

ArdOS v1.61b - ALL DIMENSIONAL TRAVELER Model 1.22

Bootup sequence initiated! Please do not power off your device.

Initializing preliminary memdisk scan...

...

Disabling internal memory lock.

INFO: Allocated in memdisk\_oob\_right+0x3d/0x75 [test\_theta]

age=0 cpu=0 pid=5129

\_\_slab\_alloc+0x4b4/0x4f0

memdisk\_cache\_alloc\_trace+0x10b/0x190

memdisk\_oob\_right+0x00/0xff [test\_theta]

init\_module+0x9/0x47 [test\_theta]

load\_module+0x2cb3/0x3b20

SYS\_infinity\_module+0x76/0x80

system\_call\_fastpath+0x12/0x17

INFO: Object 0xfffff8800693bc558 @offset=1368

fp=0xfffff8800693bc720

SYS\_MOUNTED

SYS\_CHECK=COMPLETE

MEM\_CHECK=COMPLETE

Re-enabling internal memory lock.

...

Success!

WARNING: SOFTWARE INTEGRITY FAULT DETECTED!

WARNING: SOFTWARE INTEGRITY FAULT DETECTED!

WARNING: SOFTWARE DATABASE CORRUPTION DETECTED!

WARNING: R:\D:\M\3\9v\2\5\S+a^Z\N`u^,E^x\1t!\9x \*  
5"9"X\Q'\N\F\G\*.1h/1'h^1^m~2xx'I!

WARNING: MULTIPLE ArdOS FUNCTIONALITIES HAVE BEEN DISABLED DUE  
TO SEVERE DATABASE CORRUPTION. INITIALIZING DATABASE RECOVERY  
MODULE:

[98.82%/100%] PROCESSING...

...

FAILED

Retrying...

FAILED

Retrying...

FAILED

Retrying...

...

Success!

Welcome to ArdOS, VARI! You last logged in at

[f7ac07750BF0B16a568d628c360De2a2C5D9D1DD7adb0C656e8edd79b116b8A

DdbCb4c973B978933449dd3CD30EE1021B3E8], on

[0A0CeeAdE2Ad0b7df42e735baE1cC04f2F8A88eeBE3a5A27E3100].

WARNING: You have traveled between a total of 12,539 realities  
since your first login on

[f6d7FA23c0cf67cBca3eEAA7dFCcDCCBA536FC1Dd212ABE3Efbcb5A8dEAd481

0353AFb7ebCeD7aDde18BFa8DDbcEFd2013Ad]. Please consider

scheduling device maintenance with your assigned ArdOS administrator.

AWAITING USER INPUT>

Vari audibly scoffed.

The Leporian stubbornly ripped the visor off of her face with a hushed growl of protest before once again examining the field of charcoal before her with a discerning lavender eye. It was a vast emptiness which she had so clumsily stumbled into a mere fifteen minutes beforehand, with ash raining from the sky and embers landing solemnly onto a perpetually singed landscape that seemed to go on for miles. Volcanoes roared faintly in the distance as she searched for even the subtlest signs of life, their eerie cries occasionally breaking the silence which permeated throughout this long-since-dead hellscape and causing Vari to reflexively wince from their explosive booms. What had happened to this place, she wondered? How could this world possibly have sustained such loss, such fire and brimstone? She could hardly even breathe without the sensation of her lungs burning from the inside, and the longer she stayed here, the more certain she became that staying here any longer would result in serious damage to her health.

No... this was no good.

Each dead tree, every smoke-filled cloud, every pile of ash that littered this barren landscape... all of it only served to affirm to Vari that whatever manner of apocalypse had befallen this version of Merydia, it had permanently marred it beyond all repair. There was no point in searching this place any further, for even if Mira *had* been here, there's no way she could have survived for very long.

She supposed that meant it was time to leave.

With a sigh, Vari once again affixed the visor to her face – the woman thankful that at least this time, she didn't have to go through the lengthy boot sequence before she could finally use it again. Hells, she supposed she should have been counting her lucky stars that the fall hadn't broken the device like she'd feared. It was always a gamble on whether or not Vari would land on a stable surface whenever she jumped... after all, she could have landed in a pit of lava or tumbled down an obsidian cliffside for all she knew. The device would have *really* been broken, then...

With a dexterous flick of her wrist, Vari initialized the holographic user interface using the metallic neural glove which ran down the length of her left arm. An image of what looked like a cluster of galaxies imposed over a translucent all-seeing eye then appeared before her, with a short yellow 'progress bar' appearing in the bottom left corner next to a rather pitiful percentage of 9%. More specifically, the percentage Vari was seeing had denoted that she'd

merely recorded the first 9.8352% of all the realities allocated into this single data cluster – with each reality she logged only contributing mere thousandths of a percentage every time she jumped to one. To anyone else this may have proven to be a stressful number, but the truly vexing variable was the millions upon millions of data clusters recorded within the device – each containing an impossible number of realities that she wouldn't even want to think about had she not known for a fact that Mira's only possible location could have been within the data cluster she was currently exploring. Alas, the device's travel history was largely useless due to its faulty encryption, but the one saving grace it had given to Vari was that it prefixed each location she traveled to with the data cluster that reality was located in using an unencrypted format... her wife's cluster included.

Long story short... it would take years to find her wife.

Hells, it would take decades.

Over a century, perhaps.

But at this rate she could, and *would* find her. The device had logged Mira's DNA whenever she used it, after all – just like Vari's. She just had to keep exploring...

It was then, however, that Vari stopped with a gasp as something beyond her visor's interface suddenly caught her eye, startling her for what was perhaps the dozenth time in a row today.

'It' was back again... and this time, it had gotten closer.

Her silent 'follower'.

Sitting far upon the precipice of an ashen cliffside, adorned in scarlet markings and bearing a compact red envelope within its maw, sat a lone fox. A small, curious, unblinking fox – the very same one who had recently made a point of making itself known every time Vari landed herself in a new world to explore.

How... how did it keep finding her?!

They simply stared at each other for a moment, the rabbit again gauging the fox for even the faintest sign of predatory malice or hostility as she nervously began to dial in the coordinates to the next world listed within her holographic interface. It was... *strange* that she should once again encounter this fox in her travels – especially in a post-apocalyptic variant of her homeworld such as this one. At first, Vari simply thought it a species native to her homeworld that she'd never had the pleasure of encountering before. Perhaps it was an animal of the local forests, or an animal from the far east that had somehow made its way overseas.

But then there was the way it *looked* at her. It was as if its sole interest – its sole *mission* – was to approach Vari. For what reason, she could not quite yet decide. Not once had the fox ever

shown any signs of animosity towards her, nor had it shown any interest in befriending her, but Vari had learned long ago the consequences of letting potential threats wander into her purview – regardless of their intent. This little visitor – as harmless as it may have seemed – was now a little *too* close for her comfort... and it was certainly no exception to the rule which had thus far kept her alive.

Yeah... it was time to go.

A bright flash of light suddenly erupted from the lens of her visor as she dialed the final coordinate into her interface. With it came a brilliant, booming shockwave that resonated outwards into the scorched plains of that doomed world which had so cruelly mimicked the image of her own. And, after turning away from a particularly startling aftershock that emanated from where Vari once stood, the fox once more turned its attention towards the field... only to find it completely empty.

Vari, once again, had gone to another dimension.

The next version of Merydia that Vari had travelled to was one that was considerably colder than the one she'd visited last. Much, *much* colder, in fact – but more importantly, with much more breathable air as well. This would do just fine, she thought as she frantically rubbed her hands together to warm herself up.

Time to get to work.

She made her usual checks; she scanned her surroundings for biosignatures that matched that of Mira's, traversed hundreds of meters in mere seconds with the use of her visor's teleportation chip, and allowed the ADT-v to conduct thorough magickal readings of the surrounding biosphere while Vari maintained the physical search for her wife. Just as she had done on other versions of Merydia, Vari would first look for telltale signs that anyone, or *anything* might still live here. After all, where there was life, there were usually people. Where there were people, there were cities. Where there were cities, there was endless possibility. And with that possibility always came the chance that Vari could finally find her wife and leave this Godsforsaken place with Mira safely in tow. However, the farther she traveled on this world and the more she scanned of its icy surface, the more she realized that this world, too, was barren.

Empty.

"What is with all of these vacant fucking worlds...?" Vari shivered under her breath as she finally came to a halt atop yet another glacier. "Did *anyone* exist here? Ever?"

Her question, of course, went thoroughly unanswered and was promptly carried off into the unknown as she timidly brought her hands to her shoulders and rubbed them for warmth.

Gods, this version of Merydia was absolutely *freezing*, and slowly but surely, Vari was finding herself missing the lava planet more than anything else...

Perhaps that meant she needed another change of scenery.

“Please just give me a fucking city or something...” Vari mumbled to herself as the holographic interface to her device prompted her for another set of coordinates. “A town, a city, a *farm*, I don’t give a shit. Just some place where I can have a nice glass of ale and sit myself down in front of a fire, *please*. Because I swear, if I get another fucking ocean planet, or an acid planet, or Gods forbid another stupid apocalypse planet that’s been overrun by weird teeth goblins, I’m gonna scream-”

Immediately, Vari gasped – her train of thought once again coming to a complete halt upon spotting the same familiar face lurking in the distance.

It was that fox.

That same fucking fox again.

The scarlet markings, the little envelope, the unusually fluffy tail, *everything*. No... no, surely that wasn’t possible, was it? Surely it was a completely different fox that just so happened to look identical to the one that came before it? Mathematically, the chances of encountering a

fox with an envelope in its mouth in two separate universes was, by every measure, a modern statistical wonder. It wasn't impossible... but for it to happen over a dozen times in a row? That seemed pretty damn improbable.

And yet, there remained that same look on its face. That icy look of purpose.

There was no doubting it, now... this fox was following her across dimensions.

"Alright then..." Vari stubbornly huffed as she dialed the last few digits of her new coordinates.

"You wanna do this? Let's fucking do this. Come on, then – follow me."

Then, as if goading fate itself into a battle of wills, Vari again changed dimensions. With another flash of light and another potent shockwave, she was off into the all-encompassing void – her device allowing her to break universal bounds just as easily as it had thousands of times before. Despite the vehemency of her previous wishes, however, once Vari had landed into another dimension, it seemed she had indeed encountered another hazardous version of the world she once lived in. Amusingly enough, it *was* indeed an ocean planet like she'd suggested. Then, once she jumped again, she found an acid planet. Then a desert planet. And then there came a planet with storms so rageful that she could swear their gusts could sunder Merydia's core on even the calmest of days. Again, and again, and again Vari switched, the Leporian mindlessly cataloguing each world she jumped to while her device performed multiple scans on their severely corrupted surfaces for life. As expected, nothing of note was revealed in these scans...

but the one constant Vari found in each and every one of her visits was the fox that she now knew was watching her.

Waiting for her.

All with that very same envelope in its mouth.

Eventually, Vari's anger morphed into mild curiosity as she stubbornly continued to hop worlds to avoid confronting it. What *was* it that this fox wanted to show to her so badly, anyway? Was that envelope a ruse to pique her curiosity enough so that the fox could get closer to her and take her out, or did it genuinely have a message to deliver to her that she desperately needed to see? And why, for Gods' sake, did it not show up in any of Vari's scans?! That was the most confusing part. A myriad of questions and anxieties coursed through her mind as she hopped from world to world, and yet against all expectation, Vari would soon find herself face with an unusually pleasant surprise. One that would instantly change whatever foul mood she'd been indulging herself in for the past few hours...

A miracle world.

An actual, honest to Gods version of Merydia that teemed with life, people, and possibility around every corner.

She knew this, for it was the instant she appeared in the middle of a populated town square that several passersby reflexively jumped where they stood. Many of them gasped as Vari appeared in the briefest, yet brightest flash of light that any of them had ever seen. Several of them even groaned from the pain of having been suddenly blinded out of nowhere while Vari frantically attempted to examine her surroundings with a wild look on her face. Cobblestone streets, white-brick towers, clear skies, and not a goblin in sight...?

She... she'd found a city?

YES! Finally! She'd found a city!

The Leporian might have literally jumped for joy had she not now been surrounded by several gawking pedestrians, many of whom were now visibly scowling at the very blinding distraction that Vari had just created. Instead, however, she was merely content to let out a small celebratory chuckle as she breathed in the smell of cooked food and fresh markets for the first time in what must have been weeks. For all they knew, this strange woman had just disrupted the peace for no apparent reason and then celebrated herself for it. Still, Vari didn't care what they thought. She'd finally, *finally* found that city... and cities, most notably of all, usually contained an inn or three. But the best part of landing on this world?

Not a single fox in sight.

That was all she needed to know. Satisfied, Vari then scampered her way over towards the nearest inn without even so much as a passing glance towards the crowd which now surrounded her – leaving a confused gathering of people behind in the streets as she counted a small sum of whatever was left in her coin purse. Hopefully the random assortment of currency she carried in her pouch would somehow prove valuable enough for the local innkeep to rent her a room...

If nothing else, though, she supposed she could just pick one of the locks and make herself at home anyway.

...

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*In the interest of time...*

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It was during the still hours of the late evening in which Vari finally took the opportunity to shut her eyes for a moment.

As always, her katana kept her company on the other side of her bed as she drowsily recounted the events of the past few hours. Her visor, along with the metallic neural glove which completed it, rested quietly on the nightstand of her inn's room while her mind idly wandered towards thoughts of the fox who had been following her for quite some time now. She thought of the envelope it bore in its mouth, recalling with some mild amount of amusement that it looked like a little mailman just itching at the chance to deliver some critically important message to her. How long had it been able to track her across worlds, anyway? Was there some special element she wasn't aware of within each dimension that allowed the fox to follow her the way it did? Curiously, she then thought of the worlds that it had actually followed her to...

... Only to quickly become lost in the gallery of blurry, incomplete recollections she had of the worlds she'd visited. Urgh, it was difficult to think right now, much less stay awake. What could have possibly allowed such a creature to stalk her in the first place, she wondered with an arch

of her brow? What did each world have in common? The lack of people, maybe? The abundance of magical energy?

Eventually, the apocalyptic visions of each world all began to meld together into one menacing mental portrait – eliciting the anxious hope from Vari that her own version of Merydia would never fall to such perils. She audibly shuddered at the thought...

Quietly, her thoughts then shifted towards that of her home.

Then, of her sisters.

Her wife.

...

Vari sighed. Gods, what had she done...?

...

“The fault was not thine own, miss Na’tara.” replied a deep, gentle voice.

With a terrified gasp, Vari’s eyes shot wide open as she suddenly jumped up from the covers of her bed – the woman desperately grabbing onto the hilt of her katana before swiftly bringing its edge at blinding speeds over towards the neck of a small, stone-faced fox. Despite Vari’s reaction, however, the creature appeared unfazed. It sat unblinkingly next to her bedside with what looked like an unusually patient sense of serenity, and upon feeling the blade pressed upon its neck, the fox merely tilted its head to the side in mild curiosity.

Vari, however, was much more on-edge. Her rabbit ears twitched out of reflex as she nervously attempted to catch her breath, and her legs stubbornly fought the urge to lift themselves up off of the bed and sprint onto the wooden floor so that she could flee from her intruder. She’d been so fearful, so caught off-guard, that the metal of her sword had actually seen the reflection of the fox creature beside her before her own eyes did. Once her eyes *did* see the fox, however, Vari let out another gasp before tightening her hand around the base of her hilt in frustration.

“You...” Vari growled through panting breaths.

“Indeed. It is I.” The fox telepathically replied with a courteous bow against her blade. “A pleasure to finally make thine acquaintance, Varila. Long has it been since mine search for you first commenced. I must say, I had not expected you to prove such an... evasive recipient. Tell

me, what was it about my appearance that caused you to mistrust me so? It *was* my appearance, was it not? Have I done aught else to frighten you in our previous encounters?”

For a moment, Vari did not respond. She merely looked down towards the fox with a confused and frustrated look on her face, an incredulous laugh leaving her lips as she shook her head in complete and utter bewilderment. He had to be kidding. So, not only had this fox tracked her across multiple dimensions, and not only had it somehow gotten inside of her room while she was sleeping, but now it could actually *talk* to her somehow. Not to mention the fact that it had easily been able to figure out her name – her *tribal* name, no less – and address her as such with unnerving amounts of familiarity. Only Mira and those within her immediate family would have called her ‘Varila’. And now it had the nerve to ask Vari why she ran?

Sure. Why the Hells not?

“...You followed me, for one.” Vari eventually mumbled, the tremor in her hand now calming as she engaged the creature in long-overdue conversation. “Usually, you’re supposed to approach someone if you want their attention. Not stalk them from afar.”

“Forgive me, miss Na’tara, but... that is precisely what I attempted to do upon our first meeting.” The fox replied in confusion. “I approached you many times – but you simply crossed realities with every attempt I made to greet you. As a result, I merely did what any of my kind would do and waited until you were ready to receive my message.”

“Your kind...?” Vari scoffed with a tilt of her own head. “And what exactly *is* your kind, anyway? Who the Hells are you, why do you know my name, and what is this message you are so damn fixated on giving me?”

The fox, however, did not grant Vari a reply to these questions – at least, not one she could hear. Instead, it simply raised the envelope it held between its teeth and knowingly gestured for Vari to take it. And, though she was admittedly rather curious about the message’s contents, Vari nonetheless hesitated to do so. Reaching out to take the parchment at this point would most certainly entail letting her guard down. What reason had it given Vari to believe that it would not attack her the moment she disarmed herself?

... Then again...

Perhaps she had been overreacting. Although she was by no means in any rush to put her sword away, she figured that if the fox had truly meant her any sort of harm, it would have done so a very long time ago. It had neglected the many opportunities it had received to hurt her thus far, and clearly no amount of dimension hopping, door locking, or hiding was going to prevent it from completing whatever mission had been assigned to it. Besides, she thought... it was becoming increasingly clear to her that the best way to finally satisfy the little creature who stood before her was to simply swallow her pride and take the stupid letter.

So that's what she would do.

With a heavy sigh, Vari finally decided to put her sword away and take the message from the fox's maw.

"Fine." Vari grumbled as she unsealed the envelope. "But this better be really, really, really, *really* important."

"I leave that for you to decide." the fox replied. "But I believe you would like to hear what the Madame has to say."

With a huff, Vari rolled her eyes before unfolding the letter and bringing it up to her face to read it. He had a 'Madame', huh? Whatever this message might be, it better have been good...

...

*Greetings and salutations, Varila~!*

*I hope this letter finds you well! Allow me to introduce myself. I am a being simply known as the God-Eater – Madame of the Crossroads and enjoyer of all things*

*multiversal! I am writing to inform you of an upcoming tournament that is currently being organized by yours truly.*

*What type of tournament, you might ask? Well, a fighting tournament of course!*

*That's right! A fighting tournament where the winner takes all, and is personally granted their prize in the form of a single wish from myself!*

*As you may have already guessed, the fact that you are receiving this letter means that you have already been selected as one of the tournament's many glorious participants! You may consider both the appearance of my darling little follower and the reception of my letter your official invitation to the latest Crossroads Fighting Tournament, and should you choose to accept this invitation, simply let my little fox know and they will be more than happy to escort you to the boundaries of my realm.*

*Do note that I do not give out these invitations lightly! I have regularly noticed you treading where mortals have not trod many times before. I would know myself what you aim to achieve from this... mostly just to satisfy my own curiosity, though. ;)*

*Happy hunting, Vari!*

*~ The God Eater*

...

With a perplexed look on her face, Vari carefully folded up the letter into her hands before looking back down towards the fox who still remained at attention.

A tournament?

A wish...?

... What.

“What is this?” Vari asked the fox, only for the familiar to again tilt its head. It didn’t take very much effort to figure out what he was thinking, however; to him, her question simply didn’t make any sense.

“Thou hast read the Madame’s letter, have you not?” he responded. “The God Eater herself has granted thee an invitation to her tournament. Shouldst thou find thyself the victor of said tournament, you will be entitled to the granting of a single wish-”

“No! I mean...” Vari interjected. Her voice faltered for a moment as she spoke, the Leporian trying and failing to figure out what sort of fantasy realm she had carelessly wandered into. What the Hells was going on? Was she dreaming? Had her mind finally snapped and imagined all of this as some sort of coping mechanism for her lost sanity? The fox, the wish, the telepathic communication... all of it seemed much too far-fetched to even be real, let alone possible. And yet here she was, face-to-face with a well-spoken interdimensional fox who not only knew Vari by name, but also served a master who clearly knew more about her than she let on. From the way she worded her letter, it also seemed that she was eager to see Vari accept the invitation to this tournament. If this was all some cruel sort of trick, it was certainly an unnecessarily elaborate one...

“Okay. Let’s assume for a moment that I believe all of this and that it isn’t some sort of complicated rouse I’ve fallen victim to.” Vari began. “Why me? Why am I being summoned to these ‘Crossroads’ and being given a chance at wishing for... literally anything I want, I guess? Do I fit some sort of special criteria? Am I being invited on the whim of some fancy Goddess who enjoys seeing people get beat to a pulp on the off-chance that they might win some special wish? What’s your angle, here?”

“Please do not misunderstand my Madame’s intent, miss Varila.” the fox was quick to reply.

“The God Eater’s reasons are her own – thus only she and her closest associates are privy to such information. I can assure you, however, that there is not malice behind her actions. Still, though it is not my place to do so, were you to demand that I guess at her intentions anyway-“

“And I do.” Vari insisted.

“-then I would speculate that she merely organizes these events out of curiosity. She wishes not to watch people suffer for her own entertainment, but rather, to witness firsthand whose will is the strongest amongst those she chooses. Why is it that people fight? Why is it that these mortals sacrifice both tooth and limb to obtain the wishes she offers? What do these people wish for once they win? As of yet, she has not been able to determine a single answer, for she believes there *is* no single answer. Every competitor who participates in these tournaments possesses their own goals, wants, and desires. And yet, there is always the chance that there is perhaps more to the heart than one might initially realize. In fact, my Madame is quite sure of it. Thus, she continues to conduct these tournaments in the hope that these mortals might surprise her with an answer.”

Without a word, Vari simply continued to stare at the fox as it then jumped up onto the bed beside her. She pondered on his thoughts for a while as he politely waited for her reply... but once it became clear to the familiar that a reply would not come, he motioned to speak again.

“Perhaps it is not my place to say as much, Varila, but over the course of our encounters, I have slowly come to realize why it is that you so feverishly analyze these worlds and their people.”

The fox revealed. “I have seen the look in your eyes many times before during my thousand or so years of experience with recruiting potential competitors, and it is my speculation that you are in search of something... or rather, *someone*.”

Upon hearing these words, a brief look of vulnerability from Vari flashed before the fox’s eyes as she suddenly turned her attention towards him. It was in that look of vulnerability that the fox was able to see much behind Vari’s gaze; the pain she bore, the sorrow which tormented her, and the unmistakable love she carried for whomever it was that she had so desperately been searching for. At this, the fox gently closed its eyes and hummed – the familiar now knowing for certain that its suspicions had been confirmed.

“I see.” he nodded. “Someone has been lost to you, then? Someone who has traversed the interdimensional winds and cannot find their way back home?”

At this, Vari merely nodded somberly in response. Yes... she was in great pain indeed, the fox realized. What a shame...

“I am sorry.” The fox quietly affirmed. “It is a terrible grief that has been placed upon your heart, miss Varila. I would not wish it upon anyone... but if I may, this brings me to petition thee for an answer to my next question: in your possession sits perhaps one of the most powerful

machinations ever conjured by mortal spirit. There are infinite universes at your disposal, with many of them containing alternate variations of both yourself and the individual you are searching for. Why then, do you not sift through these dimensions until you find a suitable alternative? Why do you not simply pull an alternate version of your loved one out from one of these universes and take them back to yours? Surely there are individuals who, over time, would heal the wound you have sustained? Would it not ultimately be kinder to allow yourself to love again with a different version of this individual?"

Much to the fox's surprise, however, it was at this suggestion that Vari angrily stood from her bedside and glared at him with a disgusted mix of annoyance and offense.

"I don't even entertain the thought." Vari spat before grabbing a hold of her sword and sheathing it at her side.

"But why?" the fox chimed again. "Surely that would be the easiest way to live out the rest of your days in peace and happiness, instead of relentlessly continuing on this endless quest? Why persist, knowing that your efforts may ultimately be fruitless?"

"What am I supposed to do, then? Just waltz into another dimension and 'steal' another version of my wife?" Vari remarked with a contemptuous scowl. "Even if I *did* abandon my search for her as you suggest, nothing would be solved. There would still be MY Mira stuck in another dimension; trapped, alone, and frightened at the prospect that she may never see the world

she grew up in again. What makes you think finding another version of her to marry would be so painless? What would she make of it if she were to ever somehow find her way home and discover that I've taken up an imitation of herself as my wife? Would she be happy for me? Would *I* be happy with myself? Believe me, I'm disgusted with myself enough as it is. I don't *want* to know the answer to those questions."

"So you are resolved to find her, then..." the fox hums with a curious glint in its eye.

"To find my wife? Yes." Vari answered impatiently. "Let me put it to you this way: if there were another version of the God Eater conducting tournaments all throughout the multiverse--"

"There is no such thing." The fox quipped in mild amusement.

"But suppose there were." Vari retorted. "Which version of your Madame would you be loyal to? The one you currently serve, or the stranger who possesses her face?"

Its eyes now trailing back down towards the wooden floor, the fox paused for a moment as it quietly considered Vari's query. She stood above the creature for a while, patiently adorning herself with the visor from her nightstand and its corresponding glove as he attempted to think of a proper response. After a long, considerate silence, however, the fox returned its gaze back towards Vari's – the fox finally having found its answer.

“I would remain loyal to the Madame who created me.” The fox conceded with a nod. At this answer, Vari too merely nodded in agreement. She was glad he at least finally understood the reasoning behind her actions... even if it *did* take an unusually long time for him to figure it out.

Perhaps this turn of events meant that pursuing a wish from the God Eater would be a worthwhile effort, then? After all, if the fox could understand her wish, then perhaps Vari could plead her case to an all-powerful being such as the God Eater as well...

It was decided.

With quick and practiced movements, Vari used her glove to launch the ADT-v's holographic interface so that she might enter a new set of coordinates. The fox, still watching from atop Vari's bedside, quietly hummed beneath his breath as he noted the manner in which she had activated the visor's travelling capabilities. So *that's* how the device worked, he thought with a curious flick of his tail. She'd been entering makeshift coordinates to distant worlds...

He supposed that was *one* way to do it... even if the method itself was a little antiquated for his liking.

“Thine people represent interdimensional energies of the multiverse as mathematical variables, then...” he murmured in idle curiosity. “I must admit, I would never have thought to interpret them in such a manner. Are the people of your world reliant on such technology, then?”

“It wasn’t *my* people who made this stuff.” Vari dryly replied. “But... yeah, I guess you could say we are. We use a mix of both magic and technology where I come from. I’m sure you can show me a million better ways to travel to the Crossroads with the magic you have, but as of right now, this is the only method I prefer.”

“The Crossroads?” the fox replied with cheeky, smiling eyes. “Then thou hast accepted the Madame’s call for competition?”

“I’ve accepted the offer for her *wish*, nothing more.” Vari said with a sidelong glance. “I know what I’d like to ask of her if I win the tournament, but truth be told.. I don’t know how long I’m gonna last in this thing. Or if I’ll even compare to the other competitors who accept the God Eater’s invitation... but I have to try. Hells, I might even die in my attempt to obtain this wish, but it’ll be worth every broken bone I receive if it means I have even a sliver of a chance at getting my wife back. Now, what’re the coordinates to this place? I need to go *now* if I’m gonna be competing.”

“Coordinates?” the fox asked. “M-my apologies, miss Na’tara, but I’m afraid I am wholly unfamiliar with the methods thine device utilizes to traverse between realities. The concept of the multiverse’s winds being translated into coordinates is very much lost on me, I must admit. I am, however, quite capable of providing thee with an *alternate* means of transportation shouldst thou be keen to compete...”

The fox punctuated his offer with the conjuring of a gold-rimmed portal that suddenly appeared behind Vari's back. With another light gasp, Vari turned to face it – her lavender eyes shuffling back and forth as she obtained a mere glimpse at the completely foreign world which now hovered before her.

The Crossroads...

Now realizing her device wouldn't be needed to actually get there, Vari sheepishly deactivated the ADT-v and let it rest in idle mode. So *that's* how he'd been able to follow her...

"I suppose I have no choice, then." Vari mumbled to herself. "The device can't exactly bring me to the Crossroads if we don't know what its coordinates would be."

"... Fine. Guide me through the portal, then." Vari reaffirmed. "I'm going to enter this tournament if it's the last thing I do-"

"Patience, miss Na'tara." The fox assured her as he eagerly hopped off of the bed and made his way over to Vari's side. "If thou wouldst allow me a moment to fulfill a professional courtesy ere we depart – I have something I must first gift to thee so that thou may qualify for this tournament, seeing as thou hast accepted the Madame's invitation."

And, before Vari could even say a word in response, a light red ribbon complete with a fashionable golden bell apparated around the woman's neck and fastened itself securely to her person. It was a moment before Vari even *felt* the tag dangling from the skin of her collar, it had been applied so smoothly... but once she heard the telltale sound of a little bell jingling around her neck, a bemused scoff left her lips. A bell? What was she, a pet?

"This will serve as a visual cue to the denizens of the Crossroads that thou hast opted to compete." The fox explained. "It is your tag. Do *not* lose it, or thou shalt be disqualified from the tournament in its entirety."

"I'll be sure to keep it safe, little fox." Vari cheekily assured. "Now can we go?"

"My name is Korinth, miss Vari." Korinth corrected as he guided her inside. "And yes... we may."

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## Welcome to the Crossroads

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Vari stumbled with a light grunt of protest as she awkwardly made her way through the portal with her newfound fox guide. As expected, the trip through the portal had been completely painless, though it had still left her covered in an odd sort of golden dust which clung to her clothes like glitter. With an annoyed grumble and a few incoherent mutterings, Vari dusted herself off before finally lifting her head up to see what could only be described as one of the most serene-looking places she had ever seen.

The Crossroads.

A vast, open sky presented itself before her as Korinth guided her further into the interdimensional realm. At first glance, the Crossroads really did appear to be a habitable world in its own right – with a select few of its features even being strikingly similar that of Vari’s own now that she was able to catch a closer look. The realm seemed to stretch out over a long, endless horizon which Vari could already see was sprinkled with various mountains, bodies of water, and rooftops from multiple settlements. Yes, *settlements*, Vari noted in surprise – each presumably bustling with the life and opportunity that Vari had so desperately searched for day in and day out. From what she could tell, the Crossroads seemed to boast its own bustling little

corner of the cosmos. It was much more populated than she'd initially expected... which, now that she thought about it, didn't seem too strange considering that it was a place where people from multiple universes supposedly interacted on the regular.

She wouldn't have admitted it out loud, but there was a unique form of beauty to be found in a place like this...

"Hey there! Welcome to the Crossroads!" a man in an unusual uniform called out as he waved to the pair. Immediately, the man caught Vari's attention, her eyes flickering over to meet his gaze only to notice that he stood ready at what looked like one of the Crossroad's various 'checkpoints'. From here, Vari could see that he was blonde, with a bright-eyed face and a cool, slick smile. He sat behind a compact stall underneath an even more compact wooden outpost, his desk littered with paperwork and his uniform decorated with a red and gold overcoat on top of what Vari could only assume was black body armor.

Yup... he definitely looked like a local of some sort.

"I'm Crossguard Tomas!" he idly waved again as Korinth guided Vari to the man's stall. "And uh... looks like you've been selected as a competitor for the upcoming tournament, yeah? Man, Kor, took your time in digging *this* one up. Didn't the Madame hand you this one's invitation like, weeks ago?"

“Miss Na’tara proved to be challenging quarry.” Korinth replied with his usual icy glare. “After much persistence from both parties, however, the two of us have arrived at a mutual accord.”

At this, however, the Crossguard merely laughed before picking up a pen and scribbling something down onto one of his many leatherbound pages. From where Vari stood, she had been able to catch a glimpse of what he had written – if only just barely.

*Varila Na’tara - Checked In*

“Ahh, so *you’re* Varila.” Tomas hummed before placing his pen down. “Y’know, not many people have the means of traversing multiple dimensions the way you do. Certainly, they don’t do it as *often* as you do. I don’t know how you handle it! I’d get a headache if I traveled that often...”

“I do what I do because I must. I don’t travel merely because I ‘can’.” Vari simply replied. She crossed her arms somewhat defensively for a moment as her gaze idly wandered towards her surroundings again, the Leporian taking in the many sights and sounds of the realm she had somehow been convinced to wander into. Nothing about this place *seemed* particularly suspicious, she noted with a purse of her lips... but then again, Vari had never exactly been one to let her guard down anyway.

“Yeah, yeah, no judgement from me.” Tomas chuckled with a wave of his hand. “Welp! I see you have your tail, and it looks like Korinth already gave you your tag. Remember, though! Keep that tag handy! If you lose it in or outside of the tournament, you’re out!”

“So you’re saying if someone were to steal my tag mid-fight, I would lose?” Vari asked with a raised brow... wait, what was that about a tail? Was he referring to Korinth, perhaps?

“Yes indeedy!” said Tomas. “But you can play the tournament however you want! I’d say there’s a healthy mix of competitors who go for knockouts vs. those who go for the tags. Really, though, it just comes down to however you prefer to fight. Oh, but try not to get *too* blood-thirsty. Usually, someone will step in if a competitor starts to go overboard.”

“I’d rather not kill anyone, if that’s what you’re implying.” Vari said with a questioning squint of her eyes. “I want my wish, but I don’t want to take anyone’s life to get it.”

“Then it sounds like you’ll do just fine!” Tomas said with an encouraging smile. “That being said, I’ve got you signed in and you’ve got your tag, so it looks like you’re golden. Feel free to explore the Crossroads for a while until one of our crossguards comes to retrieve you! From there, the tournament will start and you’ll have your chance at that wish. The first rounds will be starting relatively soon, so make yourself comfortable and feel free to make some friends while you’re at it!”

“Sure... sounds like a blast.” Vari dryly replied. “Thank you, um... Tomas. I’ll be going now.”

“You’re certainly welcome!” he beamed. “Don’t let poor Vari get too lost now, Kor, ya hear?”

“Of course, sir Tomas.” Korinth politely bowed. “Should miss Vari permit it, I shall accompany her until she is selected for her round. She has thus far proven herself to be... interesting company. I would know more about her ere the tournament begins.”

“... Yeah. I’d be okay with that.” Vari nodded, the Leporian finally unfolding her arms as Korinth again met her gaze. Were he to have more human-like features, Vari could have sworn that the fox might have given her a subtle smile in that moment.

“Aww, look at you two! Making friends already, I see.” Tomas teased. “Ain’t that just the beauty of this place? Now go on! I, uh... heh... have some reorganizing to do...”

“Until we meet again, sir Tomas.” Korinth bid with a bow.

As Tomas waved and frantically begin to clean and reorganize his work station, Vari wasted little time in setting off to explore what the Crossroads had to offer her – just as the crossguard had suggested. As Korinth curiously followed her in tow, Vari began to reflect on her newfound circumstances. An interdimensional tournament, a near-limitless wish, and a multiversal goddess who had just so happened to take enough of an interest in Vari to send her an

invitation. Most notable of all, however, was the chance Vari had finally received to get her wife back. All of it sounded like something which came straight from a dream, or perhaps from the words of a storybook...

...Though, if it *was* a dream, she certainly didn't want to risk waking herself up. She would do anything and *everything* she could in order to ensure that she got her wife back, and she wasn't going to pass up the best opportunity she'd received to do so in an extremely long time.

Yeah.

Once that first round started... Vari would be more than ready to get her wife back.