
Prelude: A Dream of Better Days

Knock knock.

Vari waited patiently at the front entrance to her house with a hint of excitement in her eyes and a tremor in her lip. The sun beamed down from above her while she waited, with its tranquil rays streaking across the strands of midnight blue hair that adorned her head and complemented the glistening bronze tan of her skin. As was typical for the environment which surrounded her home, birds chirped, wind blew, and smoke puffed from the crown of her chimney – indicating that although the house had indeed looked long-abandoned, someone had been living inside of it and keeping themselves warm with her hearth...

And she'd instantly known who that someone was.

After all, there had only ever been one other person whom she'd given the keys to her home.

Did she look okay, she wondered? She fidgeted with the purple fabric of her dress while she waited, her heart racing amidst the misty tears that were now threatening to trickle down her cheeks. Was her hair too messy? Cheeks too red? Eyes too puffy? It had been such a long time she'd been back here; so long, in fact, that after so many years of exploring other dimensions, she had figured it a given that returning to their snug little homestead simply wasn't in the realm of possibility for her. Dreams of her happily-ever-after had long since died with the disappearance of her love, and yet, here she was... timidly

grooming herself and fidgeting over every single imperfection in her wardrobe just as she had done on their first date together.

Knock knock knock.

It was strange.

Knock knock.

Surreal.

Knock knock knock...

But she was here.

...

Except her *wife* wasn't. *Gods*, she was taking a long time. How very like her to keep Vari waiting like this, especially after having been separated for as long as they had. The Leporian had very nearly opted to kick down the door to her own home before finally, after what seemed like an eternity of waiting, the door to her home opened.

And Mira greeted her with a smile.

"Hey!" she beamed softly as she swung open the door. The subtle light from the hearth inside seemed to shimmer amidst the natural light which had suddenly flooded into the doorway, its crackling flames ebbing and flickering around Mira's feline ears like a gentle halo which adorned the top of her flowing, platinum-blond hair. The sapphire jewels in Mira's eyes immediately met Vari's as she looked up at her – her pale skin positively flushed from time spent cooking over a warm stove and causing Vari's heart to reflexively skip a beat once she finally saw her again. She was... beautiful. Just as beautiful as she'd been all those years ago, if not even moreso. Vari could hardly believe this was real...

"Sorry," she smiled, looking up at Vari with a blush. "I uh... didn't think it would take me this long to finish cooking." Mira admitted nervously. "I was hoping to be done by the time you got home so you cou-"

A startled 'Oof!' escaped Mira's lips as her words were suddenly interrupted by the weight of Vari's body colliding into hers. With tearful whimpers, Vari brought Mira into the deepest, warmest, most apologetic hug that she could possibly manage. White-hot tears began to stream down the length of Vari's cheeks as she buried her face into Mira's shoulder, and soon, Mira was giggling underneath her breath before wrapping her arms back around Vari in a knowing attempt to comfort her.

"I'm so sorry Mira..." Vari sniffled through her tears. "I'm so sorry! For everything!"

And she was. Oh, how she was.

Gods, where to even start? She cried and fumbled over her words as she stood there holding Mira tightly in her strong embrace. She was sorry for bringing home the ADT. She was sorry for being so reckless all the time. She was sorry for getting Mira stuck in some unknown alternate dimension, and she was even *more* sorry for taking so many years to find her. Every day, every *hour* Vari spent apart from Mira was spent missing her. She had missed her so deeply she had ached, and for every moment she spent searching, she also spent pining to finally be with her wife again. The time they had spent

apart from one another had felt like an eternity of torture, and she swore up and down that she would *never* let it happen again. Ever.

“M-Mira I-I...” Vari whimpered again, punctuating her tears with gentle squeezes. “I’m sorry. I’m so, so-“

“Vari! Vari... It’s okay.” Mira smiled reassuringly, her feline-tail gently brushing against Vari's leg and staying there for a moment as they held each other tight. “It wasn’t your fault, Vari...” She said, her voice muffled as her wife kept her face smushed against her chest. "...and I'm here now." she added with another smile as she stepped back out of Vari's hug to be able to look up into her wife's teary eyes.

At this, Vari separated from their embrace before again sniffing and wiping another series of tears away from her face. She nodded meekly, her face almost akin to that of a child’s as she promptly attempted to compose herself before ultimately sighing and shyly bringing one of her hands to her arm. She supposed Mira always *did* have a knack for calming her down...

“Y-yeah...” Vari finally exhaled. “Yeah, you’re right. I’m sorry, I just... I missed you, Mira. I missed you more than you know.”

Another loving smile greeted Vari’s words. This time, Mira wiped away a tear of her own before looking up at her wife and giggling.

“I missed you too, Vari.” Mira smiled with a gentle rub of Vari’s arm. And, like a little ray of sunshine that proved itself to be warmer and brighter than any of the *actual* rays of sun which surrounded them, Mira beamed a toothy smile up at Vari before bringing the door wide open and gesturing for her to come inside.

“Welcome home, Vari!” Mira giggled.

... Wait, what?

Immediately, Vari’s heart dropped like a stone into the pit of her stomach as the world around her suddenly shifted into a marred imitation of its former self. An imitation that felt cruel and distorted... not to mention lifeless. The birds had stopped chirping. The sky had become grey. The trees were now dead, and Vari’s house was now made from the same charred, lifeless wood of their branches. From where she was standing, Vari could now see a cold imitation of the home she’d so fondly remembered them living in now waiting behind Mira as she stood idly in its doorway – the home now whispering, *begging* Vari to come inside. It was dark inside. Darker than even the most lightless cave or the blackest void, and yet somehow – against all of what Vari knew to be possible – her lavender eyes could still spot a metallic glint that sparkled brightly behind Mira as it snaked its way over to the ankle of her right leg.

And then, Vari gasped in realization. She knew what was about to happen.

“MIRA! GET BEHIND ME-“

Vari’s warning was suddenly cut off by the sound of a horrific scream which escaped from her wife’s lips as Mira was suddenly dragged into the darkness of her home by a large, metallic claw. The hand whisked her away in an instant, with Mira’s screams fading into their home and echoing out into its decrepit hallways while the sound of her kicking and struggling against her attacker urged Vari forward into their house. Tears were now streaming down Vari’s face again as she started to hyperventilate, her legs carrying her as fast as they could carry her into the darkness while her ears listened intently for the sound of her wife’s voice for guidance. No... she couldn’t let this happen again!

Mira's screams, however, only served to further disorient Vari the further she sprinted into their home in an adrenaline-fueled haze. Every door she opened, every room she searched, all of it somehow began to grow darker and colder as Vari desperately used her sensitive ears to try and locate her wife's voice amidst the chaos. Fuck, where was she?! *Where the fuck was she?!* There were so many rooms in this house – more than she remembered – and it seemed that with every empty bedroom she searched and every dusty library she found, she only seemed to grow more and more lost in the labyrinth that was their old home. Mira's voice seemed to spread out all around her as well, she noticed; it was as if there were never one location that her wife could be in, but *many*. It was why the longer Vari searched, the more panicked she became. She couldn't lose her wife again. She couldn't let it take her. She *wouldn't...* yet, what could she do to stop it?

Eventually, however, Vari's blind desperation had eventually led her to the correct door. A door which she had slammed open and practically thrown off its hinges as she frantically barged her way inside, the act coating her in splinters and drawing blood from her shoulder as cracked wood openly scraped against her skin. She'd found her... but at this point, there wasn't much time left.

She was screaming, crying Vari's name in desperation as her feline-like claws were dragged against the wooden floor of their bedroom – causing her hands to bleed from the sheer pressure of her resistance. The metallic neural glove of the ADT was now pulling Mira into a brightly-lit portal which served to act as a rift between two realities, and the crack of Mira's bones could be heard rattling throughout the room as the force with which the claw dragged her through that rift caused Mira's foot to become dislocated from her right leg. Mira screamed with desperate, frantic cries of pain as her legs were slowly torn apart, and with tears in her eyes, Vari ran to her – her lavender eyes attempting to catch a glimpse of the reality which awaited her wife as she sprinted through the darkness.

Except... there was nothing.

Literally – nothing behind that portal. There was only more darkness. More coldness and emptiness. From what she could see, the clawed hand was dragging her wife into a void she had no chance of returning from. A void which contained nothing on the other side. No life. No light. No hope.

Only oblivion.

“VARI!!! PLEASE!!!” Mira shrieked and squealed in desperation. “DON’T LET IT TAKE ME!” Mira begged, horror in her eyes and tears blurring her vision as her wife ran to her. Now overcome with desperate tears herself, Vari pounced forward in order to grab her wife’s outstretched hand as the clawed glove of the ADT made one last attempt to pull her inside. And, just as Vari’s hand had brushed against Mira’s palm, *just* as she was about to save her life...

The sound of Mira’s screams disappeared into the void as she was suddenly yanked through.

She was gone.

“MIRA?!” Vari panted as she lifted herself off the floor. “MIRA!!!”

Tears trickled in excess down onto the cold dark wood of their bedroom as Vari’s eyes gradually began to trail down to the palm of her hand...

... only for her voice to crack in tearful whimpers as she found Mira’s wedding ring clutched between her fingers.

A howling, tearful wail of grief suddenly roared out into the emptiness of Vari's home as she realized her defeat. Her grief carried out for miles into the uncaring darkness as she wailed in agony – the woman crying and retching and punching the ground beneath her until finally...

Vari woke up.

With a tearful gasp, Vari immediately shot upwards into the bed of her inn room. Her body trembled underneath the bed covers, with layers of cold sweat trickling down the back of her neck as her eyes frantically scanned the room for signs of Mira. W-where was she? Was she really awake this time? She was panting still, and her bloodshot eyes couldn't seem to unblur their vision as a puddle of tears began to form onto the bedsheets below her while she recovered. Quietly, she raised her shaking hands – both of them spotless with nary a drop of blood to be found.

Another nightmare.

Instantly, Vari plopped back down onto the bed with a tearful whine before burying her face in her hands and weeping. It didn't take long for her to break down completely once the tears arrived, and soon the soft tears trickling down her cheeks morphed into grief-stricken sobs as she then tried and failed to process the purpose of such a wildly disturbing dream. Why...? Why did she have to relive the most nightmarish version of her life's biggest mistake over and over again? She was so tired of the nightmares – the constant terrible and dramatic exaggeration that her dreams provided beyond the plain and simple horror of what *actually* happened. And, as usual, the worst part of dreams such as this one wasn't their intensity. Rather, it was knowing that they were merely the latest additions of a long series of very vivid nightmares. Even before she arrived in the Crossroads, Vari had hardly gone a single night without experiencing them... and it was becoming harder and harder to will herself out of bed every time she woke up.

She just needed this tournament to start...

Knock knock knock.

The sound caused Vari to jump with a gasp as she suddenly turned to face the door to her room. Her hand clenched into the leather of her combat armor as she panted out of fright for a moment, the woman trying to decide on whether or not she had just imagined that noise before again jumping at the sound of another series of knocks.

Nope... that was real, alright.

She groaned under her breath before languidly sweeping her legs out of bed and making her way over towards the door to her room.

“Coming...” she sniffled while frantically wiping away the leftover tears from her eyes. Gods... they couldn’t have come when she *wasn’t* crying her eyes out?

With a drowsy sigh, Vari opened the door.

“Alright, what the hells do you- ...Oh. Hey.” Vari muttered in surprise. Sitting patiently behind the door, Vari spotted Korinth boldly looking up at her with a female crossguard in tow. She could see a hint of focus on his furry little face – a look she had only ever seen during the instances in which he had ‘requested’ a personal audience with her... which by now, had still comprised most of the encounters they’d had together, now that she thought about it. Still, it looked almost alien seeing him appear before her again *without* an envelope in his maw; though she had to admit that seeing him now with a crossguard beside him was a rather comforting sight that she wasn’t soon about to turn away.

Wait... a crossguard? Did this mean...?

“Greetings, miss Varila.” said the telepathic fox with a bow of its head. “My apologies for the intrusion, but I bring tidings to thee. Thine round in the tournament is set to begin a tad earlier than anticipated, and Lady Alina and I have thus come to retrieve you to ensure that thou art not caught unaware. Alina, if thou wouldst be so kind as to inform miss Varila of the nature of her match?”

“O-oh! Um, yes, of course...” the crossguard beside him shyly affirmed. “Hi, miss Varila, ma’am! Y-yes, Korinth is correct. It was *your* name that Miss X had drawn out of the roster for your assigned Sakura league today. Your opponents have been selected and the Colosseum is ready, and I’ve been given the duty of notifying you of your matchup. Um... it *should* be noted, though, that due to your late arrival within the Crossroads, a lot of people were actually quite unfamiliar with your name when it was drawn... leading to a tad bit of confusion between the judges and the contestants. B-but! I’d like to note that the Madame herself personally expressed her interest in seeing your match unfold...”

At this, Vari merely gave her a thoughtful hum before folding her arms in contemplation. She supposed it made sense that not many would recognize her name; she hadn’t exactly arrived in the timeliest of fashions, nor had she been particularly social with the other competitors she’d seen roaming the Crossroads. But as long as the *God Eater* knew she was supposed to be here, Vari figured that this was all that mattered.

“A-anyway... your match was actually due to begin in the next couple of *hours*, but seeing as how a few of the competitors have already finished their matches for today, your match was bumped up on the schedule...” Alina continued. “You can bring any gear you like, but only-“

“Who’s my opponent?” Vari dryly interjected. At the interruption, Alina nearly visibly jumped in place before blushing and nervously bringing her hands together.

“Oh! U-um... their names are Azta and Kiriata.” Alina answered. “The ‘Azta’ guy actually had a longer name, but it was so long and full of so many syllables that I, ah...”

“Wait... I’m going up against *two* opponents?” Vari suddenly asked before shooting a questioning glare back down to the fox below her. “Korinth, is this a joke? How is it even remotely fair that I get matched up against *two people* by myself?” she asked indignantly. Ultimately, she *supposed* she could handle the fight depending on how strong her opponents were... but she had gone into this tournament under the assumption that every fight would be a one-versus-one – not whatever this was.

Korinth, however, had predictably met Vari’s outrage with his usual sense of serenity. He quietly shook his head for a moment before meeting Vari’s gaze with knowing eyes – the fox doing so almost as if he had *expected* her to ask him this very question.

“I can assure thee, miss Varila, that the Madame considers *each and every facet* of a contestant’s abilities before deciding their opponents.” Korinth simply answered. “Thou shalt not want for fairness in the tournament when every combatant has already been determined to be evenly matched. Thus, I promise that thine concerns are not necessary.”

“*My ass.*” Vari snapped before begrudgingly letting her anger melt into a sigh. “Ugh, whatever... in that case, what are *both* of my opponents like? Any specific fighting styles?”

“I-I’m not allowed to say too much outside of some basic info...” Alina admitted. “But Azta, the big guy, he mostly keeps to himself and wears this huge suit of armor while also using claws for weapons. His armor also has this soft glow to it, too... it wouldn’t be very hard to find him if you went looking for him.”

Vari’s eyes widened a bit upon hearing Alina’s response. Did she say ‘claws’...?

“Err, right.” Vari hummed, trying to hide the discomfort she felt at the reminder of sharp, metallic claws.

“And what about his partner? Ki... Kiri...?”

“Kiriata...” Alina meekly nodded. “A-and, um, yes. She’s much different compared to Azta – really spunky, very energetic. She carries a large halberd around with her and has this long set of snow-white hair. I guess they’re *both* pretty easy to spot, now that I mention it...”

At this, Vari couldn’t help but smirk for a moment before dryly chuckling to herself with a tired shake of her head. Ahh, there were always silver linings, she supposed; at least her opponents wouldn’t be difficult to find – both in and outside of the arena. She then turned back to Alina who, now after returning a confused chuckle of her own, timidly shifted her gaze towards Korinth in turn. The fox continued to stare up at Vari with an expectant look on his face, almost as if he were quietly attempting to gauge whether or not she was truly ready for her upcoming match. And, although there were no visible signs that he was about to do so, the two women nonetheless guessed correctly when he was about to speak.

“Miss Na’tara...” Korinth hesitantly began. “As thou hast likely surmised, thine battle is one that shall be fought at a numerical disadvantage. And whilst I do not doubt thine skill with a blade, I do, however, find myself concerned with thy reticence as of late. Thou hast gone against Sir Tomas’s recommendations, yes? The one regarding acquainting thyself with the denizens of the Crossroads?”

With a guarded look on her face, Vari hesitantly nodded her head before gently leaning her shoulder against the frame of her doorway and folding her arms. Indeed, she’d seen many curious individuals roaming the Crossroads during her limited time here. She’d seen rabbits, priests, demons, monsters, and even girls with red hoods... but she hadn’t taken the time to familiarize herself with any of them. At least, not directly, anyway.

“Why would I waste my time by ‘making friends’ here when I’m never gonna see them again anyway?” Vari asked with a shake of her head. “At best, we’ll wish each other luck and go about our business. At worst, I’ll get matched against them and only end up making more enemies. There’s really no point.”

“I understand.” Korinth nodded. “I must reiterate, however: thou wilt face *two* in the coming battle. Not one. Thou wouldst do well to keep in mind the strength of thine opponents’ bonds as the fight rageth on.”

“...Are you telling me to watch out for the ‘power of friendship’...?” Vari grumbled with a raise of her brow.

“In a sense.” Korinth admitted. “However, I am primarily asking if thy mind is *clear*, miss Varila.” Added the fox.

Vari paused for a moment, briefly considering the messenger's question as well as his intentions. Fighting multiple opponents was never easy, yet it seemed out of place for him to ask about her state of mind in such a... concerned manner. She turned around briefly, using a quick glance at her weapon and the ADT on her nightstand to give her enough cover to rub her eyes and wipe the tracks of tears more thoroughly from her face. Korinth must have noticed the puffiness in her eyes and recognized that she had been crying. Either that, or they had heard her before knocking.

‘*Great...*’ Vari thought to herself.

Having used up as much of her moment away from the conversation as she could, she abruptly turned back to face the pair of them – her visage unmarred.

"I'm *fine*." Vari eventually settled on saying, perhaps a little more strongly than she'd initially intended. "Besides, I'll feel even better once I get this match over and done with."

Vari then made her way back over towards the nightstand of her bed where her katana and visor still sat together. She then took her katana into her hand, fastening its sheathe to her side before hesitantly giving her glove and visor an awkward, sidelong glance. Ugh, she truly did detest this thing. Given the nightmare she had just woken herself from, she was hardly eager to equip said visor or the metallic neural glove which accompanied it either...

But eventually, she did so anyway.

Vari activated her visor with a shaky sigh before walking back over to the pair in the doorway, armed and ready to depart.

"Can... you show me to the Colosseum then? I'll need to get to my match if I wanna win it." She asked the Crossguard, her tone wavering with a bit of uncertainty as the two shared a brief look and a nod while she spoke.

"M-my apologies, Miss Varila, ma'am," Alina quickly replied with an awkward, but somewhat formal bow, "Because your match was moved up, I won't be able to escort you in time to make it to my post before everything begins. I'm supposed to be on the lookout in case some of the other competitors get too rowdy outside of the arena..." The girl bit her lip and nervously let her voice trail off, clearly a bit unsure how exactly to speak about guarding a potentially lethal fight while one of the soon-to-be-competitors stood directly in front of her.

"But, Korinth has offered to guide you there himself instead!" She rapidly added onto her previous cut-short sentence.

“Do not fret, Lady Alina. I shall see it done.” Korinth was quick to affirm to them both with a nod.

With that, the young Crossguard gave them both another haphazard bow that came paired with a blush of her cheeks before she hastily sped off and disappeared down the hallway and around the corner.

“Shall we depart?” Korinth asked Vari. “Perhaps the walk will give thee time to think without distraction?”

Vari adjusted the visor on her face and situated her blade once more. “I’m anything but distracted *now*.” She answered with a furrow of her brow. With a final stretch and a readying sigh, Vari then stepped out of her room – following the messenger fox as he guided her down the hall and towards the exit of the inn. And, the longer she walked in silence behind him, the more she found herself committing to and believing her own words. There was a newfound sense of focus in her eyes now that was visible to even Korinth as he occasionally glanced back her way.

By the time they reached the exit of the residential building and stepped out into the busy street, any doubt that had been in her was washed away under the veneer of confidence and determination she bore for the fight ahead.

“C’mon, Korinth. I’ll give you a glimpse of what I can do.”