
Where Loyalties Lie

The Cross Colosseum was easy enough to find.

Vari could have easily spotted the structure from over a kilometer away. It was positively enormous, she noticed, with its bright neon aesthetics sticking out like a sore thumb amongst the many traditional-looking buildings which had been scattered all throughout the Crossroads. From a distance, Vari had also noticed the large digital screens which hung brilliantly over each and every entryway – allowing even the most casual of spectators to catch a glimpse of what was happening from afar and thereby lure them closer to the action. It was almost as if the entire realm was built around this colosseum, with the arena acting as its spectacularly eye-catching centerpiece.

The rest of the realm looked positively humble in comparison to its main attraction. Up until this point, she had admittedly neglected to properly explore the realm or learn about the day-to-day life of its denizens. The streets were mostly composed of worn dirt roads, occasionally merging into pristine concrete paths as she treaded her way past various small villas and homesteads. Each home had been constructed with strong, wooden columns supported by foundations of earth and stone, and the people who lived in them were almost always ready to flash a smile and a wave to those who passed by – Vari included. Markets and small shops had also been sprinkled into the mix, with many of the realm's shops, stalls, and caravans all advertising their own eye-catching products and services that Vari suspected she would not be able to find anywhere else. There was fresh produce, sharpened weaponry, shiny jewelry, and plenty of exotic clothing for sale which had all succeeded in catching Vari's eye; and the longer she walked Korinth's path, the stronger of a reminder she received that the Crossroads as a whole had very much formed its own customs and culture.

But gods, the sounds... even from the other side of town, the distant roar of the crowd accompanied by the rhythmic thumping of a bassline had been heard echoing out into the open air of the Crossroads, which only seemed to grow more and more deafening as she approached the colosseum. Were it not for the sound of the Colosseum's rhythmic music in the distance as well as the occasional merchant vying for her attention, Vari might have felt a modicum of peace being immersed into the Crossroads' tranquil ambiance. The hustle and bustle of everyday life in the Crossroads, however, seemed to grow more intense as Korinth led her closer to her destination; and eventually, what had started as humble villas and markets filled with produce had turned into tightly-packed businesses and stalls adorned with the smell of fried food and candy. She almost felt as if she'd wandered right into a festival, judging by the sea of festive faces and showy smiles that surrounded each food stall. Even more prevalent amidst the festivities, though, were the various pieces of promotional material plastered onto the center of each stall and building which advertised the current Crossroads tournament. The palpable excitement in the air seemed to indicate that the tournament was a cause for celebration around here... little to Vari's surprise.

Vari, however, felt anything but excitement as she mindlessly stared at the colosseum that Korinth was guiding her towards. Getting closer to it was almost enough to give her sensory overload, and between the verses of muffled music which emanated from the inside, a woman's melodic voice could also be heard riling the crowd up for what she was certain to be another blood-pumping match. Vari couldn't be too certain of exactly what she was singing from a distance, but the audience's roars of excitement swelled and rang out in tandem with each echoed note.

She only wished the commotion had been loud enough to drown out her thoughts.

Despite what she had said to Korinth, her thoughts still lingered on the nightmare she'd had the previous night. Her mind was tired, her eyes were heavy, but even she couldn't deny the buzz that now surrounded her as she and Korinth made their way over towards the nearest entry gate. It was only when a pair of Crossguards outside of the Colosseum saluted Korinth and showed Vari to the door of her match's waiting lobby that she finally snapped out of whatever spell that the sound of the crowd from outside had lulled herself into. Their walk had felt much quicker than it had actually been...

A sigh of relief left Vari's lips once she finally stepped inside. That was better. Numerous layers of thick stone and concrete overhead had ensured that the sound of the crowd buzzing outside was significantly muffled, and from where she now stood, she could easily gather her bearings without being distracted. According to the enormous display which hung above the gate outside, her match was due to begin in just under 10 minutes. It looked like that Crossguard was right after all. She was right on time, all things considered...

"Hey, you think our buddy ever figured out how to get here?" a female voice suddenly wondered aloud.

Upon hearing the voice, Vari's lavender eyes quickly shifted their focus towards a contestant who she could now see was wandering aimlessly throughout the lobby with a polearm in-hand. She wore a long, burgundy-red overcoat with layered black clothing underneath. Her flowing white hair was also tied up into a ponytail, with its scrunchie bearing the same shade of orange as the lenses of her thinly-framed glasses. She looked... small, and a part of Vari wondered to herself how a petite girl like her could lug around a halberd that big. Fortunately for her, it seemed the girl hadn't noticed her enter... creating a prime opportunity for Vari to eavesdrop.

"I mean, seriously – I haven't seen him *or* the lil guy ever since we got here, and I gotta admit, it's kinda freaking me the fuck out." The girl continued, only half in jest. "You think he ended up teleporting into the sun or something?"

"As usual, thine sense of humor leaves much to be desired, Kiri." An armored man grumbled in response as he sat with his metallic gloves pressed against his chin. "I am certain our friend hath exercised the due caution that he hath *always* used whilst travelling – be it alone *or* with company. Thou shouldst not make jokes at his expense."

The man's metallic claws shone against the bulk of his armor as he waited hunched over with his elbows pressing down onto his knees. The sight of him in conversation with her created an odd sort of visual oxymoron that suggested he should be drawing blood out on a battlefield somewhere instead of sitting in a spotless waiting lobby with a girl who was half his size. Now *there* was someone to be wary of, Vari remarked internally. Tall, bulky, and darkly-clad, this man's armor radiated with a subtle glow that Vari swore was reminiscent of the embers of a dying sun. There wasn't even a *hint* of the man who sat underneath all that armor that was visible enough for Vari to see. It was, admittedly, rather intimidating... though in terms of design, his armor was all sorts of impractical, and in reality, probably *hindered* his abilities in battle much more than they channeled them. Still, although his appearance was a tad over-the-top, Vari would make a note to herself not to let her guard down around *him*, especially with that girl in tow.

"I *wasn't* joking, dude..." Kiri rebutted with a squint of her hazel eyes. "I'm really worried about him! You know, you oughtta have a little more faith in my instincts every now and then, considering how they save your hide on a daily basis." She bit her lip in frustration and then continued on in a grumble. "You could at least give me a *little* more credit!" A dramatic swish of Kiri's burgundy overcoat accompanied her remark as she then continued wandering aimlessly about the lobby, the girl still oblivious to Vari and Korinth's presence while the hilt of her halberd twirled idly in her hand.

"I give thee credit where *credit is due*, Kiri." Azta pointed out, his tone reassuring. "That being said, I am certain our machine friend shall find his way back to our side. Only patience will yield results."

"Pfft, yeah, says the trillion year old no-fun-having bag of-" Kiri started, only to pause and practically freeze in place once she finally noticed Vari and Korinth standing on the opposite side of the waiting lobby. Upon hearing Kiri go quiet, Azta too turned his attention towards the pair – the armored figure quickly standing himself upright from his place on the waiting bench and cautiously making his way over to Kiri's side. Upon being spotted, Vari's tired eyes appeared to darken with fatigue as she realized that a conversation with these two was now practically unavoidable.

Here we go, she thought to herself...

“No, please, don’t let me interrupt.” Vari dryly remarked. “Frankly, I was enjoying the little verbal back-and-forth. Though if you’re going to stare, a simple ‘hello’ is still customary where I’m from.”

“Thine description bore no falsehoods. A sword-wielding hare...” Azta muttered, as if to himself. “I see. Then I suppose thou must be Var-“

“LIL GUY!!!” Kiri suddenly blurted, the girl excitedly raising her arms up into the air before dashing her way over to a very surprised-looking Korinth. She slid down onto her knees as she sprinted over to him, the girl landing just in front of him before eagerly wrapping her arms around his furry frame and bringing him into a tight little hug. Korinth, of course, was baffled at the display... and had surely been about to speak before abruptly being cut off again.

“Duuude, where have you been?!” Kiri asked with unyielding familiarity. “You weren’t with us when the portal closed! Why’d you ditch us? Hey, have you seen our friend by the way? You know the one: tall, robotic, and a little too dense for his own-“

“Please unhand me...” Korinth politely pleaded.

With a gasp of shock, Kiri fell back onto her rear at the sound of her supposed friend somehow speaking to her. Bewildered, she stared into his eyes for a moment, only to then scramble to her feet before looking questioningly up at Vari and then back down to Korinth.

Clearly, this fox hadn’t been the one she’d expected to see...

“W-wait... you’re not lil guy...” Kiri pointed before snapping herself out of shock. “In fact, you’re kinda more like... *big*... guy, now that I get a closer look at you. Also, what the hell – you can *talk*?!”

“Some of mine kind are gifted with this ability, yes.” Korinth confirmed. “Myself included. As for what thou may call me, my name is *Korinth*, Miss Kiriata – though I suppose I would be correct in mine assumption that the fox thou encountered upon your recruitment was *not* gifted as such. Thus, it seems our meeting hath resulted in a natural misunderstanding. Mine apologies for any confusion.”

With a face that suggested a mild amount of nausea, Kiri slumped her arms down onto her knees before audibly groaning and turning her attention back towards the giant man of metal who stood menacingly beside her. The two then glared at one another in mutual silence, the girl scoffing to herself as if reacting to some unspoken remark before finally speaking up again.

“Great... now we’ve got *two* dudes who talk like my great granddad.” Kiri muttered with a sigh before finally shifting her gaze back towards Vari. “At least tell me *you* don’t speak in tongues like tall dark and brooding over here? You wouldn’t *believe* how many times I’ve asked him to repeat himself...”

“I’m not ‘trillions of years old’ if that’s what you mean.” Vari indirectly answered with quizzical raise of her brow. She hadn’t exactly been in a talkative mood for the past several years, but ideally, she’d hoped she would’ve been able to go through this tournament without speaking to her opponents *at all*. In fact, the only interest she had in the ones who stood before her right now lied solely in beating them; developing a relationship with these people that went anything further than that was superfluous in her eyes.

“You sure? Seems to be a common theme around here.” Kiri smirked, only halfway joking. “Either way, you must have the *worst* luck to get matched up with someone as kickass as me, lady! You’re dealing with the one and only Kiriata Chorra! I’m jacked up on absinthe and have been raring to go for the past 24 hours – so you can bet your sweet bippy I’m not gonna go easy on you!”

At this display of bravado, Vari merely scoffed and shot the girl another humorless glare. ‘*Great...*’ she remarked internally. It seemed she got matched up with an annoyingly boisterous one...

“And if you don’t believe me, you can just ask my friend here!” Kiri affirmed before pointing to her partner. “You can call him Azta, by the way; he’s a bonafide badass and he’s gonna set you on *fire!*”

With a tilt of her head that was now rife with unamusement, Vari then looked up towards the absolute tower of a man who stood before her and questioningly placed a hand onto her hip. ‘*Was this girl being serious?*’ her eyes seemed to ask him. Through the visor of his helmet, Vari could see that he was now staring back at her... albeit with a tired glint in his eyes.

“Thou canst just ignore her.” Azta plainly told her.

“Hey! I gave *you* a glowing review, Ser Clankington!” Kiri remarked before playfully bumping her fist against her companion’s armor. “I’m trying to instill fear in our opponent, here! The least you could do is back me up!”

“Mentioning mine ability to set our opponents ablaze is not a review I wouldst deem ‘glowing’.” Azta said plainly. “Furthermore, dost thou intend to reveal *every* aspect of our capabilities to our enemy?”

“Aw, come on! What’s she gonna do with *that*, douse you with a hose?!” Kiri asked... only for a glint of sudden curiosity to appear in her eyes. “Uh, actually, I guess that’s a good point. Hey, rabbit chick – what’s your deal, anyway? You don’t fight with water magic or anything like that, do you? ‘Cause not gonna lie, that’d *kind* of be a pain in the ass.”

Vari, however, again did not respond – the Leporian instead opting to shoot Kiri a look that was just as cold as the shoulder she was currently giving her. Seriously, *these* were her opponents? So much for that ‘strength in bonds’ Korinth was talking about – these two were *nuts*. The sound of retreating pawsteps soon caught Vari’s attention as she suddenly turned around to spot the wise little fox intrepidly sneaking away from the conversation. Wait... he was leaving already?

Opting to catch the creature before he could walk away, Vari decided to brush off Kiri’s question entirely so she could catch up with him instead.

“Wh- hey! Get back here!” Kiri called to Vari in disbelief. “I was talking to *you*! You saying you don’t have any abilities? A story? A *name*?”

“It’s Vari.” she called back over her shoulder, surrendering only the most cursory information to the pair that would likely already be strewn across banners and signs all across the colosseum.

“Hey.” Vari said with a jog as she caught up to Korinth. “So... this where we part ways, then? I suppose you can’t exactly follow me into the arena, huh?”

“Were it only possible.” The fox quipped with smiling eyes. “Nay, I am afraid that from this point onwards, thou shalt be on thy own.”

“Yeah... thought so.” Vari dryly muttered. Coldly, her eyes then trailed down onto the floor away from his for a moment, almost as if she were quietly debating the merits of asking him the next question that was on her mind. Noticing her hesitation, the fox waited a while for Vari to continue – curiously tilting his head as he looked up at her with an expectant look on his face.

“... Why do you continue to hang around me?” Vari finally asked. “You already got me in the tournament. I don’t imagine you have to keep following me, or giving me advice... but you do. Why?”

At this, Korinth let out an audible ‘hum’ accompanied by a curious tilt of his head. He’d been rather caught off guard by that question...

“I must admit, I thought nothing of it.” Korinth answered plainly. “Dost thou not wish me to?” he added after a brief pause.

“I told you before that you could.” Vari shrugged before folding her arms. “But most people don’t offer their advice for free, much less their time. Why am I getting special treatment?”

At this, the fox couldn’t help but reply with a low, telepathic ‘chuckle’ at her line of questioning. Vari, however, did not share in his idle amusement and merely squinted in response to his laughter. What did he think was so funny?

“We foxes are creatures of curiosity, Miss Varila.” Korinth told her simply. “And yet... occasionally ones of loyalty...” He added. His telepathic voice then intentionally trailed away into silence, signaling what Vari could only guess was either a lack of capability or desire to say more.

“Loyalty?” Vari asked, raising her brow. “And what *is* your loyalty as far as I’m concerned?”

“As far as *thou* art concerned, thou hast a match to win.” Korinth said with smiling eyes, their knowing glint further emphasizing that she would get nothing more from him through this particular line of questioning.

“Mhmm...” Vari sighed with a roll of her eyes and a shake of her head. Of course he wouldn’t elaborate. What was she *really* expecting to get out of him from asking, anyway?

From there, another courteous bow signaled Korinth’s departure he then proceeded towards a rather large set of stairs – presumably towards one of the spectator booths where the God Eater had situated herself. He quietly trotted up each step, with the fox at first fully content to leave the conversation at that and give Vari the time she’d need to prepare.

However, upon making it halfway up the stairs, a visible hint of hesitation caused him to pause where he stood. Another audible ‘hum’ left his maw, and suddenly, the fox turned his head to face her – his visage rife with contemplation. “Perhaps...”

Curiously, Vari unfolded her arms and furrowed her brow at the fox – unwilling to wait through yet another dramatic pause. “...Perhaps what?” Vari asked.

“Perhaps thou shouldst consider where, or rather, to *whom* thine own loyalties lie...” he simply answered. And then, before Vari could say anything else, the fox continued his way up the stairs and out of her sight.

... What?

A confused, almost frustrated expression quickly crept onto Vari’s face at that last vague bit of advice. *Her* loyalties? What the Hells was *that* supposed to mean? She thought she’d made it pretty clear to him by now that the only person she’d entrusted any form of loyalty to was *herself*.

Vari wearily shook her head as she then turned herself back around to face her opponents... only to be greeted with a wave and a smile from Kiri who was now standing right in front of her.

Wait, when did she get so *close*?! Upon seeing Kiri standing less than an arm's length away from her, Vari took a reflexive step backwards and just narrowly prevented a startled gasp from escaping her lips. Gods above, what was this girl's deal?!

"Yo!" Kiri greeted with the friendliest smile she could manage. "So, I was thinking... maaaaybe we got off on the wrong foot, here. After receiving a sternly-worded lectur-... *ahem*, I mean uh, some *super helpful advice* from my glowing friend over there, I was thinking it'd probably be better to reintroduce myself so that you can better grasp the full level of awesomeness that's standing right in front of you. Cool?"

'No.' Vari resisted the urge to say.

"Cool." Kiri smirked, clearly content to continue the conversation one-sidedly. "My name is Kiriata, though most people just call me Kiri! You said your name was uh... *Vari*, right? Azta reminded me that they called your name out earlier whenever our brackets were drawn. I guess I just sorta forgot about that before you showed up... hah, my bad."

"Mhm..." Vari intoned with a nod, her best attempt at feigning interest still blatantly coming across as half-hearted. Truth be told, she would've much preferred to simply wait over by one of the benches until their match started... but she figured she had to give Kiri *something* if she had a chance of being excused from this girl's continuous attempts at conversation.

"Anyway, about me!" Kiri continued. "I like fighting, taverns, fighting in taverns, and when the occasion calls for it, performing the odd magic trick or two. I also like long walks on the beach, but I'm sure you've

heard that before.” She added with a chuckle. “But hey, what about you? Anything you wanna share before our match starts...? Liiike, maybe why you’re here, or what you wanna wish for?”

At that particular question, Vari’s stern glare morphed into that of mild annoyance and shock. Did she really just have the audacity to ask her that...? Her wedding ring felt tight and heavier around her finger as she clenched her hand into a fist.

“No?” Vari snapped with a scowl. “Why would I want to tell you that?”

“Haha, well... you know!” Kiri nervously chuckled, the girl attempting to laugh off the increasing amount of tension in Vari’s expression. “Just wanna know more about you is all! Plus, I’d rather give you a nickname more flattering than ‘rabbit chick’, ya know?”

“No.” Vari pointedly repeated. Gods above, she already gave Kiri her name. Wasn’t that enough?

“Aww, come on, don’t be like that!” Kiri complained. “Alright look, I’ll meet you halfway – you probably wouldn’t guess it by looking at me, but I’m actually quite the dedicated cleric... and an awesome one, at that! *Our* wish is to get back what we’ve lost and bring about Azta’s return. Like, his *actual* return – not the version that’s standing right behind me. It’s, uh... it’s kinda complicated; but the point is that he didn’t always loiter around like a helpless tree stump! The dude’s actually a *god*. Like, for real! Isn’t that crazy? And *I’m* his only hope at regaining his lost power!” She said proudly. “Kinda sounds like the plot from a video game, don’tcha think?”

Vari, however, skeptically squinted her eyes at the girl with a puzzled shake of her head – the Leporian quietly trying to decide if she was just making that last part up for the sake of conversation. She thought the only god here was the God Eater? Either way, Kiri’s rant had still left her unimpressed.

“... Aaaaand now’s the part where you tell me *your* story and we become buds!” Kiri said with a friendly swing of her elbow. “How’s about it, sis? Wanna tell me what’s going on in Vari-ville?”

“I’d rather not.” Vari muttered before stealing a glance at the armored man who still stood a ways behind Kiri. She curiously tilted her head. He didn’t really look like a god to her...

“Ugh, lady, what the hell?” Kiri groaned, now visibly becoming agitated with Vari’s stubbornness. “I know we’re gonna fight here in a sec, but come on! You don’t gotta walk around with such a stick up your ass.”

“I think your ‘god’ friend wants your attention again.” Vari muttered before pointing to a waiting Azta. “How about you go bother him instead?”

With a sigh of defeat and a thoroughly unamused expression, Kiri then huffed before stubbornly folding her arms. The two then stared at each other for a moment, with both of them refusing to break eye contact until the other did so first. Eventually, however, Kiri let out an incredulous chuckle before smirking at Vari with a bewildered shake of her head.

“... You know, I think I do have a better name for you.” Kiri chided. “I think from now on, I’ll call you little Bunny Foo Foo. You and that little butter knife of yours aren’t gonna do much damage after Azta and I kick you into the dirt.”

“Are you still here?” Vari asked, still maintaining eye contact.

“Pfft. And Azta says *I’m* too cocky...” Kiri muttered. Whatever Kiri was about to say next, however, was swiftly cut off as the sound of a female suddenly rang out through the arena’s intercoms and caught both of their attention.

“Hi hi!!! Hope you're all ready for a SPECTACULAR DAY, here in the CROSS COLOSSEUM!” Miss X announced. “As always I am your gracious host – the GREAT and FABULOUS Miss X! Everyone get ready, cuz this NEXT match is gonna be a doozy! Please give it up for our next THREE fiery competitors: VARILA NA’TARA vs. KIRI AND AZTA!”

The crowd could now be heard going wild behind the closed doors of the waiting lobby, their cheers carrying out effortlessly across the entire colosseum in what Vari was sure was a fantastical display of raw excitement. Again, music blared throughout the colosseum and bounced in tandem with the sound of lively singing while a barrage of fireworks suddenly began to crackle with untamed energy behind closed doors. It seemed that was their cue.

Their focus now ripped entirely from their previous conversation, Vari and Kiri turned to examine each other for even the slightest hint of nervousness as a squad of Crossguards suddenly made their way inside the lobby to escort them into the arena...

“Guess we’re up then, Foo Foo.” Kiri smirked.

“Just keep that mouth in check.” Vari muttered. At this, Kiri’s expression could be seen shifting back and forth between the smile she was forcing and the annoyance that shone through it. Azta, not wanting to remain too far from Kiri, grumbled something under his breath before idly making his way back to Kiri’s side. Vari then stared up at him with another curious glint in her eye upon his return, though underneath that helmet, Azta remained distinctly unreadable. Had Kiri been talking out her ass about him, or was she being truthful about his origin?

“Contestants, please allow a crossguard to escort you out into the arena!” a gruff male crossguard called out. “Failure to do so will result in immediate disqualification. Squad Samsara, advance!”

And, like a well-oiled machine, the squad of Crossguards formed a rigid perimeter around the three contestants before swiftly advancing forward with what felt like zero hesitation. They’d looked as if they’d done this a million times over...

With bated breaths, Vari, Kiri, and Azta each turned to face their respective crossguards and promptly followed them towards a pair of the giant metal doors that led outward into the arena proper. The metal of both doors creaked in resistance as another pair of guards gradually forced them open, and as Vari approached, she could hear the roar of ecstatic cheering growing louder and far more deafening as her feet carried her out of the spotless waiting lobby and into a dark tunnel...

From there, the quiet serenity of their assigned waiting lobby was ripped away from her in an instant as the sandstone tunnel was quickly flooded with the echo of a truly massive crowd which waited for them on the other side. Her expression became painted with a touch of uneasiness as Vari continued forward, with the sense of security she felt upon entering the lobby dissipating all too quickly as the thundering crowd outside eagerly cheered for her to emerge into the limelight. The tension in Vari’s stomach violently twisted into a knot once they approached a fork in the middle of the tunnel, and as a pair of Crossguards quietly veered Vari away from the rest of the group, Kiri and Azta were taken into the right side of the tunnel and around the bend, while Vari was directed towards the left. Eventually, after what felt like a small eternity of preparing herself, the light at the end of the tunnel finally gave way as Vari and her opponents placed their first steps into the arena – a wave of flashing cameras all suddenly competing for Vari’s attention. Swiftly, Vari raised a hand to shield her eyes from the blinding rays of the sun above as well as the flashing cameras in the crowd. *‘Finally’*, she thought...

She was here.

A Brush with Fate

The Cross Colosseum was truly massive.

Much more massive than Vari had initially imagined. Thousands – no, easily *tens of thousands* of people had seated themselves in droves all along the outer rim of the arena, with the grand majority of them now practically jumping out of their seats in order to get a closer look at the contestants who were being escorted into the arena’s center. Just as she had guessed, Vari and Kiri’s separation in the tunnel had been purposeful - with Vari emerging out of one side of the Colosseum and her opponents emerging from the other. Looking up, Vari could also see hers, Kiri’s, and Azta’s names gradually scrolling along the surface of a giant arena-wide display as she walked, the text happily serving as a reminder for whose names to call out whenever the fight inevitably got bloody. Given how many fights these people must have watched for each tournament, Vari was certain they would need it.

But wow, were there a lot of people.

Kiri was taking the attention in stride, of course – waving and blowing kisses to the crowd on the opposite side of the arena while a tired-looking Azta begrudgingly trailed behind her. Vari, however, was much less receptive of being in the spotlight. She merely stared into the sandstone underneath her and kept her eyes closer to the ground as she briskly followed her Crossguards, all while firmly pressing the hilt of her katana right up against her palm in order to distract herself from the crowd. Somehow, the crowd seemed to cheer even louder once her Crossguards stopped in place – their fingers then pointing inwards into arena’s epicenter to guide Vari towards her opponents. “Ugh...”, she groaned as she

continued to walk by herself. She wasn't used to so much attention being placed onto her like this. Did they really have to make such a spectacle of these fights...?

Of course, it was just as Vari had asked herself that question that an array of electric lights suddenly beamed down onto the colosseum in a fantastic display of color. The beat of another poppy and very energetic song then sprang to life over a vast row of booming speakers, with each thunderous note quickly catching the attention of the audience below and causing them to become absolutely ecstatic with hype. Directly overhead, Vari could now make out the face of a figure who, much to her surprise, had actually looked quite familiar to her. Dancing and singing along to the opening chorus of the music was none other than the 'great and fabulous' Miss X – the infamous popstar idol of the Colosseum whom Vari had seen plastered onto a great number of posters and other promotional material whenever Korinth had first led her to the arena. Though Vari hadn't exactly made many strides to socialize or stay out of her inn room for more than a couple of hours during her stay in the Crossroads, even she could immediately recognize whose face was bouncing along to the perfectly choreographed moves of well-practiced backup dancers behind her. She looked just like she did on the posters, too – pink, cotton candy hair, complete with various blue streaks across her hair and makeup that complemented the youthful look of her lightly tanned skin. Her heart-shaped eyes also bore the same youthful look that her model-like frame suggested, and were more than successful in hypnotizing each and every spectator here with their glowing sheen and luster. To say that Miss X must have had an impressive level of influence in the Crossroads would've surely been quite the understatement, given that there wasn't a single face amongst the crowd who didn't seem to recognize her...

A thin layer of sand kicked up from underneath Vari's feet as she stopped towards the arena's center, and from where she was standing, she could now see a tall and nearly shirtless man standing before her adorned in gold and orange-black clothing. He greeted the three contestants with a fanciful wave of his fan and a silky-smooth smile as they all met in the center, with the scales along his body only just barely concealing the heat that had visibly rushed to his cheeks upon spotting all three contestants line up in front of him. Was he... was he *blushing*, Vari wondered? His sky-blue eyes shot the three of them a playful wink once they approached, only for Vari to shoot him a deadly glare in return.

This gesture, however, only seemed to elicit a playful chuckle from the dragon. This particular flower was decidedly out of his reach.

“Welcome to the Colosseum, would-be wishmakers.” The man coolly smirked to each contestant while the overhead music gradually faded into the background, almost as if on-cue. “The name’s Tenki, and I’ll be setting the mood for your chosen battlefield on this lovely day~. So, first things first; do any of you have any preferences for where you wanna fight? The sky’s the limit, here – so don’t be afraid to let your imaginations run wild while you pick out your arena.”

With visible hints of confusion now writ upon Vari and Kiri’s faces, the contestants both raised their brows in idle curiosity before hesitantly turning towards one another as if to ask the other for clarification. ‘Preferences’...? What was this guy talking about? Did he honestly mean to suggest that he could alter the colosseum grounds at will? Once Kiri shrugged her shoulders at the silent series of questions, Vari turned back towards the dragon with an inquisitive twitch of her bunny ear.

“Are you saying we can choose where we wanna fight...? If that’s the case, then why bother with the arena at all? Unless I’m missing something?” Vari curiously asked.

“Haha, wait – you mean no one told you before you came in?” Tenki chuckled with a mischievous grin. “*That’s* hilarious. Guess that’s what happens when Miss X steals the show again~... to answer your question, though: yes, absolutely. With some rift-based finessing, I can basically displace you anywhere you want to fight so long as it doesn’t instantly kill you both – like the core of a planet. You’d think that would go without saying, but you wouldn’t *believe* how many times people have requested something like that...”

Upon hearing the dragon’s explanation, Vari and Kiri’s eyes both widened in mild shock as he then proceeded to pull a compact crystal orb out from the fabric of his shrug and present it to them – a clear

interdimensional power resonating from within as it gradually shifted between glimpses of various otherworldly environments. He could just... do that?

“Woah, seriously?!” Kiri chuckled excitedly. “That’s sick! Tenki, I demand you send us to an arcade! OH, or wait, maybe a cityscape! A fight in the streets would be so metal! Wait wait wait, no, I got it – send us to a tavern! A *futuristic* tavern...”

“Kiri...” Azta cautioned as Tenki suppressed another chuckle. “Thou is letting thy imagination get the better of thee. Why dost thou insist on continuing this never-ending bar crawl?”

“Hey, I’m the one with the tag, aren’t I?” she said before pointing to the fiery pendant around her neck. “So I get to choose where we duke it out and that’s that!”

“I’m game if Miss Varila is~.” Tenki shrugged before smoothly turning his attention to the Leporian. “What do you think? Wanna go with your opponent’s suggestion, or did you have somewhere else in mind...?”

Narrowing her eyes down onto the crystal ball, Vari again pressed her palm into the hilt of her sword as she attempted to think of a setting that might benefit her. If she was being honest, Kiri’s suggestion was simply out of the question. The chaos of a tavern or a cityscape would be much too hectic for her to keep track of in a fight, and regardless of the place Kiri chose to ‘duke it out’, Vari still wasn’t exactly keen on following where her opponent wanted to go anyway. It was Fighting 101 – don’t follow where your opponent leads you. And, while Kiri may not have been necessarily thinking tactically when it came to her choice of location, it didn’t change the fact that it would have been difficult for Vari to fight within the confines of tight spaces...

Eventually, Vari simply shook her head.

“Give me a forest any day.” Vari told him. “Preferably uninhabited. Something wide with minimal chance for interruption. I’m not chancing a fight in the name of exotic scenery.”

“Ugh, boring!” Kiri whined with a disapproving groan. “C’mon lady, you have the entire universe at your disposal and you wanna fight in a *forest*? There’s a million forests!”

“It’s true, I do have plenty of those.” Tenki smiled with a shrug. “But there are also a million taverns. Unless you give me something that’ll change my mind, her choice of locale is equally as valid as yours~.”

“What, like money?” Kiri eagerly asked. “I have some of that! Azta quickly, our coinpurse!”

"That can't possibly be how this works." Vari said incredulously, only to pause as it dawned on her that yes, it actually very possibly could work that way considering the ref's unusual personality. "I have money too... how much do I need?"

“I have a pizza too if you’re hungry!” Kiri abruptly offered. “It’s only like a few days old, but travel makes it taste way better!”

“And I have some water to wash it down with.” Vari pointedly rebutted. “You’ll probably need it if you actually take her up on that.”

“Hey! My cooking is a five-star experience, smartass!” Kiri scowled. “Besides, I don’t see *you* rigging up a pizza oven out in the wilderness.”

“Who the fuck makes a pizza out in the wilderness?” Vari asked incredulously.

“How about I make a rabbit bitch stew instead?!” Kiri snapped.

As the two began to quarrel and talk over each other, Tenki let an audibly hearty laugh escape from his lips while a tired Azta merely groaned and shook his head. ‘*My my, such energy!*’ Tenki thought with another wave of his fan. It had been a while since he’d seen such beautiful women actually *fight* over him – perhaps even a week! Tenki continued to fan himself with a wry smirk as the two bickered on, the dragon quietly debating the merits of accepting either of the contestant’s offers as they did so. Sure, he liked money, but did either of them *really* have enough to sway his decision? That had yet to be seen. Eventually, however, Tenki sighed behind his fan. The crowd *was* starting to get a bit antsy, he noticed... and if he let this go on for too long, he figured Miss X would step in and pick a place *for* them.

Looks like he needed to settle this quickly with a coin toss.

“Contestants!” Tenki called out.

“What?!” Vari and Kiri snapped in unison, causing Tenki to briefly wince out of reflex before calmly clearing his throat. Talk about fiery tempers...

“...I come to you with a compromise.” He offered with a smile. He then proceeded to lift up a single golden coin out from the depths of his sleeve, its gilded sheen shining brightly between his finger and his thumb as he boldly presented it to the two contestants. Immediately upon seeing this coin, however, Vari deflated with a tired frown; if the current situation of her life was any indication, she had the worst possible luck of any being in any dimension, *ever*. There was no way she was going to win a coin toss.

“Ladies and gentlemen! It seems we have come to an impasse!” Tenki’s voice echoed as it suddenly boomed far across the entire arena. If anyone hadn’t been paying attention, they certainly were now. Thousands of eyes promptly shifted towards Tenki as his voice shot out into the air, and with a flashy show of the coin he now held in his hand, Tenki smiled for the camera that Miss X was now pointing at him. Clearly, he loved receiving the opportunity to show off a bit...

“Call it, you two!” Tenki continued before turning towards Vari and Kiri. “Fox or Tails?”

“YES!” Kiri jumped with a pump of her fist. “I *rule* at coin flips! Gimme Fox!”

“I guess I’ll go with Tails, then.” Vari exhaled. “Just make this quick...”

She prayed that the tavern or city Kiri chose would at least be an abandoned one.

After nodding and finessing the coin onto his thumb with a devilish grin, Tenki took a deep breath before shooting his attention up towards the sky. “Sides are called! Miss Kiriata favors the fox, while Miss Varila chases its tails! Let’s see who lady luck favors today!” he called out, and with a resounding cry of excitement from the audience that surrounded them, Tenki quietly closed his eyes...

And flipped.

For the briefest of moments, the air around Tenki’s thumb became sharply distorted from the miniature shockwave which emanated from his fingers as he then flipped the coin hundreds of feet into the air in mere fractions of a second. This time, it was *Vari* who winced out of reflex as she suddenly jumped where she stood. Talk about overkill! Still, both Vari and Kiri made their best efforts to follow the coin as

it shot sky-high, their eyes squinting up towards the mid-afternoon sun while both sides shimmered and glinted with gold until eventually, the coin landed on the ground with a rough *thunk*.

Tenki opened his eyes.

“... Looks like we’re taking a trip out into the woods after all~!” Tenki called out. His decree was met with uproarious applause from the audience and a groaning facepalm from Kiri as Vari timidly made her way closer to the coin to double-check which side it had landed on.

Wait...

She won?

“And now we turn over to your gracious host, the dazzling Miss X! Don’t worry though, everyone – I’ll still be around~.” Tenki announced with another playful wink. “Take it away, sis!”

By now, Miss X’s previous song had ended, and upon finally hearing her brother give her the go-ahead, the hovering idol happily did a little loop-de-loop in mid-air before eagerly flying over towards the three contestants on a compact platform and broadcasting their faces to the giant jumbotron above. As Vari, Kiri, and Azta’s faces suddenly flashed onto the numerous digital displays which decorated the interior of the arena, Miss X’s voice suddenly began to boom throughout the Colosseum’s many speakers. Clearly, she’d been waiting for this...

“And therrrrreeeee we have it, folks! Looks like Varila has won the coin toss!” Miss X cheerily announced. “The arena is set, and the game is on! Who will prevail? Whose blood will spill?! *Eek!* I can’t wait!!!”

Along with the sound of Miss X's voice came the growth of a pearlescent blue glow from Tenki's crystal ball, which was now beginning to expand from the center of Tenki's hand and encompass the entirety of the Colosseum's interior – all in what felt like the blink of an eye. The sound of birds and other wild animals soon began to assault Vari's ears as well, and large, dense packets of trees and foliage could also be seen unfurling right before her eyes. It was... surreal. Vari had to admit, she was a little awestruck right now. Seeing her desired location morph into reality like this felt much different than it popping into existence instantaneously...

“As you all know by now, the conditions of the match are as follows!” Miss X continued, albeit a tad more formally this time. “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! ...Or at the very least, to the next round!”

The trees were growing larger now, their shapes being melded into reality as if 'affixing' themselves to the arena after being stripped away from whatever dimension they'd originated from. It was only after she felt her ears begin to *pop* in her head that Vari noticed that she, along with her opponents, were starting to ascend a few hundred feet straight up into the air. The ground they stood on had morphed into a massive tree branch now – a tree branch that, even in its own right, could have easily proven itself to be bigger than any of the other fully grown trees back in her homeland. These trees... they were perhaps the biggest Vari had ever seen, and their branches seemed to rigidly jut from the center of each trunk with their paths being more than big enough to hold all three combatants with ease. They could have easily gone the whole match fighting on just one branch if they wanted to. Vari couldn't quite place what species these trees were either, but she noticed that they were almost akin to that of the giant redwoods she'd spotted back home, except... bigger. *Much* bigger. Their bark was heavy and their foliage was dense, and from inside the forest, Vari could now hear the cries of the Colosseum's audience becoming muffled as Tenki's displacement of reality took further hold around her. As expected however, Miss X's voice remained as crisp and clear – just as it had been before the arena's transformation. Vari could still spot that little platform dancing along the treeline from the corner of her eye, too, just itching for a good camera angle...

“As always, any and all gear you’ve brought along with you is fair game! You will all be granted as much time as you need to complete the match... though try not to take too long!” Miss X warned. “It’ll get pretty boring if you keep the match going indefinitely! That being said...”

From her spot on a particularly sturdy tree branch, Vari could now see Kiri withdrawing her halberd and planting it at her side with a confident smirk on her face. Towering in front of her as well was a battle-ready Azta, his claws extended and the patterns on his armor glowing with a gentle glow akin to hot magma...

Upon making sure her visor was still activated, Vari in turn drew the sword which had until now been sheathed at her hip. Her lavender eyes began to narrow towards the two targets who now stood in her wake, and with a deep breath, Vari tightened her grip onto the hilt of her katana.

Breathe.

Focus...

Miss X's voice rang through the forest arena.

“LET THE BATTLE BEGIN!!!”

Round 1: Varila Na'tara vs. Kiri and Azta

'I CALL DIBS!' Kiri thought in an instant.

'Then I shall act as thine bulwark!' Azta replied telepathically.

...

And just like that, they were off. Clearly, they weren't intent on wasting any time, for it was as soon as Miss X gave the go-ahead that Kiri and Azta suddenly made a mad dash across the massive tree branch which had served as their arena and sprinted directly towards Vari's location. Kiri smirked as she ran, fearlessly pointing the tip of her halberd straight at a battle-ready Vari and brandishing its blade with a notable tinge of excitement in her eyes. Alone, Kiri would have been intimidating enough... but clearly, Azta was used to Kiri playing the aggressor. He thus acted as her shield as they ran, the hulking tower of armor placing himself directly in front of Kiri so that she could charge into battle without fear of incoming strikes or projectiles.

It was strange... Vari could have sworn that Azta appeared a tad bigger than he did before, too.

With a deep breath, Vari activated the interface to her neural glove and readied her sword. No matter. Given what little she knew about Azta and Kiri both, it made sense that Azta would act as the barrier between Kiri and her aggressor. And, if Vari was being honest, she wasn't even sure a supposed 'god' like Azta could feel pain anyway – much less be incapacitated. Not only was he completely clad in armor,

but the possibility of a divine nature made the idea of engaging him a rather questionable one at best. No... it couldn't be helped; no matter how this fight went, Vari knew that she would need to place her focus almost exclusively on Kiri.

Fortunately for Vari, however... getting past Azta would be the easy part.

“LET’S FUCKING GOOO-oooOH SHIT!” Kiri gasped, and in the blink of an eye, Kiri was caught off-guard as Vari disappeared from her previous spot with a flashing *ZAP* and reappeared in mid-air...

...directly behind her.

“W-what?! She can-?!”

CLANG! Vari’s sword clashed directly against the hilt of Kiri’s polearm as she turned to face Vari just in time, the powerful strike cutting Azta off mid-sentence and leaving him in a mild state of shock and confusion. Wasting little time, Vari’s feet shot straight back down onto the bark of the tree before pushing her forward into an aggressive flurry of strikes against Kiri’s defenses. *Clink, clang, clack, clink*; it was mere seconds before Kiri found herself being overwhelmed, and how Vari had managed to switch positions so quickly, neither Kiri or Azta could rightly say. Even so, Kiri twirled her halberd in a defensive series of grunts and parries as Vari waylaid her from behind – the Leporian using each and every opportunity she spotted amidst the chaos to intercept Kiri’s counters and dance further into her perimeter. With a deadly glare that pierced into Kiri’s very soul, Vari swung, thrust, and swiped at Kiri’s hands in numerous attempts to disarm her. These attempts persisted all the way up until Kiri was pushed back into Azta’s frame, causing her to momentarily lose her balance before being protectively thrown to the side by her partner’s metallic arms.

‘There.’ Vari thought.

This was her chance.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl as Azta suddenly tossed Kiri aside; and, upon finally being presented with an opportunity to do so, Vari frantically reached her arm out towards Kiri's neck and brushed her fingers against her tag...

... only to gasp as the wind was suddenly knocked out of her with a violent punch to the gut.

Azta's glowing fist felt like a rock twisting into Vari's abdomen as it was planted firmly into her stomach. The force of his blow suddenly sent Vari flying back onto the bark of their tree branch, with various grunts, gasps, and groans of pain escaping her lips while she bounced helplessly against the wood below. Splinters dug into Vari's armor and pricked the bronzed skin underneath while she slid against the tree's bark, until eventually, she finally skidded to a grinding halt and planted her sword into the bark below her for leverage. Now gasping for air, her boots staggered against the tree as Vari quickly managed to scramble back onto her feet – her vision already becoming blurred and dancing along the edges of her periphery while she stood there panting against her sword in a dizzy haze. From her place on the tree branch, the muffled, ringing sound of the Colosseum crowd could be heard going wild as Miss X's voice sounded off into the distance with a remark about their fight starting off with a *bang*.

Fucking hells, that hurt...

"Ooooh, but Azta's not done yet, folks!" Miss X called to the crowd. "Vari will need to keep her guard up if she wants to get through this!"

Now widening her eyes in panic, Vari lifted her sword from the tree bark and brought it up into a defensive stance as the sound of Azta's sprinting footsteps finally snapped her back into reality with a

racing shot of adrenaline. She blocked an incoming swipe from Azta with a loud *CLANG* as he then resumed his savage assault against her, the tip of his claws grinding against Vari's blade and nearly sending her flying again while she nimbly moved to start dodging his wild flurry of strikes. Although his moves were easily predicted from the limited movement his armor afforded him, the speed and sheer strength behind each blow almost entirely negated any weakness. Vari danced and weaved amidst the wanton violence of his slashes, straining to recover herself with immense difficulty whilst simultaneously swerving between each maneuver. Gods, he just wouldn't let up; and although his movements were sloppy, they were most certainly quick and passionate enough to catch Vari off-guard in the moment as she continued to jump farther and farther away from him. With the way his attacks were positioned, Vari had also already lost sight of Kiri amidst the chaos – her attention now being forced exclusively onto the god who was adamantly refusing her a moment to breathe. Urgh, she had no choice! She at least had to find a way to slow him down if she wanted to find Kiri.

Time to test that 'godly' nature of his.

ZAP, ZAP, ZAP.

Now opting to go back onto the offensive, Vari started a series of continuous teleports around Azta as they fought. With another series of swipes, thrusts, and stabs, Vari thwacked the edge of her sword against Azta's armor and used the momentum of her teleports to dodge his attacks with each and every strike she made. She teleported to his flank, his rear, his front, and even plunged her sword into the plate of his armor from above as he wildly slashed his arms around him in an uncontrolled chain of attempts to hit her. Though her strikes were brutal and his cries of pain were now becoming audible, Vari did not relent in her attempts to bring him down onto his knees as they continued to engage one another in what seemed like an endless display of flashy violence.

Squelch. Her sword rammed right through the muscles of his arm.

Slice. Her sword swiped against his leg.

Clang! Vari battered the hilt of her sword against his helmet.

Again and again and again she hit him, desperately attempting to daze or at least disorient him as his arms just barely missed her with each and every claw he threw at her... but whether it was due to divine nature or sheer fucking resilience, Vari just couldn't seem to incapacitate him. Urgh, why wouldn't he go down?! Was she truly going up against an invincible opponent?! Clearly she wasn't, as her strikes were very much doing damage to him... but no matter how hard she tried, no matter how much pain she inflicted upon him, Vari's hits just didn't seem to have the effect they needed. Fuck. This was a waste of time anyway. She needed to focus Kiri again.

Speaking of... where was-

ROAR!!!

Vari gasped as she was suddenly overcome with an ancient, primal fear long-since instilled into the blood of her ancestors. Her prey-like bunny ears perked up in recognition at the sound of a nearby predator as she reflexively teleported a ways away from Azta, and again, Vari's eyes widened out of panic as she realized that she knew that sound all too well. That roar belonged to a big, monstrous cat that must have just spotted them. Another growl of the jungle tiger suddenly caught Vari off-guard and caused her to fall back down onto the tree branch mid-battle, and frantically, Vari suddenly turned her attention behind her towards where the sound had emanated from... only to find that there was nothing there. Confused, Vari jumped up onto her feet and turned her head back and forth as her body was keenly placed on-edge – but the more she searched, the less she seemed to actually find. What the... what the fuck was that?! Had she imagined it? The mix of fear and confusion Vari felt was now starting to become palpable, but amidst all of her panting and sweating, it was the sight of a confidently smirking Kiri atop a nearby tree branch that finally snapped Vari out of her panic.

“Gotcha.” Kiri winked.

BAM!!!

Another metallic punch surging with raw power landed itself squarely into Vari’s jaw and sent her flying back into the trunk of the tree that she and Azta stood on. With a bloody, breathless gasp, the back of Vari’s frame then bounced straight against the bark of their tree, the impact leaving an outline of her body pressed against its surface and promptly causing her to slump down onto her knees in pain. With writhing, wincing shudders of agony, Vari coughed and spat up a small pool of blood down onto the bark of the tree below. She was seeing doubles through the cracks that Azta had placed into her visor now. Her ears were ringing too, drowning out the sound of whatever remark Miss X had decided to grace her with as she desperately fought the urge to pass out right then and there.

Safety... she needed to get to safety. It took nearly every ounce of composure Vari had left in order to activate her glove again so that she could teleport herself down onto the branch of another tree nearby – granting her some much-needed distance away from the fight she knew she was losing. When it came to staying conscious, her adrenaline was at least buying her some time... but one more hit like that, and she was most certainly done for.

“Oooooof, and the crowd goes wild!” Kiri gloated from atop her tree, with the crowd quite literally going wild in the background as Vari continued to cough and spit up blood. What... what had just happened? Had Kiri made those noises? Though the ringing in her ears had now stopped, the sound of her opponent chuckling at Vari’s expense could still be heard while she wiped away a stray trail of blood from the bottom of her lip. Upon seeing the splotches of blood which had now begun to pool together underneath her, Vari’s nails dug into the tree branch she knelt on out of frustration...

Gods-fucking-damnit.

“Ooh, yeah, *that* looks bad.” Kiri remarked as she gauged Vari’s injuries from afar. “Guess the only pussycat here is *you*, Vari! Hey Azta! Did ya time that? Was that two minutes or three? I genuinely lost track.”

“Time matters not. Only our impending victory.” Azta stated simply. The bands on his wrists then briefly spun in a fiery, glowing display – the revolving action punctuating his remark and releasing an intense amount of concentrated, pent-up heat from his wrists as he peered down at Vari through the visor of his helmet. It seemed he had somehow grown... hotter, from the duration of his fight with Vari – not to mention a tad agitated from her rampant teleportation. Indeed, he looked eager to finish this fight once and for all; all he had to do now was jump the gap onto Vari’s branch and finish her off.

“Allow me to dispense the final blow, Kiri.” Azta called out. “I assure thee that it will only take a moment to relieve her of her tag.”

Vari clenched her bloodied jaw in frustration as her vision landed onto the blurry glint of her jaded wedding ring.

No, Vari thought.

She wouldn’t just let this happen.

“*Cowards.*” Vari spat through the pain, the bunny making sure that her remark was audible enough so that Kiri and Azta both could hear it. Upon hearing the remark, Kiri turned her attention back towards Vari with a coy smirk that suggested she had just heard something scandalous escape from her opponent’s lips.

"Haha, sorry Miss Foo Foo, what was that?" Kiri asked before cupping her hand against her ear. "I couldn't hear quite hear ya over the sound of you being such a sore loser!"

"I'm calling you a coward, *bitch!* Or are you deaf as well as stupid?!" Vari snapped again. A foul-tempered glare then shot up towards Kiri from where Vari knelt on her tree, and with a bitter laugh of mild amusement, Kiri briefly clapped her hands in response before jumping down from her branch and landing herself right next to Azta.

"Oho! See, now *that's* probably the most damage you've done to me all match!" Kiri chuckled. "But I gotta admit, I'm not really seeing how a little bit of illusionary magic merits such 'biting' words being thrown my way. You gonna elaborate on that claim, *buddy?* Or is that smooth brain of yours only capable of being pissy all the time?"

Now having finally caught her breath, a thin trail of blood trickled down Vari's forehead and onto the bridge of her nose as she once again staggered to her feet with her sword in-hand. She then pointed its razor-sharp edge towards Kiri in a goading, taunting display towards Kiri, with her shaky grip unfortunately betraying the intimidation she'd initially hoped to instill in her opponent. Though she had to admit that trying to bruise Kiri's ego after being outplayed like that wasn't the most mature course of action, it seemed that it was a surprisingly good way to get her attention. Even so, she didn't necessarily care about maturity right now. She just wanted to take Kiri's ego down a notch while she still could.

"The only reason you're even still standing there is because of that giant heap of molten *scrap metal* standing next to you." Vari glared. She then pointed the tip of her sword towards Azta, the contempt on her face deepening upon laying her eyes on his glowing armor again. "Your little pet god fights all your battles for you, doesn't he? Throws all your punches for you while you run and hide like a coward? It's pathetic. A child like you doesn't deserve to be here, much less be granted a wish they don't even deserve. I'll be damned if I lose to a kid like you."

As the final remaining words of Vari's rant left her lips, Kiri's grip fiercely tightened around her halberd.

"Well LOOK who's fucking talking!" Kiri snapped with a growl. "Teleporting around with some gimmick device! Without that, you can't fight for shit, yeah?!"

"Come down here and find out, *little girl*." Vari huffed with a stubborn swish of her blade. And before she even knew it...

Kiri had leapt from her tree and charged right towards her.

'Kiri, wait! Do not engage her dir-'

'STUFF IT, AZTA!' Kiri thought back.

The sound of Kiri's feet landing onto the bark of Vari's tree was swiftly followed by another loud *CLANG* as again, their weapons clashed together. With unrelenting force, Kiri had gone on the offensive again – the intensity of their re-engagement causing the muffled cheering of the audience outside of the arena to grow louder and wilder as Kiri swung her halberd in wide, reaching motions towards Vari. She'd definitely increased the ferocity of her swings this time around, opting to overwhelm Vari with an aggressive series of strikes, thrusts, and parries rather than play defensively with Azta. It was certainly different compared to the way she'd fought at the very beginning of their match with one another.

However...

That wasn't the only difference that Vari had perceived. Again and again, Kiri landed her halberd straight into the metal of Vari's katana in-between various parries and teleports, and with each strike came the

appearance of another oddity or peculiarity that caught Vari further off-guard. More specifically, Vari had started to notice that, throughout the duration of their fight, the sounds of Kiri's halberd had occasionally seemed to repeat or 'duplicate' themselves with various degrees of loudness and frequency. At first, Vari merely thought the repeats mere hallucinations – a side-effect of her growing fatigue and injuries that she'd just have to deal with moving forward. After all, she'd taken quite the devastating hits from Azta during their match so far, and she wouldn't have doubted that she'd suffered a concussion or worse from the punch that had been landed squarely into her jaw just a few moments beforehand. However, the longer they fought on, the more frequent these sounds seemed to become...

That had to have been Kiri again.

She was certain of it as Vari then began to hear strikes that weren't actually there – the bunny expending unneeded effort in dodging invisible slashes that, for all intents and purposes, she'd simply appeared to imagine. She was second guessing all of her instincts now, stumbling just a little bit closer towards the curved edge of their tree branch as Kiri continued to pour her all into each and every swing of her halberd. Vari dodged, parried, and teleported away from Kiri's strikes until finally, she flipped back from her place on the ledge and fell willingly into a few-hundred-foot freefall in order to break Kiri's momentum...

ZAP! ZAP! ZAP!

With another clench of her gloved hand, Vari instantly teleported back up onto the branch of the tree Kiri stood on and landed directly behind her in another flash of bright light. There to greet her was another reflexive swing of Kiri's halberd, which Vari narrowly avoided with a rather nimble dodge and countered with a spin and a whirl of her sword. Though she hadn't quite expected to hit her with said counter, Vari's katana nonetheless grazed the skin of Kiri's upper arm and laid a shallow cut which spanned all the way from her elbow up into her shoulder. Most notably, however, the wound had briefly caused Kiri's auditory illusions to stop, further confirming Vari's suspicions that Kiri had been their source. Now recoiling backwards in pain, Kiri grunted out of frustration before again swiping at Vari with

her polearm – forcing her to teleport again in order to dodge her reaching strikes. Fighting Kiri by herself was bad enough, Vari thought, and she had to admit that she’d perhaps not given the girl enough credit where it was due; but it was the twitching of her sensitive ears mid-fight which alerted Vari that her situation was about to get much, *much* worse than it already was...

CRACK.

Azta’s boiling fist slammed a crater into the spot where Vari had stood mere seconds beforehand – her teleport allowing her to avoid the finishing blow just as the god’s fist came crashing down onto the ground from mid-air. As soon as Vari rematerialized back into reality, she was immediately placed onto the defensive again as Kiri and Azta proceeded to barrage Vari with clawing swipes, whirling thrusts, and glancing blows – all of which occasionally managed to lay shallow cuts across Vari’s cheek and armor as Kiri’s illusions began to ‘nudge’ her into their actual strikes.

At this point, Vari was growing sluggish in her movements, and each scrape and bruise she received on her skin served as further evidence of this. Even with the ADT, there was no way Vari would be able to keep up in a fight between the both of them. She had to think fast, for if the fight continued as it was, Vari was no doubt going to lose.

And, amidst all of her dodging, jumping, and teleporting, an idea did eventually begin to surface in Vari’s head...

Maybe Kiri’s bruised ego could serve as a means for Vari to separate this obnoxious duo.

“Even with a *god* at your side, you can’t hit me! How sad!” Vari cackled, only to be met with a frustrated growl as Kiri ragefully swung her halberd into the wood below her. Vari could have sworn that Kiri’s halberd had managed to trim a few strands of hair from her bangs right as she teleported again...

“Careful Vari! Wouldn’t want you to LOSE YOUR HEAD!” Kiri shouted, all before using the extensive reach of her polearm to leap forward and strike where Vari had stood mere tenths of a second beforehand. Another close call.

“Too bad you never use *yours!*” Vari rebuked with another clench of her glove. She then teleported behind Kiri in order to land a flying *kick* straight into her cheek, knocking her a good distance back and prompting Azta to charge directly towards Vari with a deadly counter of his own. *This was it*, Vari thought. She needed one good angle on Azta, and if she could pull off this next maneuver, a solo fight against Kiri would present fewer issues for her. Again, the god wildly swiped at Vari, his claws just narrowly missing her visor and brushing directly against the fur of Vari’s bunny ears. She then swiftly teleported in response, instantly appearing behind him before firmly wrapping her arm around his neck and placing him into a burning chokehold.

‘*Gotcha.*’, she thought as the heat from his armor sizzled against her skin. He may have burned hotter than the hells right now, but at the very least, she finally had him.

“We’re going for a ride, *big man.*” Vari maliciously whispered into his ear, and just as Kiri managed to recover herself and raise her halberd back up into the air, Vari clenched her glove and teleported another several times far up into the air... all while bringing Azta right along with her. From here, things would get a lot simpler.

ZAP! ZAP! ZAP! ZAP! Vari and Azta zipped straight up into the sky while his armor branded the skin of Vari’s arm with its magma-like patterns, causing Vari to bite her bloody lip from the searing pain she felt as she teleported him higher and higher. He repeatedly elbowed Vari’s ribs in resistance as they soared upwards, the metal of his armor landing squarely into Vari’s leather vest and causing her to wince while her ribs were surely cracked.

“U-unhand me... *wench!*” he said through strained grunts.

“Thou knowest not... what thou does!”

Words of desperation, Vari was sure.

Eventually, they approached the outer boundaries of the rift which Tenki had so effortlessly created at the beginning of the round. Once she was certain they were high up enough in the sky for her plan to work, Vari smirked and laid a degrading *slap* right onto the metal of Azta’s helmet before promptly kicking him away and letting him glide down into what felt like a never-ending freefall. A frustrated roar left Azta’s helmet as he descended down towards terra firma, and although normal circumstances would have caused Vari to be worried about falling herself ... she still had the ADT.

Returning to safety would be no problem for *her*.

ZAP. ZAP. ZAP. With carefully gauged teleports, Vari maneuvered herself back down towards the safety of the treeline below where Kiri was surely waiting for her. Each teleport continued to break the momentum of her fall during her descent, and once she felt herself brushing against the leaves of the redwood-like trees of the forest below, Vari let herself glide down onto the nearest tree branch before instantly landing onto its bark with one final teleport.

Upon reaching safety, Vari heard the sound of Azta’s metallic body *whizzing* right past her as he continued to descend into the dirt a few hundred feet below. A loud *CRASH* accompanied by the sound of rustling leaves could be heard as he finally hit the ground, and although Vari was briefly concerned that she had just possibly killed this guy despite being a god, the roaring cries of pain which rang out into the forest below provided at least some level of assurance to Vari that he was indeed still alive.

Just extremely pissed off.

“Hahah... fucker.” Vari muttered – though as soon as the insult left her lips, another tang of pain throbbed throughout her ribcage and prompted her to lurch forward with another groan of agony. Oh, how she wished she’d thought to separate them sooner. Despite the light protection of her armor, it seemed that Azta’s repeated strikes into her ribcage had left one or two of her ribs cracked and broken. Had she been a little quicker on her feet, perhaps she wouldn’t have had to fight the remainder of this battle in such bad shape. She didn’t even want to *think* about the searing pain that grappling onto Azta’s armor had given her... though it was admittedly becoming much harder to ignore by the second.

With a deep, adrenaline-laced sigh, Vari stood herself up and quietly raised her sword again.

“You seem awfully proud of yourself.” Kiri called from above.

With trembling hands and a dead-eyed expression, Vari slowly lifted her gaze up towards the ledge of another large tree branch where Kiri now stood – her polearm in-hand and her white hair glistening against the rays of sunlight which shone through the treeline above. Another splotch of blood hit the ground as Vari spit the red liquid out of her mouth and wiped it away with her sizzled arm, and though she could still hear the muffled sounds of the crowd cheering from their seats in the Colosseum, she’d long-since tuned them out in favor of focusing on her opponent.

And with another chuckle, Vari took a deep breath and forced herself to smile.

“Think your friend’s gonna be okay?” Vari panted from below.

“Pfft. Of course he is, dumbass.” Kiri snapped. “I meant it when I told you that the dude’s a *god*. Traveling with someone like him gives you front row seats to the sort of shit he’s able to pull. It’s a good thing, too... because anyone else would’ve been dead the moment they dropped onto the ground like that.” She remarked before sweeping her ruffled white hair to the side. “I hope that little trick was worth it, by the way. It didn’t do nearly as much damage as you’d hoped it would.”

“I’d say it was.” Vari smirked. “I don’t see your friend being able to climb up these trees anytime soon – not with all that armor on. Now we get to fight for real.” She said, tightening the grip on her sword again. “That is, unless you’re planning to jump down there and run away to your pet god again...?”

“Tch.” Kiri scoffed with a smile that didn’t reach her eyes, and only further highlighted the shake in her fists and the tremble in her voice as she spoke. “...maybe I could. But...”

“But?” Vari asked.

“I’d rather not pass up a good opportunity to smack the shit outta you myself.” Kiri smirked.

She then withdrew her halberd with another deft twirl of her fingers, all before jumping herself down onto the same branch Vari stood on and readying herself with a stretch of her wounded arm. Not wanting to be outdone, Vari chuckled under her breath as the hilt of her katana whirled in her hand – its tip eventually coming to a sudden stop whilst pointing itself directly at Kiri. From there, Vari assumed her usual battle stance and prepared herself for what was to come.

“Just try and keep up, then.” Vari smirked with a face of bravado.

“I’d practice what you PREACH!” Kiri grunted, and with the utterance of those last few words which had been laced with stubborn malice, Kiri suddenly bolted forward with her halberd at the ready. Immediately, Vari clenched her gloved hand in response – causing her to teleport right at Kiri’s flank and strike at her with a swift kick aimed towards her ribs. Kiri, however, was ready for this, and as soon as Vari’s foot made contact with the hilt of Kiri’s halberd with a resonating *THWACK* instead, Kiri materialized a small, concerning-looking pizza from the depths of her backpack and spun it right into her hand.

“Catch!” Kiri beamed, and in one swift motion, she pushed the pizza directly into Vari’s face.

With a gasp, Vari muffled a cry of disgust into its sauce and teleported directly behind Kiri out of sheer and utter panic. Flaccidly, the pizza then fell to the ground, and as soon as Vari landed behind her and attempted to wipe away the remnants of gooey cheese from her visor, Kiri twirled her halberd again and *THWACKED* Vari’s visor right off of her head. The hit sent the visor *flying* right off of Vari’s panicked face, and with wide eyes, Vari could only watch as it skidded over towards the ledge of their tree branch and slipped right off of the edge... only for the elastic headband on the back to intertwine itself with a precarious-looking twig right before it fell, the act only just barely preventing her lifeline from plummeting to the floor of the forest a few hundred feet below.

Fuck!

Despite still having her glove, there was no way she could risk teleporting now. At least, not without the ADT malfunctioning. The ADT-v needed both the glove *and* the visor in order to coordinate Vari’s teleports through interdimensional space, and without one component, the other was essentially useless...

In other words, she was shit out of luck.

“That’s better.” Kiri smirked, and before Vari could even say a word in protest, Kiri swung her halberd right into the metal of Vari’s katana – the bunny raising it just in time to block her opponent’s strike with an unnerved gasp. *CLING! CLANG! THWACK!* Vari stumbled her way backwards with tired, sluggish parries as she desperately attempted to stave off the rapid series of strikes and illusions that Kiri was throwing at her. Not only was Vari succumbing to exhaustion now, but she also had to deal with the fatigue that came with dodging flurries of strikes that were both real *and* illusionary. She felt so disoriented – so *naked* without her visor. It was all she could do to keep Kiri from overwhelming and, eventually, disarming her...

“Awww, what’s wrong Vari?” Kiri taunted. “Can’t fight without your little TOY?”

The blade of Kiri’s halberd then *CRASHED* into the wood below as Vari just narrowly managed to dodge her strike in time. Vari wildly slashed her sword at random in return, with Kiri easily managing to lean away from the tip of Vari’s katana as the bunny staggered farther and farther away from her. It didn’t take a genius to notice that being removed from her ability to teleport had clearly thrown Vari off her game, but this observation had nonetheless managed to sate Kiri’s ego a bit as she watched Vari slowly fall apart in front of her. So enjoyed it so much, in fact, that Kiri began to smile with glee as she swiped her polearm at Vari’s feet and forced her to ‘dance’ for her – the bunny spiraling into a desperate bid to gain some distance with each and every attempt Kiri made to close the gap. Kiri was very much playing with her food right now, and as frustrated as Vari had been to be reduced to such a vulnerable state, she really only had one last hail Mary she could use in this situation...

To disorient Kiri *back*.

With a dexterous swipe of her hand, Vari removed two smoke bombs from her back pocket and deftly placed them between her fingers.

“Hey Vari!” Kiri cackled. “Whaddya call a bunny who just lost her-“

POOF!

Whatever confident quip Kiri had been eager to spin had now gone up in smoke – literally – as with the last of her energy, Vari chucked a smoke bomb from her fingers down onto the wood below. Immediately, Kiri recoiled and gagged with shock as she inhaled several puffs of smoke in-between her previous bouts of laughter by accident, causing her to swing and swipe her weapon in wild, random intervals while she desperately attempted to recuperate. The smoke bomb acted as quickly as it usually did, she noticed, allowing Vari to easily submerge herself into cover behind an enormous smoke cloud while the surrounding area was engulfed in what felt like the blink of an eye. And, although she knew she wouldn't be able to protect herself from the smoke's effects entirely, Vari nonetheless made her best attempt to cover her mouth and nostrils with her arm while she waded her way through the smoke... if she wasn't careful, she knew that even *she* would not be able to resist the urge to be reduced to a coughing, sputtering mess. Even so, Vari felt relief as she lightly coughed into her arm – she didn't think she could've have timed that first bomb any better. It would serve as an excellent distraction for Kiri to get caught up in while Vari made her next move... though she knew that she would need to work fast if she had any hope of pulling this off without her visor.

Speaking of her visor...

Now closing her eyes, Vari's sensitive ears twitched in response to the sound of Kiri's coughing, gagging, and cursing while she haphazardly swung her halberd back and forth. She could almost visualize Kiri's outline stumbling to and fro in her mind's eye as she hazily searched for her opponent through the cloud. Her smoke bomb had clearly had its intended effect, though unfortunately, this did mean that neither Kiri or herself would be able to perceive their surroundings while the smoke lingered... at least, not with their eyes. Fortunately for Vari, however, her ears were just as sharply tuned as any of her other senses...

...

There.

“Ack! Fucking piss-!!!” Kiri coughed with another random swing of her halberd. “Ugh, BITCH move, Vari! ACK! *Complete* bitch move! I swear that when I find you, I’m gonna slap you so hard across the face you won’t even THINK about doing that shit again-”

POOF!

“MOTHERF-ACK!” Kiri’s words were abruptly cut short as yet *another* smoke bomb was thrown – this time directly underneath her – causing her wheezing to intensify to the point where she had now dropped her weapon entirely and slumped onto the ground in a nonstop coughing fit. The metal of her weapon *clattered* down onto the tree as she suddenly knelt onto its bark, gagging and hacking with helpless abandon while she slowly started to crawl away from the smoke’s point of impact. She really needed to stop talking, Vari thought – the more she exposed her airways, the more susceptible she would be to the smoke’s effects...

At the very least, however, this little distraction had proved more than effective enough in allowing Vari to dash over towards her opponent and lay a violent kick right into her gut. With drooling, violent shock, Kiri gasped in surprise as Vari’s foot suddenly planted itself right into her abdomen – the hit causing her to wheeze and inhale another puff of smoke into her lungs upon having the wind fiercely kicked out of her.

From there, Vari simply walked over towards Kiri and ripped the tag from her neck with a satisfying *snap*.

This was done.

“N-no...! T-that’s-!” Kiri wheezed between her coughs. With a stubborn grunt, Kiri then pounced forward in order to wrap her arms around Vari’s leg in a last-ditch effort to prevent her from walking away with her tag. Having been caught by surprise at the sudden addition of weight on her leg, Vari grunted as she nearly tripped and lurched forward straight onto the ground. She then looked down in frustration at the girl who’d just grappled her, and with a stubborn growl, Vari began to drag Kiri behind her as she steadily hopped forward in order to reclaim her visor. It would be a pain to get the ADT back this way, of course... though with all that smoke in her lungs and her halberd firmly on the ground, Vari knew that Kiri wouldn’t be able to do much to stop Vari from claiming this match for herself.

She had practically already won.

“WOW! With yet another turn of the tides, it looks like Varila has swiped Kiri’s tag right off her neck and is now *dragging* her towards the ledge!!!” Miss X announced. “What a rollercoaster!!! You know what this means, folks...”

“START THE COUNTDOWN~!”

30!

“Get the hells off of me...” Vari panted through her exhaustion as she weakly kicked her leg up against Kiri’s arms. “You’re done! I’m through with this match; go home with some dignity, already!”

Surprisingly enough, however, Kiri did not respond.

Instead, she quickly turned to the last ace she had left up her sleeve...

...

'Azta! Aztaaztaazta!!!' Kiri communicated at the speed of thought. At least with her link to Azta, they could communicate much quicker than normal...

'Kiri?! What tookest thou so long to respond?! Has Varila truly retrieved thine tag?!' Azta replied telepathically.

'YES! Now you need to get your ass in gear!' Kiri explained. *'I've got her held down on the left side – I just need you to bust out that fire magic of yours and shoot this sucker down!'*

'What?!' Azta exclaimed. *'Kiri, dost thou realize the dangers-'*

'I know, okay?!' Kiri interjected. *'But listen, you need to stop holding back! I know you don't like using it but she has our tag, Azta! Knowing our luck, I'll be just fine. Just light this tree up and I'll use the confusion to snatch my tag back! HURRY!'*

...

BOOM!

The roaring shockwave of an enormous fireblast from below answered Vari's taunting words almost instantaneously, the blast suddenly sending Vari careening straight down onto the coarse bark of the

branch with unrelenting force and covering what felt like her entire body in piercing, black splinters. She cried out in pain as her face slammed onto the tree branch face-first, the impact breaking her nose and causing a thick trail of blood to trickle down from her nostrils while another fireball soared right past her and shot into the sky at impossible speeds. Fortunately for Kiri, Vari's retreat had now come to a screeching halt as she was suddenly thrown right onto the ground... but Kiri herself was now experiencing the exact opposite problem. She was positively sent flying as another two fireballs screamed into the wood of the tree branch from below and – *BOOM! BOOM!* – exploded upon impact, the girl bouncing away from where she once laid and skidding along the bloodied tree bark with panicked gasps until finally, she found herself rolling, rolling, rolling... right off of the tree branch and down towards the ground.

CRACK! 25!

...

Kiri very nearly plummeted down onto the floor of the forest below as she then latched her hand onto a nearby twig. From where she hung, she could also see the ADT dangling on another nearby branch – threatening to fall into the heat of the wildfires which had now started below. '*Shit. Shit, shit, shit!*' Kiri thought. Even from hundreds of feet up in the air, she could still hear another volley of fire being charged for release from the revolver-like bands on Azta's wrists as she dangled onto that branch for dear life. Her heart was racing now, and her ears were ringing from the sheer power of Azta's fire magic which she had to admit had been a *little* too effective in doing what it had been intended to do. It was when Kiri finally stopped having a mini-heart attack that she quickly gathered her bearings and opened up her mental link to Azta again.

'TOO MUCH, DUDE! WAYYY TOO MUCH!' Kiri screamed internally. She was very much resisting the urge to scream *externally*, too, as she suddenly heard another *crack* emanate from the twig she'd latched herself onto...

'Kiri?!' Azta exclaimed. 'What happened? Hast thou managed to retrieve our tag?!'

'N-no, man! I CAN'T now! I-I...'

20!

Kiri, however, did not finish that thought. She was much too busy trying to keep her heart from pounding out of her chest as she suddenly looked down towards the blazing inferno that had engulfed the forest below. Holy *shit*, what did Azta do?! The flames that had been shot from Azta's wrists had lit this forest ablaze as if it had been made of nothing but *gasoline*. She could feel the heat of the wildfire rapidly approaching their tree from below as the voluminous flames from Azta's fireballs started to eat away at the leafy floor below, and no matter how many times Kiri's nails dug into the many crevices which adorned the branch of the tree, she just couldn't seem to catch the grip she needed in order to pull herself up. From there, the embers of burning leaves and scorched earth accompanied the scent of burnt tree bark which wafted around her as she desperately attempted to hoist herself back up, only to again crack the branch above her to no avail.

And, much to Kiri's dismay, it was the sound of her branch snapping which caused Vari's bunny ears to twitch out of reflex.

...

15!

Vari groaned in bloodied pain as she gingerly crawled onto her knees, and then, up onto her feet. She'd just narrowly managed to prevent herself from passing out on the spot, though thankfully, her adrenaline had left her much too tense to succumb to her body's desire to do so. Slowly, and with trembling arms, Vari gradually began to lift herself back up onto her feet before languidly turning her attention over towards her dangling opponent.

...

Only to wince and stagger in pain as her head violently began to throb.

"Vari... please... don't let me fall!" Kiri pleaded.

~~Vari please... don't let me fall!~~

Those were the only words on Vari's mind as time suddenly slowed to a crawl. Wordlessly, Vari looked down at her opponent through pained, hazy eyes, with faint hints of recognition glimmering across her lavender pupils and dancing along the reflection of the roaring flames that had now surrounded her completely. Everything that was happening right now – the sheer chaos and panic – it all looked so familiar to Vari. Like she'd been here before...

The uncanny feeling of déjà vu froze Vari into a complete standstill. She was only able to watch as Kiri grunted and struggled to hoist herself back up onto the tree with that frantic desperation in her eyes. Her nails grinded against its bark, scratching and scraping against the tree while the surrounding flames crackled in a spectacular display of wanton destruction. The fire had spread so unimaginably quickly, Vari thought, spreading and burning and eating away every last bit of foliage which rustled around them until in the blink of an eye, the treeline above had gone black from the smoke.

And there, amidst the fiery chaos which had now begun to perforate across the entire forest floor, Vari let out a tearful gasp as the sight of Kiri's dragging nails finally revealed to her why this had all looked so eerily familiar. Indecision had now wrapped Vari in its icy grip.

10!

"N-no..." Vari whimpered. Briefly, she looked away... but knew the sight of the blackened trees around her looked much too familiar to be any sort of comfort. Gods, how had she not seen it before? It was the charred wood of the trees. The blackened sky. The familiarity of Azta's claws. It was the cold feeling of dread in Vari's stomach and the distinct sight of Kiri's bloodied nails dragging along the wood of the tree that had caused her to tense up so violently. But more than that...

It was the look in Kiri's eyes.

Eyes which no longer seemed to perceive any sort of malice in Vari... but rather, mirrored the fear and vulnerability which shone through her own lavender pupils.

Vari's nightmares were now all coming back to her in full force; except this time, they felt all too real. And, as if that weren't enough, Vari had now been presented with a choice. One that would not only decide the outcome of this match, but also potentially decide the outcome of all of Vari's future matches. With trembling, quivering lips, the woman let her katana slip out of her hands as the reality of an all-too-sudden question was abruptly forced upon her:

The ADT? Or Kiri?

"Vari, please..." Kiri trembled pleadingly.

5!

...

Time seemed to freeze completely in that moment as Vari's legs faltered and she screamed in rage.

Vari cursed the gods above and below for the situation she'd just found herself in, and in less than a second, all of Vari's fear had instead turned into a fit of helpless anger. She cursed Kiri for being so clumsy; she cursed Azta for setting the whole damned arena on fire; but most of all, she cursed *herself* for letting the round get to this point. Why? Why her?! Were it any other object, were it any other replaceable thing or item or trinket she'd brought with her on this insane interdimensional journey, Vari would have reached down and taken Kiri's hand with no questions asked. But the ADT?

Vari couldn't replace *that*.

She just couldn't. It was the only lead on Mira she had left if she didn't win this tournament, but it was also much more than that. It was her tether back home. Her lifeline. *Mira's* lifeline. It was the only thing that had caught the God Eater's attention and allowed her to participate in this tournament in the first place, and as much as she hated that godsdamned device and all of the suffering it had caused her, for a while, it was also her only ally...

CRACK!

Kiri's grip was slipping.

Vari knew she likely wouldn't survive the fall.

She'd die if Vari didn't make a choice.

With shaking, tearful breaths, Vari looked over towards the burning branch which still carried her dangling visor...

Vari's heart pounded in her chest, and her eyes filled with fresh tears.

Her feet threatened to move towards the visor and away from Kiri, but Mira's voice rang through her head – sending sharp pains throughout Vari's skull and firmly rooting her in place.

Vari ached inside, her heart torn by the cruelty of the decision forced upon her as she reached down and grabbed Kiri's hand instead.

"AWESOMENOWPULLMEUP!" Kiri screamed in one breath, and with all of the strength Vari had left, she hoisted Kiri back up onto the safety of their tree branch and slung her back down at her feet. Opting to waste as little time as possible, Vari whimpered with desperate tears in her eyes as she released Kiri's hand and sprinted over towards the branch which held her visor...

O!

... only for its elastic headband to slip right through Vari's fingers and plummet down into the burning forest below. From there, Vari could only watch in abject horror as the only remnant of Mira she had left was swallowed into an all-encompassing inferno.

She was too late.

A desolate silence lingered amidst the crackling of flames until Vari finally heard Kiri fall into a sudden coughing fit beside her, the girl sluggishly rolling onto her back as she took in shaky, adrenaline-laced breaths for air. Though Vari's focus was now turned elsewhere, she could feel the way Kiri's eyes bore into the back of her head as she knelt there – the shock of her opponent's decision not only catching her off-guard, but Vari herself as well.

"Vari...?" Kiri panted. Vari could still hear the tremble in Kiri's voice as she laid exhausted on the bark beside her, and though she had indeed heard her speak her name just now, the only response Vari could muster were the tears that were now trickling onto the small, circular pendant she still clutched in her hands.

Her wedding band felt constricted and heavy around her finger.

"V-Var-"

"Consider that countdown FINISHED, EVERYONE! LOOKS LIKE VARILA IS OUR WINNER!!!" Miss X announced.

And, from where they both sat, both Kiri and Vari could now hear the muffled crowd of the Colosseum erupt into uproarious cheering and applause as the text on the large jumbotron above transitioned into a giant, flashing announcement...

WINNER: VARILA NA'TARA

To Dust

The roots of the gargantuan forest trees which had, up until this point, surrounded Vari from all sides slowly began to 'sink' back into the ground below after the match had ended. Shrubs were disappearing, leaves were dissipating into blackened embers, and the giant treeline which had previously filtered down the shining sun above was now fading away into mere nothingness – all while Tenki's orb reclaimed the space of the Colosseum that it had previously altered and restored it to its original, sandstone state. The flames on the trees' branches were slowly being snuffed out of existence, too, with the trunk of each redwood tree gradually twisting and coiling back into the ground like a group of giant wooden corkscrews. Finally, their match was done. The leaves of the forest, along with the enormous treeline they'd fought in, had now almost completely returned to their own dimension... and there, coiling down back onto the ground right alongside her opponent, Vari sat – merely clutching onto the metal of Kiri's tag while silent tears trickling down her cheeks. She didn't say a thing as they gently descended into the Colosseum below.

Though Miss X had just announced her as the winner of this match, Vari merely wanted to retch.

It didn't help that her senses were now practically being assaulted by the sound of the crowd as their cheers eased back into full clarity. The fair-weather sun of the Colosseum was now completely visible, too, and as Vari and Kiri both descended down onto the ground without a spoken word between them, the large digital display which still displayed proof of Vari's victory suddenly beckoned for their attention with another series of flashes as they finally emerged from the thickened treeline – safe and, for the most part, unharmed.

Indeed, Vari had won.

But it was a pyrrhic victory.

A defeat, more like.

...

... Gods, what had she done?

“Uh... hey, Vari?” Kiri muttered during their descent. “I, um... I’m sorry about your goggles or whatever. I know those must’ve cost you a pretty penny, hah... but uh... I just wanted to thank you for lending me a-
“

“KIRIATA!” a gruff voice called out, and at this, Kiri widened her eyes and practically jumped in place out of fear.

Uh oh.

Whatever Kiri had been about to say had been firmly interrupted as Azta suddenly called out to her from his charred spot in the arena. With surprising speeds, his metallic feet came rushing over to her as the last of Tenki’s arena finally faded from existence – his glowing, heated boots leaving a trail of scuffed sandstone behind him while Kiri forced a reassuring smile for her now-approaching partner. Clearly, Azta was more than a little upset at how the last few moments of their match had gone...

“What was thou thinking?!” Azta scolded as he approached her, his armor still radiating with the heat generated from their match. “Thou couldst have been *killed!* By *my* hand! Dost thou even realize the tremendous depths of guilt I would feel had I not exercised more caution in exercising thine precipitous ‘ace in the hole’?! Thou wouldst not have only lost thine wish, but thy life besides! It astounds me how reckless thou art! How FOOLISH thine-“

“Yeah, yeah... I would’ve missed you too, buddy.” Kiri smirked with a wave of her hand, the casual nonchalance of her remark briefly causing Azta to fumble his words, and ultimately deflate with a defeated sigh. Of course she didn’t care.

“Surely thou dost kid?” Azta grumbled. “Might I reiterate that mine magics could have easily killed thee?!”

“Yeah yeah, our fights are dangerous! But hey – look at me! I’m fine, see? No burn marks to be found, and Vari is, well... *mostly* okay.” Kiri beamed before happily leaning her arm against the armored man – only to recoil as her skin briefly sizzled against its heated surface. Damn, he wasn’t kidding! His armor was burning hotter than any form of hell right now...

With a glare that could pierce Kiri’s very soul, however, Azta merely shook his head before lifting his hand up onto his face with an exhausted sigh. He was much too tired to continue trying to argue with her.

“And what of *her*...?” Azta asked as he pointed a glare at Vari. “What brazen trickery didst she use to rob thee of thine tag?”

“Actually, um, Azta...” Kiri suddenly interjected. “She uh... *might* have kinda saved my ass back there. Just a *tiny* bit.”

“She what?!” Azta exclaimed, only for his voice to lower to a whisper as he then spotted both Tenki and Miss X approaching from afar. “Thou will have to explain more clearly...”

“I’ll explain later, Sir Burns-a-lot.” Kiri whispered back. “But... just go easy on her, alright? She’s pretty beat up about losing her goggle thingy.”

“Well well well, if I didn’t know any better, I’d say *you* two won that match instead of little miss frowny-face over there.” Tenki remarked as he approached with his sister in tow. He then unfolded his fan with a smile as he glanced over to Vari, with Miss X shooting the woman a series of playful expressions and celebratory thumbs-up in a lighthearted attempt to capture her attention. “Chin up over there, Vari. You’ve got your second tail, and now you’re moving onto the next round! Isn’t that something to celebrate~?”

Vari, however, did not respond. Instead, she merely sat silently in the middle of the arena while the faint cheering of the crowd behind her continued to rumble on.

“Mmmm... she looks kinda down over there, Tenki.” Miss X pouted. “You think that match was too much on her? I didn’t think she’d be so *sad* to win her first round!”

“Meh.” Tenki shrugged. “We’ve seen worse happen in the arena, y’know. She’ll get over it. Besides, if you ask me, I’d say she made a rather admirable decision in saving her opponent rather than that device~... a shame to see something so exotic burn to a crisp, though. I would’ve *loved* to have something like that for myself.”

...

'Burnt to a crisp,' they said...

Yeah.

That sounded about right.

Quietly, Vari stood from her place on the ground to the echo of uproarious applause as finally, she looked up to confront the crowd that had been so excitedly waiting to shower her in cheers of celebration. The sudden eruption of cheers, applause, and glee all coalesced into one giant cry of encouragement as Vari blankly stared at the audience in front of her – her lavender eyes now glazing over as thoughts of Mira started to flood back into her mind.

Mira...

A tear suddenly trickled down the length of Vari's cheek as her heart suddenly began to race. Then another. And another. Then before she knew it, flashes of her dream from the previous night were starting to course throughout her mind as her exhausted muscles began to tremble with pain. She could only think of the sight of Mira's body being dragged across the floor of that dark and desolate house as she stood there, with each instance of her lover's voice crying out for help becoming louder and louder in her head while she desperately tried to prevent herself from losing her composure. And for the briefest moment, Vari genuinely thought she was going to break from the pressure. It was everything, all at once, that was now causing Vari to become short of breath and clutch her palm against her bosom. The crowd was becoming louder now, cheering Vari's name with excited cries as panicked tears continued to trickle down her fearful face.

What was happening to her?

Why couldn't she breathe?

Flashes of the ADT falling into that burning inferno within the forest continued to assault Vari's mind – shattering it into innumerable pieces while the sound of the Colosseum chanting her name melded into that of Mira doing the same. *Va-ri-la. Va-ri-la.* They were cheering louder at her now, no, more like *screaming* at her. Screaming at her like Mira did. Screaming at her, crying and calling out for help that they knew she was powerless to provide. No... they were *ridiculing* her, too! Scolding her for being unable to do the bare minimum in saving the woman who loved her most in this world and instead, letting her go.

All to save a stranger she'd never meet again.

"Yo... Vari..." Kiri called out, her voice now catching the attention of Tenki and Miss X and snapping them away from their previous conversation. "Are you-"

The sound of Mira's voice screaming her lover's name was all Vari could hear as her vision faded to black, and with an unforgiving *thud* onto the ground, the blood from Vari's nostrils pooled down into the sandstone below as she then lost consciousness.