her time in recovery, a story which had involved quite a bit of bargaining with Tenki as well as the input of many scientists, mages, and engineers. 'Input', however, was perhaps a bit too strong of a word, as many of the so-called 'geniuses' that Korinth approached had apparently deemed the device impossible to repair.

All of them except one.

A part of her couldn't help but wonder the sort of promises he must have made with that person in order to get the ADT repaired. She thought back to the shop Korinth had mentioned visiting in order to have it refurbished. What had that place been called again? The 'Iron Claw'...?

The Leporian shook her head with a hushed scoff. She would have to ask him about it again later in order to make sense of it all, but right now, there were other things for her to worry about. The identity of the person who had written her this ridiculous letter was first among them, and she only wondered what they might have had to say to her once she arrived.

She only hoped that this wouldn't prove to be a gigantic waste of her time.

From where she now walked, Vari could see the entrance of the Fox Den coming fully into view. Thankfully, there were not any drunkards lingering outside the entrance this time around. As she began to make her way closer, however, Vari couldn't help but notice that despite the busy streets, there didn't appear to be *anyone* going in or out of the Fox Den today. An unusual occurrence... though it did not discourage her from approaching the little noren at the front entrance and lifting it just above her rabbit ears so that she could step inside.

Upon entering the building, however, Vari instantly froze in place.

Three sets of eyes suddenly set their sights on Vari the moment she walked through the front entrance. From where Vari now stood, she could see that the Fox Den had been completely emptied out – save for the three people who had all congregated at the front of the bar. The Leporian only recognized the first face who had turned to greet her, the coy but familiar smirk on her lips causing Vari to squint her eyes with hints of mistrust. Much to her surprise, it was Chiifu who had spotted her first – her gold-brown eyes once again inviting Vari to approach so that she could indulge herself in the odd bit of mischief. Vari only wished that she could decline.

The tired but stoic face of a demon had also turned to face her, and a very tall one at that. She looked surprisingly put-together for a fiend, the points of her ears and horns blending unusually well with the sharpness of her posh attire. There was an acute inquisitiveness to her ruby eyes that gave Vari pause as they glared at each other from across the bar, and if appearances were to be believed, Vari could have easily seen her being the one to run this bar in its entirety. At the very least, she had likely put a great deal of care into its maintenance. Either way, the Leporian knew for a fact that her talents couldn't have stopped at being a bartender.

Lastly, there was... a woman. Just a woman, Vari thought curiously, her skin dark and her hair cropped close to her head. There didn't seem to be anything particularly special about her, though appearances alone told Vari that this woman concealed an all-too-familiar hint of fatigue behind her eyes. Vari also couldn't help but notice the distinct sense of... pain? No – discomfort, she felt whenever she looked at Vari. Aside from the rugged clothes on her back, the woman carried nothing else of note on her that would have suggested who she was.

Could she have been the one to write her that note?

"Varila!" Chiifu exclaimed, the woman clearly more than happy to speak first. "My, it's so good to see you again! I appreciate you coming back to see me, though I'm afraid you're a tad late. Octavia already stopped by to tell me who won your last round~."

"I never agreed to come back." Vari stated coldly. A playful giggle of amusement could then be heard as Vari closed the distance between herself and the small group who had posted themselves at the bar. Despite Vari's unwillingness to play along with her teasing, it seemed Chiifu was having fun with her regardless.

"Ahh, but you came back anyway! And that's all that matters~." Chiifu smirked. It was as Vari went to seat herself at the bar, however, that Chiifu's eyes suddenly widened. A hint of realization could now be seen in her features.

"My my, Varila, and you got your toy back too!" Chiifu added with delight, her eyes now fixated solely on the visor which rested directly within the periphery of Vari's vision. "Wherever did you get that~?"

"Just stop talking..." Vari dismissively groaned under her breath, though much to her annoyance, Chiifu only seemed to find even more amusement in her response as a mirthful giggle escaped her lips. She appeared to find entertainment in Vari's words no matter how brazen they were, but the demon who stood behind her at the bar was not nearly as amused. With her red fingers now gripping tightly onto the edge of a polished shot glass, the demon abruptly *clacked* it down onto the counter before turning to greet their newest visitor with a deadly scowl.

"You will treat Lady Chiifu with the utmost respect while you're here, missy." Saki commanded, her hand gradually tightening against the glass which rested in her grip. "That shit may fly in the arena, but it won't in here. Not in my bar."

"Oh goodness, Saki, relax!" Chiifu chuckled, the Crossguard granting a playful wave of her hand towards the demon as Vari shot a foul-tempered glare in her direction. "She's nothing you need to worry about, bestie. In fact, I think you two would get along quite well if you simply gave her the chance!"

"Whatever." Vari muttered, the Leporian already disinterested in the conversation as Saki begrudgingly held her tongue. It was just as Vari's gaze shifted back over to her side, however, that she again met the tired gaze of the woman who so far, had not uttered a single word to any of them. Vari paused as she met her gaze for a moment, the dark-skinned woman simply opting to examine Vari in analytical silence until slowly, the Leporian reached a cautious hand back onto the corners of her pocket and pulled out the folded note. She then tapped a finger against the parchment, presenting it to her with a raised brow.

"This yours?" Vari asked. The question elicited a soft gasp from the woman as immediately, she seemed to recognize the letter. A brief pause had now fallen in the conversation between Saki and Chiifu as they then turned around to face the two of them. Then, as if caught red-handed, the woman looked down at her feet for a moment while she silently searched for the right words. For a brief instant, Vari wondered if she was even going to respond at all.

Until, finally...

"Yes." She answered timidly. "It is mine. I'm sorry to reach out to you so informally, Varila, but there are things we must discuss before you move forward into your next round. Had I the means to do so, I perhaps would have chosen to meet you at the hospital instead... but delivering my message to you through Korinth was my only option at the time."

At this, Vari squinted her eyes with vague displeasure. She recalled quite well the uncertainty with which Korinth had handed her the letter in her hospital bed. Truth be told, a part of her had simply wanted to throw it away at first. If Korinth hadn't suggested that she at least hear this person out, she might not have risked coming to the Fox Den at all...

"My name... is Angela." She said. "I called you here in the hopes of avoiding disaster. I... I believe I have some things to explain to you before you fight."

"Then talk." Vari said. She then leaned back in her seat on the bar stool, the Leporian casually crossing her legs as she placed the note down onto the bar for Saki and Chiifu to see. With a devilish curiosity in her eyes, Chiifu sneakily opted to read the letter herself while Vari and Angela conversed...

"Right... okay." Angela sighed. The woman then took a deep breath, again trying to find the right words. She looked as if she didn't know where to begin.

It was after another brief pause, however, that she eventually decided she needed to start somewhere. She nervously cleared her throat.

"Well, I'll start off by saying that I did not lie about the fate of many worlds hinging on this battle." Angela began, her hands now solemnly being intertwined with one another as she spoke. "I know at first glance that may sound dramatic, but believe me when I say that your opponent is... well, they're determined. Both to survive, and to get their wish. It is why they've committed a great number of misdeeds to get where they are in this tournament, and why they'll commit many more should they be allowed to obtain their wish."

"And who is my opponent, exactly?" Vari suddenly asked, the Leporian placing both of her elbows on the bar behind her as Saki, too, began to read Angela's letter. "The fight's in a couple of days, and I haven't heard a word about them."

"Their name is Ravi..." Angela sighed, the woman stifling a light shiver as if it pained her to say the name. "And, well... they used to be a friend of mine. We travelled together for many years, and while we did at one point become close, our bond was formed more out of necessity than anything else..."

A brief pause fell between them as Angela's gaze began to linger at her feet. Though Vari still wasn't certain regarding this woman's intention, Vari still couldn't help but feel that her words were coming from a genuine place. A painful one, too, if the look in her eyes was any indication. Whether this fight meant the end of existence or was perhaps just a bump in the road, Vari leaned forward in her seat a little bit as she curiously brought her hands together in her lap. She would hear more of what Angela had to say.

“So what happened?” Vari asked simply.

“I...” Angela started. Her words faltered for a moment before finally finding their footing again. “To put it simply, our world was ravaged by plague. It was a plague of divine origin – one which very well could have laid waste to our realm had my brother and I not taken action when we did. We needed Ravi’s alchemical skill to combat it, you see, and with so many people falling sick, their ability to concoct potions and medicines would have proven itself invaluable to our journey. The plague goddess, Irra, had also just come into power at the time, and was building up her influence at a rather astonishing rate. So, Ravi joined us, agreeing to fight the plague goddess however they could. We all worked to ensure that we could prevent her from gaining a foothold within the continent, and for a while, it even seemed as if we would manage. Until...”

Another heavy pause. Vari, Chiifu, and Saki all could now see the visible shame which had taken root in Angela’s expression as her shoulders began to sag.

“We reached our limits.” She said vaguely. “And a ritual was performed.”

“A ritual...?” Vari asked, the woman raising her brow. It was upon being asked this particular question, however, that Angela simply shook her head – almost as if it were too difficult to answer. Fortunately for her, it was Saki who spoke instead after Angela’s story trailed off into silence, opting to give Angela a quick reprieve from the conversation.

“The point she’s trying to get at...” Saki began. “Is that Irra was sealed away with this ritual. However, they needed a living host to go through with it, and Ravi, apparently, was given the honor. Despite being sealed away, though, Ravi still carries Irra’s plague – a fact they neglected to tell everyone when they first stepped foot into the Crossroads. There’s no cure for this thing, and it’s already managed to infect some of the other contestants... Kiri and Azta being two of them.”

Upon hearing this, Vari’s ear couldn’t help but twitch out of a mix of both shock and incredulity. Now sitting herself a little more upright on the top of her bar stool, Vari furrowed her brow before fully turning her head towards Saki with a hint of bewilderment in her expression. Had she just heard her correctly?

“*Kiri and Azta...*?” Vari asked, her tone indicating disbelief. “You’re kidding. Why the Hells didn’t they just go home after our round was over?”

It was upon hearing this question, however, that Saki furrowed her brow. “Go home?” she asked. “Why would they go home after winning one round? If anything, I’m surprised *you* didn’t go home seeing as how you were the one who lost.”

At this, Vari was visibly taken aback – and though she hadn't seen her do it, Chiifu had now lowered the letter from her face to reveal yet another mote of mischief that had crept into her expression. The knowing look in her eye also suggested she'd had something to say, though Angela could only sigh as the conversation began to veer from its course.

"You have to be fucking with me. *I beat them.*" Vari insisted, a hint of outrage in her tone. She wasn't sure if this was a joke, but she was actually a bit insulted at the idea that she could have lost her first match after all the hell it had put her through.

"You sure you haven't had a bit too much to drink?" Saki asked. "I can show you the tapes if you need a reminder."

"I think it's you who needs the reminder." Vari squinted.

"Actually!" Chiifu interjected with a raise of her index finger. "That won't be necessary. I'll go ahead and be the one to tell you that you're *both* right."

At this, everyone else in the room – including Angela – turned to face Chiifu with confusion on their faces. Although Vari and Saki still appeared rather miffed with one another, it was their curiosity that was now winning out against any lingering amount of animosity.

"What do you mean?" Angela asked, the woman nervously crossing her arms. "Is Varila not the one I should be speaking to...?"

"Nope! She's your girl." Chiifu said cheerily. "Though I believe what you're all experiencing is a result of the Madame tinkering with reality again."

At this, Vari tilted her head with incredulous confusion.

"'Tinkering' with reality...?" Vari repeated.

"Yup! She – hrm, how should I say this? She likes to 'remix' timelines every now and then in order to keep things entertaining." Chiifu smirked. She then reached over to playfully slide the shot glass beside her into her fingers, with even Saki appearing baffled at the chief's explanation. "Sometimes, timelines fall off by the wayside... and sometimes, they end up being repurposed to create new ones. Think of it like mixing a cocktail; the ingredients by

themselves can be pretty underwhelming, but it's only when you decide to shake things up a bit that they become much more interesting~."

"I don't understand." Vari said. "Are you saying I'm in a different Crossroads?"

"I'm saying you're in a *better* one." Chiifu hummed, her fingers idly circling the rim of the shot glass beneath her.

Vari, however, merely hardened her gaze at the Chief's peculiar response. She couldn't say she particularly cared for the thought of being 'cocktailed' into another reality without her knowledge, nor could she say that the logistics of doing so really made any sense to her to begin with. After all, if Saki remembered Vari's first round differently, then who's to say there weren't others who remembered it that way, too? Would anyone still remember her when she went back into the arena? Was she even still eligible for her wish? All these questions and more began to rush into the forefront of her mind, all the way up until Chiifu slyly turned her attention back towards Vari and gave her a coy, but knowing smile.

"Relax, Varila." Chiifu teased. "I wouldn't worry your pretty little head about any of it. Besides, I believe Angela would agree that we're getting a bit off-track here..."

"Extremely." Angela sighed impatiently. "The more time we waste arguing, the less time we have to come up with a real solution to our problem."

"Our problem?" Vari asked with a fold of her arms. "Since when is any of this 'our' problem?"

"It will be your problem if you get infected." Angela answered. "Or worse, if Irra manages to break free from her host after your match. Believe me, Varila, Ravi is dangerous enough on their own... but if Irra manages to get her hands on a wish from the God Eater, or Esae forbid, that device you wear on your head, then there would be nothing left to prevent her from getting what she wants."

"And what does she want, exactly?" Vari asked. She thought it strange a goddess would ever want, much less need the power of the ADT...

"Freedom." Angela told her. "Influence. Chiifu has told me what that device of yours is capable of, and in the hands of an evil such as Irra's, such technology could pave the destruction to any number of realities should Ravi find a way to obtain it. She would be free to roam the multiverse unabated, and build an empire out of rot and decay."

"So what would you have me do about it? I don't exactly plan on losing my match, you know." Vari scoffed. So far, this had sounded like nothing more than a long-winded request for Vari to win her match – something she'd

already planned on doing from the beginning. She wasn't even going to entertain the thought of letting someone take the ADT from her, either.

"I..." Angela began, only to falter as her solemn gaze suddenly shifted off to the side. A pause then entered the conversation as Angela prepared herself for what she'd say next, and judging by the conflict that was now present within her expression, Vari figured that they had finally reached the point behind Angela's little letter.

"I would have you kill them." Angela finally told her, the words exhaled from her lips like a sudden confession. "Kill Ravi, before they can smother what's left of my world with Irra's rotten influence."

At this particular suggestion, Vari's eyes began to widen. She then leaned forward on her barstool, her hand slowly gripping the countertop behind her in a subtle bid to process the thoughts that were now swirling within her mind. Saki, too, seemed taken aback by this, though curiously enough, Chiifu had remained content to smile to herself once Angela made the suggestion for bloodshed. Though Angela had seemed rather unassuming on the outside, the sheer finality of her request had surprised Vari. She actually wanted Vari to kill her opponent, something that so far, Vari had managed to avoid for the entirety of this tournament.

Admittedly, the notion of taking a life had already crossed Vari's mind once before – namely in the throes of her previous round – though Andrea hadn't exactly left her much choice when she expressed her intent to kill Vari right from the get-go. It was only through a miraculous turn of events that either of them had exited that arena alive, though had she been pushed any farther at the start, Vari might have opted to kill or be killed.

Still, despite her willingness to defend herself, a request like Angela's had felt different. It felt premeditated; though much to her surprise, it was a request that Vari genuinely felt herself considering as her mind suddenly flashed back to the vision she'd had in the arena.

"That's... not happening." Vari forced out, though even she could hear the hesitation in her own voice.

"But *think of the danger*." Angela pressed. "With you in the arena, Ravi doesn't even *need* to win the match for Irra to obtain her wish. Slipping that device off your head could be more than enough for Irra to throw the tournament altogether. She could just leave – go wherever she wants with that sort of power – which is why it's better that you kill her host before she has the chance."

"Didn't you say that Irra is a goddess?" Vari asked in reluctance. "Can Ravi even be killed...?"

"The ritual sealed Irra inside of them, but it did not make Ravi immortal." Angela insisted. "Ravi is much stronger now, that much is certain, and they're capable of many things now that they've aligned with Irra's will... but I've seen what happens to those who decide to spread her 'gift' of their own volition. I've never known any of them to

be invincible, and I don't imagine Ravi is an exception. Believe me, Varila, it is better to just kill them and be done with it."

At this, Vari felt visibly conflicted – a burgeoning frustration growing inside of her the more she heard Angela speak. Perhaps the worst part about listening to her plea was that above all else, her reasoning was sound. She'd never once considered the possibility of her opponents deciding to steal the ADT from her, but this one had real reason to do so. It wasn't exactly a device that was exclusive to Vari, after all, and with a goddess who appeared intent on spreading her plague as far as physically possible, there was indeed a real danger of her match going awry.

If it did, it wouldn't just be Vari who suffered...

"No." Vari insisted, this time forcing a little more conviction into her answer. Despite whatever Angela had to say about it, she was still resolved not to take anybody's life in this tournament. She already had enough trouble falling asleep at night...

"Please, Varila..." Angela pleaded, now stepping forward a bit. "It is better for everyone that we do this."

"No, it's better for *you* that *I* do this." Vari snapped. "I know this may come as a surprise to you, Angela, but I'm not some hired merc that you can pressure into cleaning up your messes for you. Find someone else to be your killer."

"You don't seem to understand the situation you're in." Angela answered, a subtle frustration now coloring her voice. "We no longer have a choice in the matter. Either you take Ravi's life, or they live and spread Irra's rot."

"Not my problem." Vari said with a shake of her head.

"*It is now.*" Angela answered pointedly.

"What if you took their tag instead?" Chiifu smirked, the kitsune playfully leaning her cheek against her palm. "That's still a perfectly viable way of winning the match~."

"But it leaves Ravi *alive*. Something I cannot afford to do..." Angela told her. A brief look of disgust then entered Angela's expression, though whether that disgust was directed at Chiifu, Vari, or herself, the Leporian couldn't quite tell.

Either way, it left more than enough room for doubt.

“Well then I guess you’re shit out of luck.” Vari remarked, again leaning back against the bar. “Because I’m not a killer.”

Not anymore, at least...

“What if we take a different approach, then?” Angela offered. “You take their tag, and then use your wish to erase Irra completely. Since it seems you value Ravi’s life so much, I’m certain this won’t present an issue for you.”

Again, Chiifu smirked, but Vari’s expression visibly darkened – this time, with a hint of malice in her expression. She’d never exactly bothered to put on a pleasant exterior for those around her, but it was upon hearing this particular suggestion that Vari desperately suppressed the urge to leap up from her seat and do something that both of them would regret.

“I am *not* giving up my wish, Angela.” Vari growled, her voice trembling as she spoke.

“Then pick the sensible option!” Angela pressed. “Take Ravi’s life, and erase Irra’s existence. You can still have your wish if you do this.”

“She’s not wrong, you know~.” Chiifu offered, now leaning her cheek against her palm with a smile. “Plus, it’s way more entertaining that way.”

“This isn’t up for *debate*.” Vari scowled, again gritting her teeth. She couldn’t believe Chiifu was pressing her on this, but then again, Vari had rarely seen Chiifu take anything seriously – something that had irritated Vari every time she spoke to her. She figured this time wouldn’t be an exception.

“I don’t know. Maybe Angela has a point, here...” Saki said, the oni leaning down onto her countertop with a sigh. “I mean, this plague has already spread to one of our Crossguards. If *we’re* having trouble containing this thing, then I can only imagine the trouble that other worlds might-“

“Wait.” Chiifu interrupted, her expression briefly souring for a moment as she turned her attention to Saki. “The plague has infected one amongst our ranks? Who?”

Much to Vari's surprise, it seemed that there actually *was* something that Chiifu took seriously. She turned to face Saki with a pause.

"...Crossguard Alina." Saki answered, a hint of guilt making its way into her voice. "It, erm... it's my fault, Chi. I was having her treat Scythe with one of Ravi's recipes, but then Alina broke her suit and I--"

"Did not have permission to use my Crossguards in such a manner." Chiifu snapped. "Nor the authority to assume command over them without the God Eater's knowledge."

Upon hearing this, Vari did her best to conceal her mild surprise. Not only did she recognize the name of the Crossguard who had apparently gotten herself infected, but up until this point, Vari had thought for certain that there was next to nothing that could wipe that smirk off of Chiifu's face.

"But I had to do something!" Saki told her. "This plague isn't a joke; it's nearly *killed* Scythe. I needed help containing this!"

"No, you didn't." Chiifu told her. "The God Eater made quite sure of that whenever she created a pocket dimension *specifically tailored* for containing such an outbreak. Now you're telling me you've added to the infected by tossing in one of our own?"

"Scythe needed treatment!" Saki told her. "I couldn't just let this thing eat away at them!"

"Urgh, yes, but..." Chiifu started, only to sigh in exasperation. "We'll talk about this later. That was really careless of you, *bestie*, and I can't do anything now that she's in quarantine... but I'll at least bring word of this to the Madame so that she can take care of it."

At this, it was a quiet sigh of relief that left Saki's lips. "Thank you..." She said simply. For a moment, Vari briefly wondered if 'taking care of it' meant outright curing them...

"This does bring up a good point." Angela said, her curiosity mirroring Vari's. "You both act as if the God Eater will be able to cure the crossguard of her ailments, but what of the other contestants? Will they be taken care of as well?"

"Saki will continue to watch over them." Chiifu answered, the woman making a pointed glance over to Saki as she spoke. "I'm afraid they won't receive the same treatment as our dear Alina will, but at the very least, Saki will make sure that the disease doesn't progress any further."

"Forgive me, but... is the God Eater not divine herself?" Angela pressed. "Could she not simply cure them of Irra's influence, especially now that they're done with the tournament?"

"The Madame is a wish-granter, not a healer." Chiifu shrugged. "She cannot personally attend to the health of every single individual who walks into the Crossroads with a flu."

"You mean she *will* not," Angela glared. "and this isn't a mere flu. To leave the infected to their own devices is nothing short of cruel!"

"You may not realize this, dear, but the Madame is a trend-setter." Chiifu explained. "Everything she does is under constant scrutiny by those around her. If word got out that she was suddenly in the business of mending wounds and curing plagues, she'd start being pressured into opening a hospital instead of a Colosseum. And trust me when I say that the Madame *hates* being told what to do."

"Unbelievable." Angela scowled. "Irra builds her influence right underneath the God Eater's nose, and yet she refuses to treat this situation with the gravity it deserves."

It was when Angela turned her attention back to Vari that a sudden pleading glimmer made its way into her dark, tired eyes. This, Vari could tell, would be her final plea.

"Please tell me that *you* will at least consider my position." Angela told her. "You conceal it, but it is plain to me that there is good in you. I can see it in your eyes – you know what must be done, Varila."

"I'm not killing Ravi." Varila repeated, her lavender eyes now refusing to make contact with Angela's as she hesitantly looked off to the side. "And I'm not ceding my wish, either. Not when I've come this far."

"I ask you- no, beg you to reconsider!" Angela pleaded, her voice beginning to rise. "If Ravi manages to beat you in battle, then your defeat could lead to the infection of countless worlds! Millions – *billions* of people could face the consequences of your defeat – and everyone who sacrificed their lives, their *sanity* to ensure that Irra was sealed away would have done so for nothing! Please, Varila! You must find a way to stop this plague from spreading before more people die!"

"Damnit, I said no!" Vari scowled, the woman desperately wishing for Angela to stop talking. "I'm not here to do your dirty work, I'm not here to save your world, and I'll be damned if I give up my one and only chance at finding what I'm looking for."

"This isn't a game, Varila!" Angela exclaimed.

"No, it isn't!" Vari shot back, her voice now trembling with frustration. "You think it's easy for me to just do something like this?!"

"I never said it was!" Angela retorted. "But Ravi has left us with no choice!"

"Then why don't you do it if it's so damn important?!" Vari asked incredulously. "They were *your* friend! Or are you too much of a coward that you can't do it yourself?!"

"I-!" Angela began, only for her words to sputter out completely as she then cut herself short.

Much to Vari's surprise, it seems her words had actually bore an effect on her.

Chiifu merely twirled her finger against the rim of her wine glass for a while as she side-eyed Vari with a subtle smirk on her lips, all while Saki regarded her with a quiet and contemptable scowl from behind. Many times, Angela attempted to say something – to open her mouth with some counterargument or another plea to Vari's stubborn nature. It was after another few moments of complete and utter silence within the Fox Den, however, that Vari eventually saw Angela deflate. Defeat had now made itself apparent in the way she looked down at the floor, and although Vari continued to assure herself that she bore no obligation to this woman or the people of her world, a small part of her couldn't help but wonder if letting her opponent live could truly prove so catastrophic.

However, Vari was resolved. She was not going to give up the last shred of sanity she had left, and she certainly wasn't going to give Mira up for the sake of someone else. Hells, there was no guarantee that Angela was even telling the truth about any of this to begin with, or that Ravi was as much of a threat as she was making them out to be. If they were, Vari was certain that Angela would find somebody else to take pity on her anyway.

"And you are certain the God Eater will not at least consider my request?" Angela asked, the woman solemnly turning her attention to Chiifu as Vari continued to look away. "There is no way she will destroy Irra herself?"

Chiifu, however, merely gave another shrug in response. "Like I said, the Madame grants wishes." She answered. "Not requests. As long as there's a big enough pool to pull new contestants from, it doesn't matter to her if a few worlds fall off by the wayside. Besides, she has a realm of her own to attend to; she can't be expected to address every single plea from the outside."

"Then I really hope you win." Angela muttered, granting Vari one final look of defeat before solemnly closing her eyes. "For all of our sakes."

The Leporian, however, remained silent as she allowed her gaze to drift back up onto Angela's mournful expression for a moment. She hadn't allowed herself to feel pressured by Angela's request so far... and one more pitiful look wasn't going to change that.

That's what Vari kept telling herself as Angela quietly made her way over towards the front entrance to leave.

"If you..." Angela began. The woman paused at the front entrance for a moment, lingering next to the noren as her eyes briefly made their way back towards Vari's gaze. She appeared lost in thought as she stood there, and though her words hadn't been intended for Saki or Chiifu, they too were now waiting for what she had to say.

"If there is anybody you love waiting for you back home..." Angela said. "If there is anyone or anything you care about – anyone who loves you – just know that I pray for them. I pray that they will never have to experience the terrors that Irra is capable of."

It was with a lingering lavender stare that Vari finally watched Angela leave.

Relish the Rot

Blood.

Flesh.

Rot.

Caught in an everlasting struggle between slumber and wakefulness, all that seemed to surround Ravi now were the signs of their goddess's festering influence – an influence they had practically bathed themselves in after finally accepting the gift of her warmth. From an outside perspective, they were merely sleeping in the darkness, trapped indefinitely until the God Eater decided to free them from her pocket dimension; but behind Ravi's slumbering eyes, the pulsating décor of Vivisection Hall appearing as grandiose as ever as Ravi sat atop the flesh of putrid, wheezing lungs. Their lips remained curled into a serene display of silence as their ears focused on the sound of a singular beating heart all around them, and though their eyes continued to weep in bloody joy from the gift they'd received from the goddess of rot, it was in *her* hall that thankfully, they could still witness her. Indeed, she remained as beautiful as ever as she sat idly between two winding spires of bone, the beating heart which served as her throne pulsing at a lively, but steady pace. It was almost as if the hall itself were responding to her radiance, the heart underneath her becoming flustered as it beheld her in all her majesty. A membrane of mucus draped itself over the bloody contours of her visage, almost like the veil of a bride as she merely sat atop her throne made of muscle. To them, her figure appeared more akin to that of an amalgam of sanguineous viscera than an actual woman. In Ravi's eyes, however, her beauty was made all the better for it.

They only wished that the bright blue sky still lingered above her so that they could better gaze upon her larger stature; though ever since their imprisonment, everything outside of Vivisection Hall had turned pitch-black. Red mist continued to trickle into the crease of the wound which acted as the sky-light above them, but whether the sky's disappearance was by design or an odd side effect of the God Eater's pocket dimension, Ravi couldn't say. Even so, they felt strangely content not to see that sea of blue hovering above them anymore – taunting them with the promise of false freedom. It had been days since the 'Madame' had thrown them into what may as well have been a pitch-black void, cursed to wait for what felt like a small eternity. The only saving grace they had been given during this wait, it seemed, was the presence of Irra and only Irra. Though they might have once saw reason to thrash, curse, and complain at the goddess's presence, they now merely regretted that they hadn't had the sense to accept her sooner.

It really had all been such a pointless effort, hadn't it?

"Are you ready to continue?" the Weeping One asked, her soft voice quietly stirring the halfling from their rest. With bloody, weeping eyes, Ravi suddenly turned their attention up towards the plague goddess Irra – their fingers tightly gripping against the crimson spear they held before gradually using it to lift themselves onto their feet.

"I am." they said plainly. It was upon hearing this, then, that the goddess in front of them willed several blood clones into existence with a single wave of her hand. Each one carried with it a different face – faces Ravi knew that at one point, might have been used to persuade them into believing that their struggle was futile. Now, they would simply serve to impart strength onto Ravi as the halfling suddenly leapt into a flurry of precise, efficient attacks.

SQUELCH. The tip of Ravi's spear landed sorely between Nalagrom's eyes.

SLICE. The spear's blade severed Scythe's head right from her neck.

SWISH, THUNK. Kiri and Azta dissolved lifelessly into puddles of crimson goo.

RIP, WHOOSH, CRACK. The faces of Angela and Aster both fell in tandem with one another as they lunged with intent to kill. These clones in particular gave Ravi great pleasure as they fell with silent screams of agony.

Again and again and again, Irra's clones rose from the flesh of Vivisection Hall – only to brandish various expressions of anguish once they were cut down into piles of viscous goo at Ravi's feet. The halfling's technique had grown greatly since their round against Kiriata and Aztachronopilas, the goddess noticed, their innate skill with a spear quickly developing to the point where even she appeared impressed as she sat silently atop her still-beating throne. Slash after bloody slash echoed out into the walls of Ravi's mind-space as Irra's clones continued to lunge forward, and it was only when the tip of Ravi's spear finally collided with the pads of real fingers that Ravi and Irra both were given pause.

With a coy giggle, the God Eater flashed Ravi a toothy grin as waves of Irra's blood clones suddenly collapsed all around her – the impact against her fingers causing the bells at her feet to chime and shake.

Strangely, impossibly, the God Eater was here.

"You." Irra drawled, her-once satisfied expression now melting into that of rampant displeasure.

"Me!" the God Eater smirked. "So sorry to interrupt your little sparring session, Ravi, but I come to you with a message... one that I figured you might like to hear, given how long you've been cooped up~."

"And what message would that be?" Ravi asked, the halfling fiercely maintaining the grip on their spear as they held it steady against her fingers. "I hope this *intrusion* means it's important."

"Oh, it is!" the God Eater beamed. "I wouldn't have stepped foot into your little headspace if it wasn't. Though I have to admit, your mind is a lot... *different* than I thought it'd be. Even the most violent of contestants don't have thoughts that look *this* extreme."

"What you see as extreme, I view as inevitable." Irra hummed with feigned disinterest. "Impart your message to us, God Eater; there is much preparation to be done."

"Very well~." the God Eater hummed. It was only then that Ravi finally lowered their weapon, the halfling deftly twirling it in their fingers for a moment before firmly planting it at their feet. This better be good, they thought impatiently – they weren't in the mood for games.

"I'm pleased to inform you that your third and final opponent has been decided!" the God Eater beamed, her golden eyes meeting Ravi's unflinchingly. "I may have meddled with the timelines a bit to make it happen, but I assure you, she will be a more-than-suitable challenge for you to test your new abilities."

"And who would that be?" Ravi asked. Up until this point, they'd very nearly wondered if anyone would bother to tell them at all.

"Varila Na'tara." The Madame smiled, a knowing squint now in her eyes. "The swordswoman with rabbit ears. You might know her."

At the mention of Varila's name, the halfling was given pause. A brief hint of recognition indeed stirred within them at that name – though it had been a long while since they'd heard it.

"Ahh, the one who has yet eluded me." Irra muttered, almost to herself. She then created a roughly-shaped blood clone of the Leporian with a small wave of her hand, the rabbit woman appearing before Ravi with a quiet, stern expression on her face. "She does not particularly intrigue me, though I find it puzzling that you would ensure that it is *her* who Ravi fights. Why?"

"Why not?" the God Eater shrugged. "I thought a battle such as this one would be far more interesting than the options I was initially presented with. Besides, Varila has always been great for ratings with that flashy little gadget of hers. I simply couldn't resist~."

"Flashy gadget...?" Irra repeated with a tilt of her head. The words sounded positively alien upon escaping her rotted lips, but for the God Eater, the question had elicited a brief hint of mischief in her eyes – almost as if she had counted on Irra asking it.

"Indeed." the God Eater smirked. "It's a neat little device that lets her 'hop' between realities, if you will. With that glove and visor she carries, she can essentially traverse anywhere she likes. It's actually how I found her in the first place! If you ask me, though, I'd say it's her *sword* you'd best watch out for. That bunny really knows how to swing that thing..."

"I see." Irra muttered, clearly disinterested in any martial skill that Varila might have possessed. She looked much more interested in the device that could supposedly take her 'anywhere and everywhere', though for Ravi, such information was superfluous at best. All they wanted anymore was a good fight.

With a scowl on their face, Ravi tightened the grip on their spear as they looked up at the blood clone of Varila – contempt plain in their expression.

"And you're sure she's strong?" they asked, the halfling taking a step forward as they quietly examined Varila's lean figure. She certainly *looked* strong, Ravi thought, and despite Irra's clone not quite being true to life, Ravi could still see that distant look of exhaustion in her eyes they had identified with at the beginning of the tournament. Fighting in general was still quite new to Ravi, but despite Irra's concerns, they ultimately didn't care who they fought as long as they were free to rip the life from their weeping eyes.

And, as if sensing their bloodlust beginning to grow, the God Eater widened her grin.

"For the sake of fairness, I won't give you any more details." the God Eater teased, faint hints of amusement quickly taking hold of her as Ravi struggled to contain their murderous intent. "I *will* say that your round is tomorrow, however, and that you'll be free to gauge her strength yourself when the time comes. Rules apply as usual – take the tag or go for the kill. I don't care which."

The goddess's eyes, however, briefly shimmered with a golden sheen upon looking down at Ravi again. There was a strange intent in her gaze that not even Irra knew how to decipher.

"For what it's worth, though, I wouldn't have given you this fight if it wasn't going to be a good one~."

Though they weren't completely satisfied with this answer, Ravi decided that it would be enough.

In what felt like the blink of an eye, Ravi thrust the point of their weapon straight into Varila's neck – twisting its blade straight into the base of her skull before watching her disintegrate into yet another pile of bloody goo. They simply stared at the bloody puddle as it began to bubble and dissolve at their feet, the once-determined expression written on Varila's face twisting and contorting into one of wretched sorrow before finally, fading away into nothingness.

At this, the halfling maliciously stomped their foot and twisted it into her remains. Hard.

"Fine. But you better not hold out on me, God Eater." Ravi hissed, their gaze still lingering at the spot where Varila had dissolved at their feet. "And your little refs better not fuck me over, either. Because when I get my wish, there will be no one, *anywhere*, that will be safe from me."

They then reared their attention back towards the God Eater, their malignant gaze beaming a message towards the Madame that not many were brave enough to convey.

"*Not even you.*" Ravi growled.

"Hmm." the God Eater smirked, her amusement morphing into a mild shade of annoyance at the vague threat hurled towards her way. "Well, let's hope for both our sakes you don't fly too close to the sun, Raviaki. No matter how high you ascend, one wrong move can send you tumbling all the way back down."

She then turned her back towards the both of them, the plague goddess and her host merely watching from behind as the God Eater produced a portal with an echoing *snap* of her fingers. The sound of bells could be heard announcing her departure as she proceeded to step inside, and before the portal could swallow her completely, the Madame's hand flourished a brief wave of goodbye in a dismissive show of indifference.

"Tata~..." her voice echoed, and once the Madame had disappeared completely, Irra turned her attention back towards her host with a subtle furrow of her brow. She did not look pleased.

"It would not do you well to antagonize her, Ravi." Irra told them. "She is more dangerous than you realize."

Ravi couldn't be too certain, but they had sensed what was perhaps a hint of trepidation making its way into her voice as she spoke. With a foul-tempered glare, Ravi suddenly turned to face her and tilted their head.

"It's unlike you to be *scared*, Irra." Ravi half-observed, half-mocked.

"And it is unlike *you* to be careless." Irra said back. "Though I'm aware it is your natural inclination to do so, we cannot afford to make more enemies. Especially ones such as her."

"Please." Ravi scoffed. "The God Eater's not going to do shit to me. It'd be bad publicity! She has all the power in the world, and the only thing she gives a damn about is *applause*."

"She is in search of amenities." Irra told them. "Not applause. She will find little enjoyment in the insolence of her playthings."

"I am not. A *plaything*." Ravi growled.

"You may as well be." Irra told them plainly. "My power has granted you strength, but do not yet think you can clash against gods and prevail."

'Yet', Ravi heard her say. It was the one word in that sentence that had given them cause to refrain from arguing any further as gradually, another series of blood clones were willed into existence with a single wave of Irra's hand.

"For now, we hone our strength, Raviaki. We bide our time, and *hold our tongues*." Irra instructed. "Only then may we claim what is ours... and slay our enemies."

Slowly, the blood clones around Ravi became recognizable again as they limply trudged towards them – their crimson faces morphing into what looked like a small army of Kiri's, Azta's, Angela's... and Varila's, as they did so. With a fierce look in their eyes, Ravi brandished their weapon.

"Are you ready to continue?" the Weeping One asked. Ravi did not reply.

Instead, they deftly began twirling their spear in their hand...

...and used its blade to pierce Vari's skull.

Confession

Vari awoke with a start.

The Leporian then placed her hand onto her head with a sudden hiss as she gradually rose from her bed in the Kit'Inn, her two long, but very sore legs slowly swinging down onto the floor as she finally stirred from her restless slumber. Vari groaned under her breath for a moment as she gently rubbed the sleep from her eyes, the woman taking a deep breath before turning to examine her sword. The blue, mythrill blade remained propped against a nearby nightstand, just where she'd left it – its hilt also bearing the strap to her visor which dangled freely above the floor. She half-groaned, half-growled upon spotting it, the mere presence of her visor reminding her once again of the run-in she had with Angela the day before. Vari couldn't help but feel that she'd just had the worst night's sleep she'd had in a very long time because of her... which still wasn't saying much, considering that she'd hardly slept since her second round anyway. Even so, her exhausted mind continued to wrestle with the question that Angela had put forth – one that would decide the fate of her final opponent. She could never have mustered the will to say as much to Angela directly, but in truth, any reason she could conceive of to spare Ravi's life had promptly fallen short once she considered the logistics of it all. With her ADT back, it would be so easy for her to end the match with a single, decisive strike. She'd potentially save millions if Angela's story was to be believed, and in killing Ravi, Vari would even be able to keep her wish in the process. Finally, her long and arduous journey would be over after what felt like endless torment, and with one strike, she'd be able to have her wife again.

Something she'd wanted more than anything, ever since she'd seen Mira again.

Another groan, this one mixed with pain. A part of her still wanted to deny what Korinth had revealed to her in the bed of her hospital room – that the vision she'd seen hadn't simply been a result of the fumes and blood loss she'd sustained after her fight on that train. Mira had looked so real to her when she'd seen her standing in the Colosseum – so alive and happy. Her eyes, her smile, her dress... Vari could still picture the way Mira glowed against the sunlight as she strode her way over to her, her arm outstretched and ready for Vari to take it. More than anything else, Vari *had* wanted to take it. She wanted Mira to whisk her away from this tournament, to bring her back to their old life together so that Vari could just leave all of this suffering behind and live out her days in peace.

If only. Instead, she'd only been met with more of the same. Perhaps the only good experience to come from her time in the Crossroads so far had been from the fox who brought her here. She'd done a poor job at showing it, but his company had been a tremendous help in alleviating some of the stress she'd felt in entering this tournament. She only regretted that he couldn't be here to see her off again today, and that he wasn't here to provide her with some much-needed input on what to do about Ravi. Moreover, she'd actually grown rather accustomed to seeing him trailing along behind her with that stoic look on his face.

Vari hummed at the thought of her fox companion. She'd miss him, once this was all over...

It was upon finally donning her armor, visor, and sword again that Vari eventually hurried her way out of the inn. Although the room she'd rented had been a nice change from the Crossroads' hospital beds, Vari still hadn't wanted to linger too long for fear of catching someone's attention and *again* being pulled aside. She gave the inn one final glance behind her as she hastily made her way out into the bustling streets of the Crossroads, though she quietly furrowed her brow upon spotting a window with a rather large hole in it. Someone should really fix that, she thought with a scoff, before sighing and turning her attention back towards the Colosseum which stood as proudly as ever in the distance...

Today was the day.

The walk towards the Colosseum was as arduous as ever, though. Despite her endless mental wrestling, Vari still couldn't help but feel that no matter how much sleep she got, none of it helped. She still felt exhausted from her previous run-ins from Kiri and Andrea, and though she'd had plenty of time to recover, her fights with them had left her incredibly drained. Perhaps the medicine the doctors had given her were taking a toll on her, or perhaps her injuries from the previous fights had taken much more from her than she'd initially realized. Either way, she couldn't help but worry over the possibility that she very well might succumb to exhaustion before ever making it to the God Eater for her wish...

The thought alone elicited a deep wealth of dread within her.

Vari lingered on these thoughts all the way up until the sound of bustling streets began to drown them out – though admittedly, the distant music from the Colosseum was doing most of the work. Of the few things she might have thought to miss about the Crossroads, the noise certainly wasn't one of them. It was a constant barrage of overstimulation; the sounds, the sights, the smells, all of it had done little to convince her of the allure of staying in such a realm for very long – much less living in it. She just wanted to go back home, to drown herself in the scent of book pages rather than fried food. She'd also be content never to see another television in her life if it meant finally being granted the gift of silence.

No, even silence was too loud for her now. Perhaps instead she'd find a nice beachside home for her and Mira to move to once this was all over. Their old home had fallen into disrepair anyway, and the crashing of waves sounded like a nice distraction from her thoughts...

"Varila?"

It was once Vari finally made her way up towards the gate of the Colosseum that she heard her own name being called. With a curious hum, Vari lifted her attention up from the ground beneath her to find Angela there waiting for her – the woman looking just as exhausted as Vari felt. Upon setting her sights on her, however, Vari's expression changed from distant coldness to that of mild annoyance. She bumped her shoulder against Angela's as she simply opted to walk past her, the Leporian silently making her way towards the nearest entrance to the Colosseum's waiting lobby.

"Wait." Angela said, her hand planting itself firmly on Vari's shoulder to hold her in place for a moment. Though Vari quickly brushed her hand away with her shoulder, the move had indeed bought Angela a moment to speak.

But only a moment.

"What." Vari said flatly. She had little interest in whatever desperate plea this woman had to give her.

"Listen, I..." Angela began. "I wanted to apologize for yesterday. I know I didn't have any right to ask what I asked of you, it's just--"

"Just what?" Vari asked, the Leporian turning a lavender eye towards Angela. She really wished this woman would hurry up, already – her rabbit ears could hear the crowd much louder than Angela could.

"It's just... I'm frightened. For all of us." Angela said. "I've never particularly known Ravi to be a fighter, but I do know that whatever the plague goddess has done to them, it's... it's changed them. For the worst."

"For the worst, huh?" Vari half-heartedly echoed. She then turned back to face her with a sigh.

"Yes..." Angela said, her dark eyes solemnly drifting down onto the ground for a moment. "I wasn't lying when I told you that alchemy used to be their specialty, but their previous round has changed them. They're so... dark, and bloodthirsty now. I couldn't believe it was the same Ravi when I watched them fight... nor did I want to."

A brief pause. Then, Vari placed a hand onto her hip. Though she supposed she appreciated the vague warning, she had a hard time believing that Angela had come out all this way just to tell her how different her old friend used to be.

"So is that why you're here?" Vari asked, a touch impatiently. "To tell me how strong Ravi's gotten?"

“...No.” Angela admitted, her answer prompting Vari to squint and fold her arms at her.

“Then tell me.” Vari said. “I only have a couple minutes.”

At this, Angela sighed. She then presented Vari with a small, compact vial from the sleeves of her tunic – the bright blue liquid inside dancing against the glass of the vial for a moment as the woman cautiously handed it for her to take. With a curious squint of her eyes, Vari did so – taking the vial into her hand to examine it. It looked small, and there was only enough liquid inside for one sip; but she supposed it wouldn’t matter as long as the liquid did its job.

“What is this?” Vari asked. “This some kind of medicine?”

“It’s a gift – from Saki.” Angela told her. “It’s a potion taken straight from Ravi’s recipe book, and one designed for fending off diseases and illnesses. She only had enough time to make you one, so I would use it wisely.”

With another contemplative look down towards the vial, Vari simply stared at it for a moment before promptly reaching her hand onto its cork. As soon as she did so, however, Angela quickly raised a hand to stop her.

“It’s better to wait – for if you actually become infected.” Angela said. Begrudgingly, Vari nodded before placing the vial into one of the leather pouches at her side.

“Well... thanks, I guess.” Vari suspiciously muttered. She then turned around to make her way over towards the front gate again, only to stop upon feeling Angela’s hand land squarely onto one of her shoulders. Annoyed, Vari reared her head back towards Angela again with a tired look on her face. This was becoming irritating.

“Sorry. I, um... that’s *not* all I wanted...” Angela told her. Her fingers clutched onto Vari’s shoulder as the hints of a soft tremble then entered her voice, prompting Vari to again shrug her away with an impatient sigh. This woman was lucky that Vari felt more exhausted than temperamental right now.

“What, then?” Vari asked her. This time, Angela didn’t hesitate to speak.

“I have one more favor to ask of you before you step foot into the arena.” Angela said. “One more request that you might find easier to fulfill. I know our previous conversation didn’t exactly end on the best of terms, but I figured with this, I could at least make things right between us.”

The Leporian raised her brow as she waited, the gesture silently urging for Angela to continue.

"I know it's last-minute, but... I suppose I should tell you there's a *reason* why I asked you to kill Ravi in the first place." Angela began, lowering her gaze down to her feet. "The world I come from, it suffered under Irra's influence; she made tragedy become unremarkable – commonplace, even – as she spread her plague across the continent. I'd like to say that the ritual I performed was a natural response to that suffering, and that I'd done it for the greater good... but in truth, the decision I made to seal her away was a desperate one. A cruelty performed in panic. It was something that for the longest time, I blamed myself for enabling in the first place. Sealing Irra inside of Ravi, it... it was an act that went against everything I once stood for. For that, I never thought I'd be able to atone for what I'd done."

Silently, Vari merely squinted at Angela as she spoke. Where was she going with this?

"So imagine my surprise when I discovered that they were here." Angela muttered with a solemn chuckle. "That they had somehow made their way into the Crossroads in yet another desperate bid for their life. Ravi has *always* been stubborn, and they have never once failed to prioritize their own safety over others – but I never once thought that they would be able to make it *here* of all places. Already, I had nearly lost myself from the guilt of what I had done... but it was a different kind of dread altogether to discover that even after everything, *she was still here*. It was why I felt so resolved to finish what I'd started back at the Fox Den. It was also why I pushed you so hard to 'clean up my mess', as you put it; and while I was outraged at the time with the way you had worded it, I eventually came to realize that yes, perhaps you were right. Perhaps I was simply shifting the problem onto someone else, despite being the cause of it all..."

With widened eyes and a sudden surge of anger in her expression, Vari clenched her hands into fists. Was she...?

"So with all of that in mind..." Angela sighed. She then turned her attention back up at Vari, a spark of resolve now flickering in her tired eyes.

"Will you please spare Ravi's life?" Angela finally asked. "I... I'd like to have a talk with them, when all is said and done."

For a moment, Vari simply stared at her, a fierce anger beginning to fester in her wide-eyed expression. She clenched her fingers into her arms, her nails digging so deeply into her bronze skin that it nearly caused it to break – but eventually, despite all of the building fury which coursed throughout her muscles, a quiet sigh then left Vari's lips. It was as she thought.

Angela had changed her mind.

"No." Vari replied, her answer given simply and plainly. At this, Angela's eyes briefly widened in a display of shock – the woman perhaps wondering if Vari had even heard her correctly.

"What?" Angela asked.

"I said, no." Vari repeated, unflinching. "I'm going to kill Ravi and smoke out whatever god you've placed inside them. Whatever you have to say to them, it's far too late."

"Varila, no!" Angela said, a mild desperation now rushing the words out of her mouth. Upon hearing the tremble in Angela's voice, Vari fiercely began to grit her teeth. To change her mind now after putting her through so much anguish...

"Fucking hells, what does it even matter?!" Varila snapped, only barely containing her anger. "You seemed so sure of yourself yesterday!"

"Y-yes, but that was before I-!" Angela stuttered. "Look, I just- Ravi is strong, okay? Their fight with Kiri was ruthless, and for a moment I thought Azta might *kill* them. The disease spreads through fluids, and they're using *blood magic* to form their weapons. If you go for their tag instead of fighting them, you might be able to avoid a tough match as well as an infection! Sparing their life works out better for you in the long run!"

"Or I can just cut them down and be done with it." Varila pointedly replied. "Irra's 'divine plague' won't be much of an issue if I cut it off at its source."

"Damn it, Varila!" Angela exclaimed, the profanity sounding strange on her lips, even to Vari. "I'm only asking this of you because of how hard you fought against me yesterday! Now you suddenly change your mind?!"

"I could ask you the same thing!" Varila shouted back, her anger now boiling over completely. "You wanted me to kill the fucker *so badly*, but now all of a sudden, you want to give them another chance?!"

"If I could be given another chance, then so can they!" Angela snapped. "I just need to talk to them!"

"Even if they want to kill everyone around them?!" Vari yelled.

"Yes!" Angela shouted. "I mean, no! I mean... urgh, why are you adamant on this?!"

"Why?! Because mercy nearly got me killed, that's why!" Vari said, fiercely pointing to the bullet hole in her rabbit ear. "I spared Kiri, and nearly lost my visor. I spared Andrea, and nearly lost my life. Hells, I would've killed her too if I hadn't gotten shot at – something that wouldn't have happened anyway if I'd *had my damn visor with me!*"

"So this is about your visor?!" Angela asked incredulously. "Surely, that can't be what drives you?! What *one thing* could be worth leaving an entire world to fend for itself, should your little plan not go as expected? If you die, your actions could doom *billions!* What wish could possibly drive you to make a risk so *stupid?!?*"

"Stupid?!" Vari spat, the Leporian already tired of repeating the same conversation. "Letting Ravi live so you can turn them into your little confessional is *stupid!* What, did you snatch one of their potions while they weren't looking?!"

"No!"

"Did you use them?! Manipulate them for your own benefit?!"

"G-Goddess, no!" Angela exclaimed, though her hesitation suggested that wasn't a bad guess.

"Then what?!" Vari pressed. "Give me *one good reason* why I should spare Ravi's life!"

"BECAUSE I TRIED TO KILL THEM ALREADY!" Angela shouted, her confession immediately faltering into white-hot tears which began to trickle down her face. At this, Vari looked puzzled; had she heard her correctly?

"I left them in a cave, left them to *die*, all in the name of what I thought was the greater good!" Angela continued. "But what good could come from more suffering?! People are dying because of a decision that *I made* – because I couldn't find the strength to protect who I held dear! TWICE! This never would have happened if I had found another way, if I hadn't listened to Aster-!"

"Then who the hells are you to tell me to spare their life?!" Vari interjected, her words not missing a beat. "Who are you to tell me to sacrifice my wish, all because you took a half-measure?!"

"A half-measure?!" Angela yelled, outraged.

"You should have killed Ravi when you had the chance." Vari spat. "Not left them in a cave to roll over for you. If you thought for *one second* that killing Ravi yourself would erase Irra forever, then you should have done it – not sulk by yourself and walk away from your problem."

"Ravi isn't a problem to be *solved!*" Angela spat tearfully.

"They are now!" Vari said, her voice lowering into a determined growl. "And whether you like it or not, I am *done* being merciful."

From there, the argument quickly died into nothing more than an intense staredown. There was a hot, glaring anger present in Angela's tearful eyes as she met Vari's cold gaze with a stubborn anger of her own. The woman balled up her hands into fists which trembled with a barely-contained fury as she kept them restrained at her side. For a moment, Angela looked as if she were going to explode. She clearly hadn't expected Vari to change her mind, and though the Leporian would never say it outright, neither had Vari. It was a decision she'd made out of anger, and perhaps a little desperation of her own – but it was one that Vari would hold firm to once she entered into the arena.

Her cold gaze suggested as much as she continued to glare daggers into Angela's eyes.

Eventually, Angela exhaled a long, defeated breath before finally turning around and removing her gaze from Vari completely. She then wiped her tears from her face as she did so, her hands continuing to tremble as they brushed across her cheeks. It seemed she couldn't quite stand to look at Vari anymore.

"Very well." Angela told her, all emotion now drained from her voice. "Do what you like, then. I will stall you no longer."

"Good." Vari said stubbornly. "Now go and sit back while I solve all your little problems for you."

"You know," Angela started, the woman threatening to look back at Vari with a subtle turn of her head, but not quite committing. "I have no idea what Kiri thought was worth saving in you. You're just as much of a bitch as you let on."

"Tell Kiri I said to go the fuck home already." Vari said, folding her arms in indifference. "You should go with her, while you're at it."

A long pause met Vari's response. "I hope we live long enough to do so."

Now stubbornly setting her sights on the Crossroads, Angela slowly began making her way back into town – presumably back towards the Fox Den. She didn't say a word as she went, with nothing but the crowd behind her to fill in the silence as she carried herself with slumped shoulders. Curiously, infuriatingly, Vari felt something begin to form at the bottom of her stomach as she watched Angela go – something she had become overly familiar with over the course of several years, yet hadn't expected to feel upon pushing someone like Angela away.

The emotion she'd begun to feel, Vari realized, was guilt for her actions.

She stubbornly pushed that feeling into the bottom of her stomach before clenching her fingers against her arm. No, she thought to herself – she'd meant what she said before. She was done bleeding for the sake of those who couldn't give two shits about her. There were a literal million other people Angela could have petitioned to help her with her issues, and if Angela had put half as much effort into asking some wayward hero type for their help instead of begging Vari, then surely someone in the Crossroads would have taken pity on Angela's plight and done so already.

Vari wasn't that hero.

With a frustrated scowl, Vari stubbornly turned back around and began making her way towards the roaring gates of the Colosseum. If luck permitted it, she'd never have to see Angela again.

A Fate Determined

The Colosseum met Vari with its usual fanfare. Upon stepping foot into the arena, a deafening roar of the crowd could be heard echoing out into the clear blue sky above as the audience excitedly cheered her forward – their waves of screaming voices eliciting just as much dread within Vari as they had the round before. The thundering boom of fireworks also came to visit Vari as the soles of her leather boots hastily scuffed sand out from underneath her feet, and upon turning her attention towards the waves of various onlookers all around her, she was nearly blinded by the sudden flashing of cameras which could be seen flickering across the stadium in droves. Again and again, the rhythmic thumping of a bassline could be heard playing in tandem with her footsteps, each note eventually building into an explosive opener to another one of Miss X's many prolific hits. As expected, the crowd went absolutely wild once it started – her fans cheering and jumping out of their seats in order to better immerse themselves in the popstar's latest show. It seemed each and every component of the Colosseum was operating like clockwork today, and much to Vari's chagrin, the energy only seemed to grow more intense as she made her way directly towards the center of the arena.

Steadily, Vari pressed her palm against the hilt of her sword. If she never saw another crowd again, it'd still be too soon.

A pair of coy blue eyes quickly flashed a greeting to Vari once she stopped at the halfway point. Their shimmering hints of gold were accompanied by the mischievous hints of a smile which laid hidden behind Tenki's fan, the dragon fluttering it with flirtatious glee as the Leporian willed herself to ignore him as much as possible. She instead opted to examine the arena around her while she waited, her eyes scanning for any and all signs of her opponent. Unlike her previous rounds, however, it seemed that this time, her opponent was nowhere to be found – a fact which gave Vari great pause as she then took a moment to check the tunnel she entered from, just in case she had missed them...

"What's wrong, Miss Varila?" Tenki teased. "You seem disoriented. I'd think that visor of yours would help you out tremendously, given how much trouble your fox friend went through to find it~."

There was a slight tinge of envy in Tenki's voice that even through the commotion, Vari recognized immediately. She then squinted her eyes before turning back to face him with a subtle warning – her glare suggesting for him to back off from her visor. He didn't react to this, however, his greed only being concealed upon finally hearing her speak.

"Where's Ravi?" Vari asked. The question immediately caused Tenki's eyes to widen, his envy drowning amidst a wave of sudden anger which reached his smiling lips. With another wave of his fan, Tenki then 'dampened' the

sounds around them – the dragon opting to silence the cheering crowd for a moment while they discussed her missing opponent.

“Ah, yes, *that* little shit.” Tenki smirked, an uncharacteristic hint of fury in his words as he stubbornly shut his fan with a *CLACK*. With a curious raise of her brow, Vari tilted her head to the side for a moment and paused; she hadn’t quite expected such a change in his demeanor...

“I’m afraid little Ravi is currently sealed away in one of the Madame’s pocket dimensions.” Tenki explained with a sigh. “My mother is retrieving them now, though I’m afraid you won’t be able to see them until the round actually starts... though perhaps that’s for the best. Who knows what sort of plague-ridden nonsense they would attempt with tens of thousands in attendance?”

“They’re really that dangerous, huh?” Vari asked, the Leporian doing her best to hide the mix of frustration and nervousness that was now bubbling inside of her. At this, however, Tenki merely scoffed.

“Hardly.” Tenki told her. “Just a child in way over their head. In truth, we’re doing it this way to protect the fans – letting a plague out into the arena before the start of a match would be a PR *nightmare*.”

“So... how’re we doing this, then?” Vari asked, folding her arms. “Can’t exactly do a coin toss without my opponent here.”

“Oh, we won’t *need* a coin toss this time around.” Tenki smirked. “I already have your destination in mind.”

Another furrow of her brow. This time, Vari was visibly taken aback.

“Wait, you’re choosing *for* us?” Vari asked. “Can you even do that?”

“Of course I can!” he smiled. “Those coin flips were more for my enjoyment than anything else, though I’m afraid they’ve run their course with the fans~. One can only perform a trick so many times before it becomes old hat! Besides, I think you’ll appreciate the place I’ve chosen for this particular fight.”

“I’d ‘appreciate’ the freedom to choose one for myself.” Vari snapped. Upon hearing this answer, however, Tenki merely chuckled and shook his head in amusement.

“Oh, Varila... I’ll sorely miss that fiery temper of yours.” He replied. “Believe it or not, though, your opponent has some venom of their own! It’s why despite how tempted I’d be to haggle for that exotic little device of yours, I’ve decided I’m going to give you this little advantage for free~.”

Another tilt of her head. ‘Advantage’...? What was he talking about?

“Let me ask you a question, Miss Varila.” Tenki continued. “Do you know why the Crossroads has been blessed with such perfect weather?”

With a cautious squint of her gaze and a quick glance into the sky, Vari shook her head. She supposed she never thought about it.

“It’s because I can manipulate it to my each and every whim.” Tenki whispered secretively. “If I really wanted to, I could bring about a hurricane, or a tornado, or a thunderstorm – perhaps even all three! Then, I could let them swathe over the Crossroads and leave nothing but devastation in their wake. But I don’t do this, because not only would I end up getting on my mother’s bad side, but because I would also destroy crops, ruin lives, and eventually, discourage the tournament from happening altogether. Nobody wants to attend a tournament with Mother Nature throwing a fit all the time, now do they?”

With a curious hum, Vari simply folded her arms again. Where was he going with this?

“That being said, such manipulation has a price.” Tenki sighed. “The more I use my power, the stronger Nature’s response becomes. Every now and then, there comes along a storm that’s much too big for me to handle – one that leaves me with no other choice but to erase it entirely. Sure, I could use my winds to divert the crisis, but it always comes back to bite me in the end – *and* it ends up taking much more effort than it’s worth. I’m sure you know where I’m going with this...”

“Pretend I don’t.” Vari flatly replied. With a disappointed sigh, Tenki then unfolded his fan before stepping a touch closer to Vari – the dragon leaning in as close to her rabbit ear as possible so he could whisper a very important secret to her.

“I throw them into other dimensions.” Tenki whispered before promptly leaning back and smiling. “I use my crystal orb for much more than deciding arenas, you know. It gets tiring preventing natural disasters and keeping everything put together all the time. So sometimes, I take shortcuts.”

“And this means...?” Vari asked after a brief pause. With another groan of disappointment, Tenki dramatically rolled his eyes; it seemed he was going to have to spell this one out for her.

"It *means* you'll be dancing in the rain, Miss Varila." Tenki said. "Believe me, you'll want to thank me for this later."

Then, before Vari could think to ask any more questions, Tenki suddenly undampened the sound of the Colosseum around them and activated the switch to his microphone. Already, Vari was confused... but she knew better than to press any further on the matter – especially now that Tenki's voice was audible to the entire Colosseum.

"LADIES AND GENTLEMEN!" Tenki announced, his voice now booming across the arena. "Our fighters are ready, and our stage is set! I now turn your attention towards my adorable sister, the Master of Ceremonies – the magnificent and marvelous Miss X!"

A roar of excitement proceeded to wash over the stands of the Colosseum as Tenki then turned the 'spotlight' back towards the idol who still sang from afar. Upon hearing her brother's voice, however, the idol paused in the middle of her performance – her eyes then looking down towards Tenki with a rather stunned look of incredulity. Despite clearly having called on her much too early, the dragon merely proceeded to smirk at the visible frustration which appeared on his sister's face. Perhaps he had interrupted her show on purpose...

"Aww c'mon, Ki! I didn't even get to finish my song!" Miss X whined, the holographic idol meeting her brother's introduction with a sudden nosedive into the center of the arena. Although a number of various backup singers seemed content to continue the show behind her, the popstar herself looked more than a little bothered to have her performance so abruptly cut short. Even so, Miss X's expression seemed to lighten up a bit upon spotting a pair of rabbit ears standing tall next to her brother – the idol apparently forgetting all about her brother's cheeky show of mischief as she careened towards Vari with a newfound sense of eagerness.

"Vari!!!" Miss X exclaimed with a bubbly smile. "Wow, you got your goggles back! Either those doctors *really* know their stuff, or someone did you a solid!"

At this, Vari's eyes merely shifted off to the side. She'd have to remember to thank Korinth again once this was all over...

"Maybe later you can tell me how you got them back!" Miss X offered with a wink. "Whaddya say to another interview? I still have so much I wanna ask you about round two!"

Upon recalling the end of her second round, the stubborn expression on Vari's face almost imperceptively changed – though much to her frustration, she was certain the camera on Miss X's platform had been able to pick it up. She really would have preferred to forget about the end of her second round, as well as the cruel trick her mind had played on her upon its conclusion. The one saving grace she'd received from that experience, she supposed, was the motivation to make that vision a reality...

Regardless, Vari turned her nose up at the idol's offer with an indignant scoff. She just wanted to get to her fight already.

"Awh, you're no fun..." Miss X said, the silence visibly deflating her spirit. She then took a moment to 'clear her throat', however, before forcing a smile back onto her face with practiced ease. Despite Vari's poor sense of showmanship, it seemed the show must go on.

"AlIIIIright, everyone!!! Due to special circumstances, we'll be dropping Ravi straight into the arena after Varila gets herself situated!" Miss X announced. Already, Vari could now see Tenki reaching into the sleeves of his shrug in order to produce his crystal orb. With a coy smile, the dragon then held it out for the entire audience to see – its pearlescent light rapidly expanding from the center of his palm and transforming the arena around them into something unrecognizable...

At least, that's what Vari expected it to do.

Instead, the arena around her saw surprisingly minimal change. As the orb's light permeated its way from the center of the Colosseum and out into the open air, Vari could hear the muffled cries of the audience begin to fade into the backdrop of low and muffled thunder. Hearing the audience's cheers fade away felt appropriate, however, considering what Vari had just watched the Colosseum become. Their echoing cheers felt reminiscent of ghosts watching from the stands as everything around her suddenly became lifeless and empty. The smell of rain instantly made its way into Vari's nostrils as she then watched her surroundings go dark, the tumultuous thunderclouds above casting a grim shadow over the entirety of the arena while the chill of ice-cold raindrops formed goosebumps against her skin. The change was enough to make her bronzed skin go pale; she almost couldn't believe that this was the same place she'd been standing in mere moments beforehand.

Then, with her voice now piercing through the very heavens, Miss X began to speak.

"Pay attention everyone, because the conditions of the match are as follows!" the idol called out. Vari swore she could still hear the words from when Miss X last read them off.

"Matches are decided via knockout or by the acquisition of an opponent's tag! If a combatant manages to hold onto their opponent's tag for 30 seconds, they're declared the winner and proceed onwards into GLORY! ...And a free lunch with the Madame, if you're willing!"

The winds around her were howling now as they suddenly began to pick up the pace. In the distance, Vari's lavender eyes could see hurricanes and tornadoes raging on in an endless maelstrom – their placement far from the Colosseum, but their influence still strongly felt. She couldn't for the life of her figure out how this would help

her like Tenki suggested, but fortunately for her, Vari had visited plenty of worlds which had succumbed to an eternal tempest. She'd never exactly fought in one of those worlds, though she supposed there was a first time for everything...

"As always, any and all gear you've brought along with you is fair game!" Miss X continued, her voice punctuated by a bolt of lightning streaking its way across the clouds. "You will both be granted as much time as you need to complete the match. Just don't keep everyone waiting, alright? The Madame won't be happy if you drag things out too long!"

Then, as if on cue, a dark, pitch-black portal appeared on the opposite side of the arena, the otherworldly noise it made catching Vari extremely off-guard. Her eyes remained fixed on the portal as out stepped a single bloody foot, the soles of the owner's feet twisting and turning as they gradually struck a balance in the slick sand below. Eventually, Vari saw them emerge; they were a short, blood-soaked halfling with a spear – the weapon they carried with them made of crimson and looking taller than they did. They met Vari's gaze with soulless, weeping eyes once they noticed her, with the tears they wept carrying no shred of remorse as they trickled down the halfling's cheeks. Those tears, too, were made of crimson, and though the sight had been nothing close to what Vari expected, the Leporian nonetheless drew her sword out and brandished its blade with a flourish.

With a cold, deadpan expression, Ravi met their opponent with contempt.

"Get ready everyone!!!" Miss X called out. "Aaaaand..."

"I'm coming, Mira." Vari growled.

Then, before Miss X could even finish, Vari *zapped* towards Ravi with a teleport and wildly swung her sword.



Round 3: Varila Na'tara vs. Raviaki Silverspark

Much to her surprise, however, Ravi didn't budge.

Instead, the halfling stood there unflinchingly as the blade of Vari's katana suddenly slashed its way into their carotid artery – the wound exploding into a vicious fountain of blood which soaked the Leporian's blade as she then landed directly on her feet. The force with which Vari swung her sword briefly caused Ravi to lose their balance as they then stumbled into a nearby rain puddle, her strike causing rotting crimson to spill its way into the sandstone below while they continued to bleed freely from their wound. It was after a brief pause that Ravi then fell to the ground with an unforgiving *thud*, and their blood seeped into the puddle beneath them as Vari tightly gripped the hilt of her sword.

As her opponent fell to the ground and their spear clattered against sandstone, Vari simply stood there and watched them bleed. It didn't take long for her look of stubborn determination to morph into that of confusion.

A bolt of lightning flashed overhead as Ravi laid there completely still, bleeding profusely. For a brief moment, Vari wondered what had just happened. 'Was it over?' she wondered. 'Were they already dead?' Her lavender eyes briefly scanned them in silence, the freezing rain continuing to patter down onto her paling skin as the cold gradually wrapped its icy tendrils around her body. She couldn't be too sure what she'd expected from this match, but she definitely hadn't expected it to last a mere three seconds.

What a waste of time...

SCRAPE! It was just as Vari was about to call for Miss X that a bloody spike suddenly shot straight up from the puddle beside Ravi and grazed Vari's cheek – its point just narrowly missing the Leporian's head and quickly prompting her to tilt her head to the side. She narrowly managed to dodge the blade once it appeared, and without a mote of hesitation, the Leporian swiftly clenched her glove to teleport. She appeared several feet behind her previous location with a sudden *ZAP*, the maneuver leaving Vari breathless as she attempted to shake off the trembling that had now made its way into her hands.

"HAHAHAHAHA, fuck, Varila!" Ravi laughed. The halfling slowly began rising to their feet as they cackled, with rotten tendrils of crimson gradually lifting them upright as they then proceeded to *pop* the bloody crick in their neck. Stunned, Vari merely watch in silence as Ravi shrugged off a lethal blow like it was a flesh wound. She almost couldn't believe what she was seeing.

“Straight to the point, huh? *That’s* refreshing.” Ravi smirked once they finally found their footing again. “Kiri did sooo much talking, I never thought she’d shut the fuck up. *You*, however...”

They again *popped* their neck with a violent tilt of their head, their blood gradually beginning to harden into a tacky crimson substance which both stopped the bleeding in their artery and held their neck together in the process. Now visibly taken aback, Vari tightened the grip on her sword before once again brandishing its tip.

Was it possible she was seeing things again?

“You didn’t even waste a *second* before trying to kill me.” Ravi chuckled in amused disbelief. “I knew I liked you.”

“What the fuck did you just do?” Varila called out, now more frustrated than confused. She couldn’t fathom how they were still standing.

“Me?” Ravi scoffed, the halfling now kicking up the hilt of their spear before twirling it straight into their palm. “I think I’d be more concerned with what *you* just did...”

With a half-questioning, half-frustrated look, Vari then watched as the halfling tightened their grip onto their spear – fresh blood continuing to trickle down the length of their weapon as an overwhelming sense of malice crept its way into their expression...

“You made me bleed.” Ravi intoned.

Then, with a ferocity that surprised even Vari, Ravi hurtled the tip of their spear straight towards the Leporian’s head like a javelin. A loud *ZAP* signaled another teleport from Vari as the Leporian instantly used her ADT to dodge the attack, the device placing her just above Raviaki so she could swing down her sword with another fierce strike. Ravi, however, was ready for this, lifting a freshly made spear from the bloody puddle underneath them and using it to block Vari’s strike with practiced speeds.

With another clench of her glove, Vari *ZAPPED* behind Ravi in order to shove the blade of her katana straight into Ravi’s chest. A loud *SQUELCH* could be heard as metal violently collided with flesh and bone, and though she was certain the blade had pierced straight through Ravi’s spine and into their heart, it was when she saw Ravi lash with their spear behind them that Vari again clenched her glove to teleport. She appeared directly above them again in mid-air, the Leporian swinging down her sword with a loud and fearsome warcry that echoed out into the rainclouds above as rapidly, she descended back down towards her opponent and lodged the entirety of her katana straight into Ravi’s skull.

But she didn't stop there.

ZAP! ZAP! ZAP! A continuous stream of teleports melded into the crackling roar of thunderclouds as Vari repeatedly clenched her glove, the Leporian swiping, thrusting, and slashing at Ravi's small frame between each and every teleport she made. In an instant, Vari was all around them – the woman appearing at Ravi's flank, their rear, and their front in a long and random series of strikes and teleports. The tip of Vari's sword dragged heavily against the layers of Ravi's clothing as she swung, its mythrils easily digging into the rotting skin which lied underneath as over and over, fresh wounds and lacerations were dragged across Ravi's body. Even amidst the rapid flashes of her rampant teleportation, however, Vari could see that her attacks were having little effect on them. They frantically attempted to slash at her as she zapped back and forth, the halfling frustratedly trying to defend themselves against what would have otherwise been a very lethal series of strikes; however, once enough wounds had been made, Ravi actually looked as if they might have been becoming a little overwhelmed with Vari's movements.

With actual pools of blood now soaking into the rot at their feet, Ravi eventually decided that they'd had enough.

"GET THE FUCK OFF OF ME!!!" Ravi roared. Their voice frothed with an almost unrecognizable rage as another series of bloody spikes suddenly rose from the ground underneath them and hurtled towards Vari in mid-air. A gasp escaped Vari right as she clenched her glove to teleport, though not before a series of stray spikes could slice at Vari's armor and leave a long, but shallow trail of grazes running right across the side of her hips and torso. Another *ZAP* signaled her appearance another several feet away from Ravi as she dodged the brunt of the attack, and this time, Vari opted to take a quick breather before she would even attempt trying to strike again.

Ravi, however, did not intend on giving her time to recover.

From the lacerations which now trailed down the length of their nimble figure, Ravi dragged their fingers against their blood and *swiped*. They then dragged the thin trails of crimson out towards their side, the severity of their cuts and wounds bearing little hindrance on Ravi's movements as the blood quickly began to harden into a vast selection of knives. Vari's eyes began to widen at the sight of each blade as they snugly fell into the gaps between Ravi's fingers, and, once Ravi flung them in her direction, she again clenched her glove out of reflex – each blade only narrowly missing their mark as Vari *ZAPPED* out of the way with a well-timed teleport. Upon reappearing several feet behind Ravi, the halfling again turned around to face their opponent and lashed at her with their weapon; only this time, it was a large, double-sided axe that Ravi had swung at her – its blade landing mere inches away from Vari and *CRASHING* into the sandstone beneath her while she leapt back with a startled gasp. It seemed Vari's reflexes had worked against her, however, for the moment Ravi saw Vari dodge without a teleport, they again threw another knife which they had hidden underneath the layers of their sleeves...

...and lodged it directly into her left shoulder.

“Suffer.” Ravi growled. Then, upon hearing Vari cry out in pain, Ravi clenched a tight fist in her direction – the gesture immediately prompting Vari to fall back into a nearby puddle as she was hit with a sudden bout of fever and dizziness. The Leporian quickly became light-headed from the pain in her left shoulder, and suddenly, her heart even began to race in her chest as the pain started to fester against broken skin. She swore she could feel her wound beginning to *boil* against the knife in her shoulder as her pain slowly started to become unbearable. Quickly, Vari raised her hand onto the hilt of Ravi’s knife in order to clumsily pull it free from her shoulder.

But it was already too late.

With her vision now starting to blur from the infection, Vari panted and groaned to herself as stubbornly, she reached her hands into one of her pouches and searched for Saki’s vial. She could already feel Irra’s plague coursing throughout her veins as rapidly, the goddess’s rot began to multiply inside of her – the rot feeding upon itself as it rapidly spread at unprecedented levels. Now smiling a devilish smile, Ravi merely watched as one of Vari’s eyes began weeping, and as soon as Vari felt a rivulet of blood make its way down the length of her cheek, Vari lifted a small vial up in front of her and quickly popped the cork.

Frantically, desperately, she downed the liquid in one gulp.

“Oh, for FUCK’S SAKE.” Ravi all but screamed, disappointment rife in their remark. “How many fucking potions did I lend you people?!”

Vari, however, did not respond as the vial clattered underneath her hunched over frame. She panted breathlessly as a small droplet of blood fell from her cheek and landed onto the vial, her distorted reflection briefly revealing the bloody left eye which looked right back up at her. With another growl of frustration, Vari stubbornly wiped the blood from her cheek. She then looked up to face Ravi with a wild look of panic on her face, and though she now knew the potion to be working its magic, she could just barely make out the silhouette of her opponent approaching her – the Leporian just barely making out Ravi’s figure through the sea of popped blood vessels which now reddened her vision.

“No no, it’s okay! I’ll just do it myself!” Ravi shouted, the halfling seemingly scolding no one as they gradually dragged the blade of their axe in Vari’s direction. Slowly, and much to the protest of her limbs, Vari began staggering back onto her feet in response, but it was only when she spotted Ravi hurling an axe twice their size towards Vari’s face that she feverishly clenched her glove to teleport. In an instant, she landed another several feet behind Ravi with a *ZAP* – the axe just barely missing its mark and clattering onto the ground with a series of violent *clangs*.

As Ravi began to form another spear from the various pools of blood underneath them, they then turned to Vari with a distinct look of displeasure on their face.

"You're only prolonging the inevitable, Varila." Ravi muttered.

At this, Vari's rabbit ear twitched. Even if it had been for a moment, Ravi's voice had changed. Their rage had now settled into a low and unsettling murmur which faded into the sound of rumbling thunderclouds above them. For whatever reason, the halfling's voice no longer sounded like their own.

Even so, Vari wasted little time in meeting Ravi's remark with a raised middle finger.

"*Sit on it and spin.*" Vari panted, the Leporian now barely managing to stay on her feet as already, Irra's plague had sapped her of most of her energy. At first, the gesture elicited an amused chuckle from her opponent... a chuckle which eventually morphed into an all-out laughing fit. It seemed the halfling's voice had swiftly been returned to 'normal' through Vari's show of defiance, though for how long that would last, Vari was uncertain.

"Feisty until the end!" Ravi cackled, the sound of their laughter fading into a sudden crack of thunder which rang out behind them. "You know, I'm glad it was you I got to fight in the end – you've got a look in your eyes that just *screams* desperation. Kind of reminds me of how I used to be."

"Don't you *dare* compare yourself to me..." Vari panted between breaths. She struggled to stay on her feet as she frantically caught her breath, her hand tightly clutching onto her sword as Ravi merely started to approach again.

"Oh? Why not?" Ravi asked with a tilt of their head. "You're an opportunist, like me. You're a survivor, like me. You're even a *killer*, like me. It's uncanny."

As Ravi continued to close the gap between them, they brandished a malicious smile – their hands keeping steady around their spear as if they had spent years honing their craft. Her heart was now beating even faster in her chest, and her legs were beginning to wobble. Not only was she now coursing with adrenaline, but a distinct sense of fear had now made its way into her eyes as an opponent she couldn't kill tauntingly made their approach.

She had to run.

She had to fight.

She had to do *something*, but instead, she only fell back down to her knees.

"I do have one question for you, though..." Ravi muttered with another twirl of their spear. Then, as if on cue, their expression contorted and twisted into one of murderous intent as slowly, Ravi raised the pointed tip of their spear over their heads and held it there for Vari to see.

With her entire body now trembling, Vari frantically searched her opponent for even the slightest hint of their tag. Urgh, where was it?!

"How fast can you run, little bunny?" Ravi grinned.

Vari's spirit crumbled with panic.

As soon as Ravi brought the tip of their spear down towards her skull, Vari clenched the glove to her ADT again. And again. And again, and again, and again – until soon, Vari was repeatedly *zapping* herself straight out of the Colosseum, teleporting at break-neck speeds towards the heart of the Crossroads' business district. If Tenki's words were to be believed, then this storm-ridden replica of the Crossroads had been completely abandoned a very long time ago. She only hoped it was big enough for her to hide in.

With a quiet grin of amusement, Ravi simply watched Vari teleport straight out of the Colosseum – all the way up until she was out of sight. It seemed she could run quite fast...

But not fast enough.

CRACK! A series of long, spindly legs suddenly shot straight out from the crimson of Ravi's wounds – each leg briefly faltering into goo for a moment before rapidly hardening into what looked like giant, bloody spider legs. Each leg then crashed into the ground underneath them, the sheer strength behind their impacts piercing straight into the sandstone below and lifting Ravi effortlessly up into the air. Soon, Ravi was gliding across the arena and up towards the walls of the Colosseum, their legs quickly scurrying into the arena's empty stands. Rapidly, Ravi glided above each seat, their legs navigating the gaps on autopilot until eventually, the halfling made their way onto the highest and tallest point of the arena to gauge the stormy chaos all around them. Even from such a distance, Ravi could now see the flashes of Vari's teleports careening their way towards the innermost portions of the Crossroads – her fear guiding her straight into the heart of the business district. Without wasting any time, Ravi used their newfound limbs to leap straight off of the arena and hurtle themselves down towards her path. Even now, the scent of Vari's blood still lingered in the rain.

They would enjoy every moment of this.

...

ZAP!

Vari landed herself squarely amidst the rubble of a collapsed version of the Fox Den once she finally stopped running. She scrambled to her feet and entered the building through a very large hole in the wall, the pain from her wounds quickly being overridden by the desperation she felt to hide somewhere, anywhere amidst the bar's various piles of wreckage. Shards of broken glass could be seen littering the remains of a bar which stood abandoned off to her side, and upon scanning further, she could see the piles of broken furniture which had scattered itself across the floor of the main lounge. There were also a number of holes in the ceiling above, with heaps of stone and rubble having crumbled to the floor over time. Much of this rubble had accumulated into various mounds which were strewn throughout the main lounge, and though it may not have been ideal, the Fox Den's state of disrepair could still be used to Vari's advantage.

Blindly, she sprinted towards the rubble of a collapsed loft which had fallen in one of the more secluded corners of the bar, and once she tucked herself away behind its wreckage, Vari placed the palm of her hand onto her forehead and winced – the Leporian desperately trying to manage the pain which emanated from her now throbbing headache. The fever Ravi had given her had worked fast – faster than she ever could have expected – and despite how sour her interaction had been with Angela, Vari was still counting her lucky stars that she had approached her before she could make her way into the Colosseum. Had Vari been allowed to enter the arena without Saki's potion, she easily could've seen herself succumbing to the effects of a very lethal plague...

CRASH! Vari froze completely at the sound of Ravi landing down onto the street outside, the scuttering of long, bloody legs briefly causing her ear to twitch as she then placed a death-grip onto the hilt of her katana and waited...

"Oh VARILA!" Ravi called out. Their voice became louder and significantly clearer in her ears as they strode into the dilapidated ruins of the bar. "I'm not quite done yet! C'mon, where's that killer instinct from before?!"

The sound of wine bottles crashing against the floor punctuated Ravi's question as they searched behind the bar, their long legs easily tossing plates and broken glasses aside until they finally turned their attention towards the rubble at their flank. Even from her place across the room, droplets of pouring rain continued to trickle in through the cracked infrastructure above her, the constant exposure to the elements creating various spots of water damage throughout the ruined bar. With Vari's heart now pounding its way out of her chest, Vari felt another tear of blood caress the length of her cheekbone as she fell into a deathly silence behind the collapsed loft. She didn't bother to wipe the tear away, opting to keep herself as still as possible until Ravi either gave up or searched another location. She desperately hoped for the former, however, knowing full well that if Ravi eventually found her, it would guarantee her death sentence.

"I know you're here, Varila..." Ravi growled, their long spider legs now striding closer towards the various piles of rubble which concealed her. She believed them.

Even so, Vari forced herself to remain frozen. The rain and rubble which had had done a good job of wiping her blood trails away, but despite her best efforts, Vari couldn't help but start shivering as various series of rain droplets continuously pattered against the surface of her skin. This rain truly was freezing, she thought, and the fact that there was so much of it meant that if she dragged this match out any longer than she needed to, she could very well succumb to hypothermia if not her fever. She really couldn't hide forever.

Another impatient *CRASH* rang out as Ravi let out a sudden growl of frustration. She couldn't be too sure, but it sounded like Ravi had just thrown a table across the room...

"As much as I love a good hunt, Varila, I'm getting *pretty fucking tired of hide and seek*," they called out. She could feel their anger beginning to build as Vari remained hidden behind her wreckage, and although her hand was now shaking against the hilt of her sword, she just couldn't will herself to make a move – defensive or otherwise. It was infuriating; and the fact that seemingly everybody had underestimated the extent of Ravi's durability had left her completely clueless on how to proceed. She'd gone up against an invulnerable opponent once before, but never one so determined to end her. It was why despite all of her endless frustration, both with Angela and with everyone else in this damn tournament, she was terrified.

Even more terrifying, however, was the drop of rotten blood which had dripped onto the top of her head.

"You're really bad at this." Ravi whispered.

CRASH! A crimson leg came hurtling down towards Vari's chest and narrowly missed its mark as she immediately teleported away from her rubble. The leg pierced its way into several layers of brick and wood upon impact, sending various chunks of brick flying across the bar as Vari teleported onto the wood of another nearby loft. She swiftly lost her balance, however, upon feeling another otherworldly *smash* rattle its way throughout the building – causing one of the stone pillars underneath her to crumble against the force of Ravi's strikes and send her tumbling down into the main lounge. She clenched her glove again before she could hit the ground, though it was once Vari appeared on the other side of the bar she immediately turned around and began sprinting towards a rather small entryway. She barely made to it in time, turning into the corridors of a long, winding hallway which echoed with the impact of a spear that *CRACKED* into the stone wall behind her – Ravi's throw missing her head by mere inches.

The crashing sounds of crimson continued to ring in her ears as Ravi gave chase, and upon hearing their legs scurry underneath the entryway behind her, Vari clenched her glove to *zap* towards the steps of a large, wooden staircase which waited at the opposite end of the hall. Again and again, she zapped her way upwards, the Leporian eventually making her way into yet *another* lounge which she was sure had seen better days. Her eyes flickered from wall to wall, the woman desperately scanning her surroundings for signs of yet another place she could use to hide. The sound of Ravi's voice calling out her name continued to usher her forward, however, and soon, Vari gave into her panic – zapping her way behind a large, broken speaker which rested beside an enormous LCD television. Neither looked as if they had been switched on in a long time.

“You can’t run forever, Varila!” Ravi called out, their voice again causing Vari to freeze. Just as she had before, she clutched onto the hilt of her sword as she prepared herself for the worst – and though she knew Ravi to be correct, she still couldn’t help but shiver in fear as the sound of their long, crimson spider legs scuttled across the bar behind her.

She was frozen in fear. She knew that no matter how much damage Ravi took, they’d never succumb to their injuries – and despite how much damage she had been able to inflict so far, she still hadn’t seen any sign of their tag. Not once had she even thought to try and take it at the start of the match, and now, she was much too hesitant to even go looking for it. One more clash with Ravi, and she could very well lose her life...

And more than anything, that terrified her.

That was the worst part. She was terrified of dying, terrified at the prospect of losing her place in the tournament, and more than anything else, she was terrified of allowing her chance to finally rescue her wife slip right through her fingers. She’d been so utterly scared ever since she won her second round in the tournament, and as willing as she’d been to die to the lead of Andrea’s bullets or the flames of Azta’s fireballs, it was when she’d come so close to the finish line that Vari shuddered at the thought of losing now. So close... she’d really gotten so *fucking* close.

“Varila...” Ravi called tauntingly. “Let’s finish this already. I’m getting tired of bunny hunting...”

At the mention of hunting, however, Vari’s breath hitched. She recalled the desperation she’d felt during her last round, the *zip* of flying bullets, and the hole which now adorned her left rabbit ear. She remembered just how close she had gotten to death’s door, and how much blood she had lost by the time it was all over. But most importantly of all...

She recalled Mira, standing there in that shimmering red dress of hers.

The thought of losing that warm smile forever finally broke something inside of her.

Slowly, Vari clenched her shaking hand even tighter against the hilt of her weapon. The fog of her adrenaline had finally started to overwhelm her, cracking and chipping at the terror which moments before, had left Vari petrified and helpless to resist. Another tear of blood trickled into the real ones lining her cheek as she shivered behind that broken speaker, the crimson landing onto her glove as her vision began to blur with reddened sorrow. As afraid as Ravi’s chase had left her, and as desperate as she had been to get away, the thought of losing now had breathed a rageful fire into her chest. Soon, Vari’s pupils were narrowing from the adrenaline which was now coursing through her veins, causing her teeth to grit.

She recalled the sensation she'd felt once she stepped foot into the arena at the beginning of her second round – the vow she'd made to rescue her wife, even if it came at the cost of her own life. For what had seemed like the entirety of this tournament, she'd struggled to survive. She'd repeatedly clawed herself free from the maws of defeat as she fought tooth and nail for an audience with the Divine Maw herself, yet despite the struggle of it all, had shown mercy to everyone she'd encountered. She was battered. She was bruised. She was so utterly broken – both physically and mentally – but despite all the nightmares she'd fought and made for herself, one goal had remained firmly planted within even the most desperate reaches of her mind...

SCHWING!

A hum of audible satisfaction rang out from Ravi's lips as tearfully, Vari drew her sword to fight – perhaps for the final time. The clinking of rain against metal had immediately signaled her location to Ravi, the rainwater trickling in through cracks of the ceiling and landing atop her blade as carefully, she stepped out into the lounge. With a malicious smile now on Ravi's face, Vari slowly turned to look at the halfling as she revealed herself with a glare of murderous fury in her eyes. No matter what happened now, no matter what the results of this tournament would be, she was resolved. With the sorrow she carried in her heart and the hate which tainted her soul, Vari would go forth and break the very fate which had ripped her one and only true love away from her.

She'd save Mira or die trying.

"There you are." Ravi grimaced, but it wasn't even until the breath had fully left Ravi's mouth, that Vari *zapped* with a teleport and swung down at the halfling with a roar. The woman screamed with all of the broken rage she had left as she did so, and once Ravi looked up to meet her gaze, Vari brought the metal of her blade down into Ravi's skull – vertically slicing it in half.

ZAP! ZAP! ZAP! Vari swung with rapid-fire adrenaline as she continuously teleported herself between the swipes of Ravi's spear – her ADT allowing her greater maneuverability as she bounced from wall to wall, kicked her feet off the floor, and whirled down into another strike from above. She surged into a visceral flurry of attacks, each hit landing onto the halfling at every conceivable angle as she used what little remained of her energy to deliver devastating slashes, shattering thrusts, and overwhelming strikes. Each of her strikes would have eviscerated any other opponent, and though Vari knew Ravi couldn't die, she was determined to rend them apart until nothing was left – the woman gliding and zapping between each of the wild strikes Ravi brought to bear against their rabid opponent. Without falter or pause, Vari drenched herself in the blood of her enemy, slicing off their limbs and slashing into their eyes as they roared in pain and frustration. Truly, Vari felt untouchable in that moment.

At first, Ravi had simply opted to use their spear to fight back. They lashed and lunged and struck at Vari as she went, the tip of their spear only just barely missing its mark between each and every zap. Once that didn't work, the halfling formed a large war hammer from the crimson puddles of blood which coalesced underneath their feet. They then lunged at Vari with the most forceful strike they could manage, only for Vari to cut the halfling's arm off with her sword and send the hammer crashing down into the rotten floorboards below. With the blood that now oozed from their severed arm, Ravi lashed at Vari with the barbs of a long bloody whip – each *crack* sending stray

glass and rubble flying as Ravi continuously hurled attacks at her. Once that didn't work, Ravi opted to form a large scythe instead – the blade of their crimson appendage now hurtling sickles of blood towards her with each labored swing, with many of them creating gashes in the surrounding walls and furniture that stood within the VIP lounge. Despite the ferocity with which Ravi fought, however, they only served to provide more fuel for Vari's fire, and they too eventually began to roar with rage.

Now trying any and every weapon they could think of, Ravi formed a large flail – its ball laden with large spikes that, had they hit, would have minced Vari into piles of gore and viscera. However, each and every one of the many weapons Ravi had formed so far had failed to deliver a killing blow, and the flail was no exception. Vari, despite all of her rage and recklessness, had managed to dodge a myriad of Ravi's strikes without even so much as a scratch on her figure. It was why Ravi eventually decided to up the ante – the halfling throwing stray shuriken, shooting bloody crossbows, and tossing large javelins – each weapon crashing against the crumbling architecture of the building around them and dismantling it even further into rubble. After a certain point, the craters left behind by Ravi's weapons were causing the floor to give out underneath them... and eventually, they did – sending them both tumbling back down into the center of the main lounge below them.

This, however, didn't stop them. They were practically fighting out in the open elements once again as their skirmish sent another stray spider leg *crashing* through the wall of the Fox Den. Now spotting an opportunity amidst the chaos, Vari led Ravi outside with another *zap*.

"No you *fucking* don't!" Ravi growled, their legs springing them out into the open air and prompting Vari to return to the offensive. With the ice-cold winds once again hindering Ravi's movements, the halfling tossed bloody chains through the air in a wild attempt to wrap them around Vari's waist. Vari *zapped* again, however, returning the halfling's attempt with a forceful slice of her mythrill blade down the length of Ravi's spine – immediately cutting them in half.

For the briefest of moments, Ravi had been cleaved into two, and though the tack-like consistency of their blood had quickly managed to sow them back together, Vari didn't hesitate to slice them in half yet again. This time, Vari cut them horizontally, severing them at the waist. She then leapt up and *zapped* with another clench of her glove, this time landing herself directly on top of Ravi's torso so that she could shove her thumb directly into their eye. A rabid, angered scream of anguish left Ravi's lips as Vari gouged at the delicate orbs in Ravi's sockets, and once Ravi formed another set of bloody claws at the tip of their fingers, Ravi grappled onto Vari's glove and attempted to swipe her visor from her face – only for her to again *zap* away and avoid the attempt altogether.

Vari wouldn't be their prey.

She would never be prey.

"THIS FUCKING RAIN!" Ravi roared through the blood in their mouth, the consistency of their gore gradually becoming more goo-like as the fight progressed. Through the chaos of their fight, Vari did take notice of the effect

that the surrounding weather was having on her opponent... an observation which gave her great pleasure as she continued to push through the mires of her overwhelming fatigue. Not only was the freezing rain causing Ravi's weapons to become brittle in nature, but it was also making their blood grow sluggish – the rainwater diluting the halfling's blood and weakening the integrity of their weapons to the point of near-uselessness. Such weakness in the integrity of Ravi's weapons meant that they also had to expend more blood in order to form each weapon, and the more time it took for Ravi to do so, the longer Vari could strike and slice each weapon from its root.

Even so... the tides were beginning to turn against Varila.

She was tired. Much too tired to ignore.

Vari then sliced at the base of Ravi's neck and decapitated them, their screams of rage momentarily being cut off as a set of gory tendrils lurched out from the halfling's torso and grabbed onto Ravi's head. They then fastened it back onto their owner's neck with a violent *cracking* of spine against skull, with Ravi's screams of rage picking up right where they left off as Vari landed back onto their torso and shoved the length of her sword directly into Ravi's heart. It was once she did so, however, that her anger finally gave way into exhaustion – her rage subsiding long enough for her to notice that the tag fastened just underneath Ravi's collar was now plainly visible to the naked eye. It was a simple medallion, just like the one she wore underneath her armor, but it was also caked in layers of Ravi's blood. She knew she'd likely never get another chance to grab it considering the weight of her exhaustion, and as the halfling's sightless eyes rolled back into the forefront of their sockets, Vari lurched out with one of her trembling arms and snatched Ravi's tag – ripping it from their neck with one decisive motion.

Then, as if being ripped from the action of a particularly engrossing movie, Miss X suddenly clambered back onto her microphone.

"T-the tag! VARI HAS RAVI'S TAG!!!" Miss X cried out. "You know what that means, everyone!"

"START THE COUNTDOWN!"

The popstar's voice echoed into the rumble of flickering thunderclouds as Vari then *ZAPPED* herself away towards Colosseum in the distance – only to come crashing down to ground once the links of bloody chains wrapped around her waist and threw her into a pile of mud. With Ravi now completely unable to speak through the layers of blood that had coagulated in their throat, the giant, bloody creature before her simply roared in rage and agony as it readied one of its spider legs and thrust. The limb hurtled itself down towards Vari at what felt like blinding speeds, and as it did so, a cacophony of voices outside the arena could be heard beginning to count down from thirty.

SLAM! It was just as Ravi thrust one of their legs down into the ground below that Vari appeared behind them – exhausted, but certainly not impaled. Though Vari ultimately dodged the strike with another clench of her glove,

Vari's impact down onto the mud had meant that she'd dropped Ravi's tag in the process. With another monstrous gurgle of frustration, Ravi – or at least, a creature which vaguely resembled Ravi – looked up at Vari and shot her a quiet, hateful glare. Vari stared back at them for a moment, panting and trembling in place as she desperately willed herself to keep going... but couldn't. She was spent, and as Vari merely watched the creature in front of her lift their tag from the mud and place it back onto their neck, the Leporian began to wonder if she had finally reached her limit.

"OOH, close, but not quite!" Miss X exclaimed. "In an almost immediate turn of events, Ravi has reclaimed their tag!!!"

For a moment, Vari wondered if she should prepare herself to run again, or if she should simply remain here until she fought to her death. The merits of both ideas shot back and forth in her mind for a while until finally, out of the corner of her eye, Vari spotted the glimmer of yet another metallic object in the mud. One that caused her heart to drop and her eyes to flash over towards the now undecorated ring finger on her right hand.

Slowly, steadily, Ravi used one of their spider legs to lift the object up and examine it at eye-level, and as soon as Vari realized what Ravi had taken from her, another wealth of rage boiled its way onto the surface – tainting her expression with hate.

"GIVE MIRA BACK TO ME!" Vari roared, the white-hot beginnings of tears starting to fall as Ravi examined the jewel of her wedding ring. The exhaustion which had previously left her unable to fight now felt like a distant memory as Ravi merely flashed a malicious smile in response, the sanguinous halfling mockingly tilting their head for a moment as they visibly debated on what to do with the trinket. It was once Ravi finally unhinged their jaw and lifted the ring into the air, however, that a desperate gasp left Vari's lips.

"PLEASE!!!" Vari screamed, the woman briefly resorting to begging. "IT'S ALL I HAVE LEFT OF HER!"

But it was too late.

She could only watch as the ring then dropped into Ravi's throat. With a loud and audible *gulp*, Ravi tauntingly swallowed the ring, a vicious satisfaction in their expression as Vari's wedding band slid into the depths of their stomach – never to be seen again.

And, as the heart in Vari's chest shattered into a thousand-thousand pieces, the Leporian finally felt something inside of her die for good.

Her vision grew red, and her ears began to ring.

She screamed. She screamed as loudly and as violently as her lungs would allow her, but no matter how hard she screamed, no matter how wrathful her roars became, her tearful cries of rage still sounded like silence to her – her despair rattling out like the gasp of a dying star collapsing in on itself. Her love, her sorrow, her rage, all of it imploded within her and faded into an endless abyss of hate and despair which threatened to smother her inner light away. Then, as soon as Vari's rage finally cleared long enough for her to regain some of her senses, Vari clenched her glove for another teleport.

"YOU'RE FUCKING DEAD!!!" Vari wailed.

In what felt like the blink of an eye, Vari was back on them. Again, the two were locked in mortal combat – their fight picking up right where it left off as Vari unleashed a wild and instinctual whirlwind of attacks on Ravi's monstrous frame. She couldn't be too certain what was happening anymore as they fought, the stormy and tumultuous world around her seeming to fade into a muffled, ear-ringing silence in her head as she repeatedly rendered the halfling's body limb from bloody limb. Over and over, Vari threw everything she had at them, their clash eventually devolving into nothing more than a hateful maelstrom of blood and sword as it wandered even further out into the streets of the Crossroads. To Vari, the fight seemed to go on indefinitely, and it wasn't long before her body was repeatedly drenched in the dark and ooze-like layers of Ravi's blood – a fact which might have been cause for concern if the rain hadn't continually washed it away.

Still, she continued to strike. She threw her sword into their brain, twisted one of their own spears into their heart, and even gouged both of their eyes out as a series of crimson weapons swiped at Vari's limbs. Under normal conditions, the arsenal of self-made weapons that Ravi had brought to bear might have made her think twice about approaching them – especially in a direct confrontation – but after so much misery, Vari no longer cared. Even Ravi had even dispensed with the weapons entirely, opting instead to fight with the long streams of blood which extended from their fingertips and coagulated into sharp and deadly claws. However, it didn't matter to Vari. None of it did, for as long as her body would permit her, Vari would fight.

And fight she did, all the way up until she plunged one her fists through the goo-like substance that coated Ravi's neck. In truth, she had meant to go for their heart, but the results of her strike were undeniable as suddenly, through the red-hot rage which coursed through Vari's veins, she felt the metal of a medallion being clutched into the palm of her bloody hand. She then rendered it free from Ravi's neck again, the halfling responding with yet another attempt at Vari's visor and leaving a long, bloody scratch mark across its glass as they attempted to swipe it free from her face. She swiftly zapped away, however, and despite her rage threatening to work against her, Vari had actually managed to reclaim Ravi's tag amidst the chaos; though against her better judgment, Vari merely continued to swing her sword at them as she feverishly went back for more. She wouldn't stop until she'd reclaimed what she'd lost.

"AMAZING!!!" Miss X shouted through the chaos. "Against all odds, Vari has stolen Ravi's tag again!!! But folks, I don't think she cares about the tag anymore! This bunny wants BLOOD!"

Indeed, she did. Instead of teleporting straight to safety like her brain was telling her to, Vari instead listened to the wrath which boiled in her heart – repeatedly continuing to plunge the mythrill of her sword into Ravi’s small frame and relish in the fountains of blood which sprayed onto her face. Despite the rage which roared from Ravi’s lips with each and every strike, it was now taking longer and longer for Ravi’s freezing blood to coagulate again... a fact which Vari used to her advantage as she repeatedly sliced at their limbs and slashed the head from their neck.

Eventually, Ravi looked more akin to a pile of red goo than they did a halfling, and once Vari was certain that she had made another opening for herself, she again plunged her fist through Ravi’s frame – this time through the holes in their stomach – producing the glint of a small, diamond-like jewel in Vari’s hand.

“THE RING! Vari was after her ring!!!” Miss X gasped, the roaring cheers of the crowd faintly audible behind her as Vari again clenched her glove for a teleport. Despite having reclaimed both her ring and the tag around Ravi’s neck, Vari still could not bring herself to stop. With two pieces of metal now in her hands, Vari continued her assault on Ravi as rage continued to guide her every action. A countdown from thirty had now started in the distance, echoing out into the clouds as a series of stabs and squelches punctuated the count of every number; and though Vari knew victory to be well within her grasp, the red in her vision literally continued to blind her as she repeatedly brought her sword down onto the halfling that had drove her to this point.

25! Vari sliced off Ravi’s left arm.

20! Vari sliced them in half.

15! Vari thrust the tip of their sword into Ravi’s heart and twisted. She hoped it felt even slightly close to the pain in hers.

10! Another decapitation.

On and on Vari went, until finally, Vari swung her sword down to land one final blow into Ravi’s skull. Into this strike, Vari would pour all of the energy she had left. She would pour everything she had into this last, devastating strike, but it was when the metal of her sword viciously plunged its way into Ravi’s skull and scraped its way down the length of their spine that a stray axe swiped into the periphery of Vari’s bloody eye...

And sent Vari’s left arm flying.

“ZERO!!!” cried Miss X. “THE COUNTDOWN IS FINISHED, BUT RAVI SURE ISN’T!!!”

As Vari roared down onto the ground crying, screaming in pain, she clenched her right hand onto the stump where her gloved arm used to be. Several feet away from her lied Vari's severed left arm, its fingers still tightly clutched around Ravi's tag which pressed firmly against the jewel that adorned Vari's wedding ring. Blood poured in excess down onto the ground as Vari and Ravi both roared out into sky above – one doing so in pain, the other in malicious glee. As soon as Vari finally opened her eyes again to gauge the condition of her arm, she instantly saw Ravi standing there, hovering over her with a spear in their claws.

"GAME... OVER..." Ravi gurgled, and as they plunged the tip of their weapon one final time down towards Vari's head, Vari briefly discovered the wisdom in all of Mira's old books for herself – that upon being greeted by the maws of death, one sees their life flashing before their very eyes...

Fortunately for Vari, however, it was the divine maw herself that prevented death from taking her just yet.

CLANG!

... jingle jingle.

The sounds of battle briefly faded into the chimes of bells as the patter of rain gradually returned into the forefront of Vari's senses. Now standing before Vari in all of her tailed glory, the God Eater herself had presented a single finger towards the spear which Ravi held in their bloody hands – the gesture proving itself more than enough in blocking the strike which otherwise would have left Vari dead in the mud. The skies themselves seemed to applaud the God Eater's arrival as another *crack* of lightning could be seen streaking in the distance, briefly illuminating the divine glow of the kitsune which now stood tall above Vari's frame. She prayed to the gods above that this wasn't another vision.

A toothy grin appeared on the Madame's lips as a roar of frustration then exited Ravi, the halfling again pushing the tip of their spear directly against the God Eater's finger in a desperate attempt to finish their opponent. Their efforts, however, were to no avail. She then flipped a few stray strands of her white hair away with her free hand, the woman's golden eyes appearing to glow against the darkness of the stormclouds above while Vari laid directly below her, clutching her bloody shoulder. Though the blood loss was already starting to dull her senses and her fever was beginning to come back, Vari could still hear the God Eater's voice ring through her ears as plain as day once she started speaking.

"I'm sorry, dear... but it seems that you have lost~." She smirked.

A roar of rage, pain, and anguish rang out into the rain as a portal to the God Eater's pocket dimension opened up behind the halfling and dragged them. Their long, bloody claws dragged against the dirt road underneath them as frantically, they clambered to remain in the fight – struggling to stay away from the darkness which now threatened to swallow them whole again. Through the various shrieks, screams, and cries which escaped from

Ravi's lips, Vari was briefly able to divine meaning from the gurgled words which sprang forth from their bloody maw.

"FUCK YOU, VARI!!! AND FUCK YOU, BITCH!!!" Ravi screamed. "I'LL HAVE TENKI'S HEAD MOUNTED ON A BLOODY SPIKE WHEN I'M FREE!!! I'LL KILL YOU AND EVERYONE ELSE WHO DID THIS TO ME! I'LL KILL ANGELA! I'LL KILL ASTER! I'LL KILL EVERYONE WHO THREW ME TO THE FUCKING WOLVES AND TURN ALL YOUR LAUGHS INTO SCREAMS OF AGONY! FUCK! YOU!!!"

She could practically feel the rage they bore for Vari threatening to burst from their throat as they were dragged into darkness. Each and every fitful cry that escaped into the air around them seem to echo for a moment as soon, Ravi's rage began to morph back into sorrow, and once Ravi finally gave the God Eater one last hateful look, they were sucked into the portal – never to escape.

Their screams still rang in Vari's ears once they were gone.

With an audible hum of satisfaction, the God Eater promptly clapped her hands together before happily turning her attention back down to the Leporian underneath her.

"Well!" the God Eater beamed. "Now that *that's* over, why don't we find a more suitable setting?"

"W-what..." Vari groaned. "What happened...?"

"Hmm? Isn't it obvious?" the God Eater smirked. "You've won!"

WINNER: VARILA NA'TARA

A Lover's Wish

"Oh, stand up, darling. The dirt is hardly a place for a winner." The God Eater grinned.

Then, as if through divine intervention, Vari was indeed on her feet again – the Leporian rising onto her own two legs while the God Eater simply regarded her with a rather coy smile. The storm clouds above them were now beginning to dissipate as the field emanating from Tenki's orb collapsed back in on itself, the smell of rain and ruin promptly disappearing as fresh air swooped in all around them. Much to Vari's surprise, she hadn't immediately warped back into the Colosseum; instead, she'd appeared in what looked like one of the God Eater's various pocket dimensions – a soft, pearlescent glow now enveloping her as she stood amidst a vast, endless sea of shimmering warmth and light. It was pretty, if not a little jarring... but perhaps even more jarring was the fact that Vari's pain was actually beginning to dull in the presence of this realm's light. She also didn't feel the effects of her blood loss anymore, despite missing an arm. It seemed merely standing in this realm was enough to keep Vari alive, despite how close to death she had been mere moments before.

"It's nice to finally meet you, Varila." the God Eater told her, a hint of inquisitiveness now made plain in her expression. "I've really been looking forward to this."

She then began to circle Vari for a moment as the goddess looked her up and down, her eyes of divine gold briefly glowing against her fair skin as she scanned the tired Leporian in front of her.

"My, my, you've gone through hell to get here, haven't you?" the Madame mused, flicking a speck of dirt from her good shoulder as she gauged the extent of her wounds. "Yes, you've proven to be quite the little trailblazer. With every opponent that I've thrown at you, you've decided to face each of them head-on... mortal or otherwise. I love a good fighter!"

She then stopped right in front of Vari before leaning closer in to examine her even further, the kitsune openly invading her personal space and causing the Leporian to lean away from her with a questioning raise of her brow.

"Hmm. That device you have on your head is pretty curious, though. I can see why my son wanted it so badly..." she muttered under her breath. As Vari continued to look into the goddess's eyes, she could practically see all of the questions which swam under her golden gaze. Vari, too, had a number of questions for her... but the extent of her injuries had largely prevented them from moving, much less from speaking.

It was with a sudden flick of her tails, however, that the God Eater stepped back and hummed for a moment – the kitsune doing so almost as if she'd just realized something.

"Ah! I'm sorry dear, I'd forgotten those injuries might actually *hurt*. One moment, please..." She said, and with a snap of her fingers, the God Eater proceeded to 'wipe' Vari's injuries away – the various cuts and wounds which streaked across Vari's body effectively being erased from existence. A mote of light began to dance around Vari's frame as she allowed the God Eater to work her magic, and soon, all of Vari's injuries – even Ravi's plague – had disappeared. She hadn't quite expected the God Eater to cure her of Ravi's plague, much less heal her injuries, though it was still a gesture which gave Vari just as much pause as it did relief. Much to Vari's displeasure, however, the God Eater still hadn't returned her arm to her shoulder despite it still bearing her glove. The phantom limb on her shoulder had merely been replaced with a rounded stump instead, and the faint remnants of a fever had continued to linger inside of her despite being cured of Irra's influence. The Madame did, however, completely stop Vari's bleeding, including the bleeding which had nearly blinded her left eye.

The God eater soon stepped back with a smile upon deciding that Vari had been sufficiently healed of her injuries.

"There!" the God Eater smirked. "Now, as much as I would love to sit down and pick your brain for a little while, the time has come for us to discuss your wish."

"M-my wish...?" Vari echoed, her eyes now gazing listlessly into the God Eater's as she spoke.

"Yes, Varila, your wish." the God Eater affirmed with a playful scoff. "You may now take a moment – and only a moment – to think about the wish you'd like to make as part of your prize for winning my tournament. Normally, I'd tell you to take your time, but unfortunately, I'm going to have to tell you to make it snappy. I have much to do if I'm to clean up Ravi's mess, and-"

"Wait..." Vari said weakly.

"Hmmm?" the God Eater hummed. "Ahh, yes, your arm. Your glove was on there too, wasn't it? It seems I've gone and left it in Tenki's little 'shortcut' realm~. I suppose you can wish it back, but considering how many good surgeons we have, I'm afraid that would be a waste of a perfectly good wish-"

"No, damn it, the arm I can live without..." Vari said, the woman still weakly clutching her shoulder. "I just... I need to know about Ravi."

"What about them?" the Madame asked with a mischievous smirk. "I've already cured their little plague from you, you know. You're free to make your wish however you please."

“But what happens to them once this all ends?” Vari asked. “What happens to Irra? As long as Ravi lives, that plague will still be around.”

“They get to go home.” The God Eater shrugged simply. “Along with their little plague. Despite her many shortcomings, Irra has respected the Crossroads as my realm alone – a gesture that won’t go unappreciated. I won’t be diminishing her any further once I bring all of the infected back to their own realms, and Ravi can do whatever they like so long as it doesn’t involve the Crossroads. Frankly, it’s more than they deserve...”

Despite everything, Vari felt her heart sink into her chest. There was something that felt wrong about that answer.

“Wouldn’t it be better to just cure everybody?” Vari asked. “There were others who got infected, too. Why do I get special treatment?”

“They weren’t winners.” The God Eater simply smirked. “You are.”

“But... they’re going to die.” Vari muttered in realization. “They’re *all* going to die. I threw everything I had at Ravi, and it still wasn’t enough. The world Ravi goes back to won’t stand a chance.”

“Worlds fall to ruin all the time, Varila. I’m certain you of all people would understand that.” the God Eater said with a flick of her tails. “It’s truly unfortunate that a plague made its way into the Crossroads, but frankly, I only cured you to keep things fair. You won the grand prize, after all, and you wouldn’t exactly be able to enjoy your prize if I left an incurable plague inside of you, now would you? Beyond that, the plague is not my responsibility once it leaves the Crossroads.”

“But...” Vari whispered. “I...”

With her voice now trembling, Vari gradually went silent. Unflinchingly, the God Eater simply smiled and curiously tilted her head at the Leporian’s response. Vari’s hand began to tremble as she then clenched it into a fist of frustration, and as waves of realization began to crash over her spirit and clutch tightly around her heart, Vari briefly felt her feet begin to wobble – her lips sealing tightly shut as she attempted to rationalize what this all meant. A glimpse of curiosity made its way into the God Eater’s expression as Vari did so, and quietly, she watched the Leporian succumb to visible hesitation.

Why?

Why was she hesitating?

She was here. She was finally here, and all she had to do in order to get her wife back was to speak it and it would be done... but frustratingly, *impossibly*, it was every time she attempted to do so that Vari vividly recalled the conversation she'd had with Chiifu back at the Fox Den. It seemed that Chiifu had spoken true when she'd said that the God Eater was a wish-granter, not an altruist. For all of her infinite power and abilities, the Madame was indeed fully capable of removing Ravi's blight from those who had suffered it – but whether or not she was going to do so was completely dependent on if Vari would use her wish.

It was a responsibility that Vari wished she hadn't realized. Slowly, tears trickled down the length of her face as a fierce bout of turmoil suddenly made its way into her expression. She wanted nothing more than to use her wish to bring Mira back right now... to damn everyone else to their own fates and let them live with the consequences of their own stupid, *stupid* decisions. She hated Ravi. She hated Irra. She hated Kiri, and Andrea, and Angela, and everyone else who had tried to kill her or take her wish away. She should have had little issue with leaving an entire world of strangers to a goddess that Vari would likely never see again.

So why couldn't she do it?

A quiet sob left Vari's lips which prompted the Madame's smile to morph into confusion. 'Damn it', Vari thought. Why? Why couldn't she just make her wish? She'd worked so hard to get here, gone through so much hell to get Mira back, and now that she was granted an audience with a literal wish-granting goddess, she just couldn't will herself to do it. Vari thought about what would happen to Ravi should they be allowed to go back to their homeworld... how many people would suffer now that they had committed themselves to a goddess who only lived to infect. Vari doubted the God Eater would keep Irra in her realm any longer, and she doubted even more that anybody who got infected would be allowed in the Crossroads after the tournament was over. Clearly, simply curing the infected was something that the God Eater never cared to do – as evidenced by what Chiifu had told Angela at the Fox Den – and even if she did cure them, it seemed the God Eater couldn't care less what would happen to Ravi's world once they went back. People would die as long as Irra lived.

Another tear trickled down Vari's cheeks.

Angela had been right.

Everything she'd told her about Irra had been true. From the world-ending plague, to the constant torture and anguish, Irra was a blight not only on her own world, but on others as well. In attempting to seal Irra away, Angela had instead ushered Ravi even further into darkness. In trying to kill Ravi, Vari had only caused more suffering... a sin which Angela herself had warned against committing. Vari recalled the way Ravi screamed as they were dragged back into the God Eater's pocket dimension. She pondered the immense sorrow she saw in their eyes as she glimpsed into the shattered fragments of who they used to be. Despite how hard the two of them had fought,

and despite how fiercely she had hated them in those moments, Vari couldn't help but feel a strange, twisted empathy for Ravi – the halfling serving as a stark reminder of the desperation that she herself had still felt.

She then thought of the horrors that would be unleashed on the other contestants' worlds, should they wind up infecting them too. Who else had Ravi managed to infect during the tournament? While Vari had indeed prevented Irra from obtaining their wish of freedom, the plague she had planted in other contestants meant that they, too, would go home infected. Entire worlds could be brought to ruin at the hands of a goddess who didn't even inhabit them, with even the sacrifice Vari had made in saving Kiri being made pointless if she allowed this rot to fester.

Quietly, Vari fiercely debated with herself on how to proceed. Trying to kill Ravi had undoubtedly made the situation worse, and there was no doubt in Vari's mind that despite how badly she'd wanted to avoid all of this, any of the blood that spilled from this point forward would undoubtedly be on Vari's hands. There was no telling how strong Ravi was now, or how much blood they would shed in the name of their new goddess... and if Ravi was even half as determined as Angela implied them to be, then perhaps one day, even more lives would be plunged into peril.

Perhaps even Mira's.

The thought elicited a soft gasp from Vari's lips as she stopped weeping. She now knew what she had to do.

"The clock is ticking, Varila..." the God Eater gently reminded her. "If you don't make a wish now, I'm afraid we simply must do this another time."

"No need..." Vari sniffled, her eyes still looking down towards the floor. "I-I... I know what I want to wish for."

With a hint of delight, the God Eater widened her smile with excitement. She'd been very much waiting for this.

"Ooooh. Then tell me, Varila Na'tara..." the Madame smiled, now placing a finger onto her cherry lips. "What is it you wish for?"

A long, deafening silence. One that seeped into the furthest reaches of her heart and threatened to make Vari crumble where she stood. For a while, Vari thought she might not be able to make her wish at all, until finally...

"I-I wish..." Vari sniffled. "I wish... for the complete and utter eradication of the plague goddess, Irra. I wish for her influence to be erased from reality, and for all who have come into contact with her to be cured of her plague."

At this, the God Eater clapped her hands together in an excited show of surprise... and no small amount of delight. Clearly, she had been very pleased with what Vari had ultimately chosen to wish for.

"Really?!" the God Eater gasped. "Oh, Vari, you have no idea how much time this will save me! Truly, I-"

In an uncharacteristic show of concern, however, the God Eater briefly paused in her excitement – the God Eater bringing her gaze down onto the spot where Vari's wedding ring used to be. Her eyes lingered on it for a moment as tears trickled down from Vari's cheeks, and despite her words from earlier, the Madame actually seemed a bit hesitant to grant this wish for Vari...

"Are you sure about this?" the God Eater finally asked. "You *did* work very hard to get here. I wouldn't want you to walk away from all of this unsatisfied."

"I'm sure..." Vari shuddered, her voice now barely above a whisper. It was as she'd said at the beginning... she wouldn't take her wish at the cost of others' lives.

Another hint of concern from the Madame. "Truly?" she asked.

"Just get on with it already!" Vari spat, the woman forcing a white-hot glare at the Madame in another display of fervent emotion. "Do it! Before I change my mind..."

For a long while, the God Eater simply met Vari's gaze. If there were ever an opportunity for Vari to take back her wish, she now had ample time to do so. Against the God Eater's every expectation, however, the Leporian did not rescind it; and, once it seemed that Vari was indeed completely certain of her wish, the God Eater gave Vari another smile – a genuine smile, and one that lacked the usual sense of mischief which accompanied it.

Then, upon letting out a soft chuckle underneath her breath, the God Eater raised her fingers.

"I knew I'd crack that shell eventually~." the God Eater hummed. "One moment, please."

It was with a loud *snap* that Vari's vision faded to white.