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## Into the Fox's Den

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Tired. Totally, unequivocally exhausted.

That was how Vari felt as she quietly strolled her way through the Crossroads by her lonesome. She wasn't sure how long it'd been since the festivities surrounding the tournament had begun, but all of the realm's denizens had remained just as excited and cheerful as they'd usually been – if not even moreso. There to populate the front of every shop and street corner were stalls, merchants, wagons, and food stands; all of which were making their usual bid for Vari's coin and attention as she walked by. Each stall boasted their own various attractions and merchandise as well, with some of them even going as far to use the likeness of different tourney-goers in order to keep excitement for the tournament going strong. Just as she had done whenever she'd first stepped foot into the Crossroads, Vari noted the faces of the many different beings she saw – humanoid or otherwise – whenever she looked at each stall... except this time, they were all in the form of marketable plushies or t-shirts ready for sale. She'd even seen her own face once or twice amongst the assorted piles of clothes and stuffed figures. It was why some people seemed to recognize her whenever she passed by; though if anyone were to ask her how she'd felt about being turned into a mere tourist attraction for people to buy and ogle at, she decided she couldn't rightly say.

She figured it wasn't worth thinking about anyway as she made her way closer to the Colosseum.

Then, she sighed under her breath. The Colosseum...

The towering structure in the distance only seemed to grow more and more imposing the closer she approached. Although the various multicolored lights and distant music took away from its otherwise intimidating presence, Vari still hadn't realized just how nerve-wracking of an experience it would be approach the Colosseum without Korinth here to act as her guide. It was bad enough not having her visor to fill the role of a safety net should things become too dangerous for her liking, but not having Korinth there to see her off only served to add another layer of vulnerability to her situation - one that she hadn't quite expected to feel considering her experience with travelling alone.

Perhaps the various magics and medicines the nurses had used to heal her were still addling her mind somehow, or perhaps the absence of the ADT was still causing her to panic in ways she couldn't quite comprehend. She hadn't even felt remotely comfortable until she'd received her katana back, after all, and the nurses who'd taken care of her hadn't exactly instilled any form of confidence into Vari upon releasing her from the infirmary. According to the doctor who had overseen her recovery, remaining unconscious for over twenty-four hours was bound to have its side effects – her present exhaustion included. They warned her numerous times not to exert herself too much once she went into her second round, telling her to count her lucky stars that she hadn't sustained any serious damage during the first. Fortunately for her, tournament officials had also been given ample time to repair any damages to her armor from the previous fight, and her gear had all been accounted for once she'd been checked out from the infirmary. Perhaps it was for the best that she'd been unconscious for most of her time in that hospital bed... the question of whether or not she'd be getting her *other* gear back would have only amplified her inner turmoil.

Another sigh. Distant lavender eyes lowered their gaze down onto the path in front her as she quietly strode past one of the Crossroads' many bars and taverns – its warm lights and bustling atmosphere doing little to catch the woman's interest. What did catch her interest, though, was the sign stationed just above the front entrance: 'The Fox Den'. Though she hadn't bothered to sample any of the Crossroads' amenities thus far, she'd still recognized the name of this particular bar after passing it on the day of her first round. From here, she knew it would only be another fifteen minute walk or so before she finally reached the gates of the arena.

She was almost there, she thought; though she only hoped she could receive a few moments of peace and quiet by arriving at the Colosseum early...

"MOVE!" a voice from behind her suddenly shouted, and before Vari knew it, she'd swiftly been shoved down onto her rear as a tall, pale figure rushed its way past her and frantically made its way into a grassy clearing just outside the bar's entrance. The figure didn't make it far, however, before raggedly staggering to a halt – their hand fiercely clutching onto their stomach as they gagged, heaved, and finally...

Vomited.

The Leporian hardly had any time to process what had just happened as a large pool of vomit shot straight down onto the ground with a loud, wretched cry. The figure quickly caught the attention of numerous passersby as they went about their daily business, prompting Vari to rush back onto her feet as she looked on at the display in a furious mix of frustration and disgust. It was a woman who'd just pushed her aside, Vari noticed – her messy dark hair concealing most of the pale features on her face as she bunched and held as many black strands as she could behind her head. Her tall, lean frame

appeared to convulse underneath the layers of dirty clothing she wore as she retched; which, from Vari's perspective, looked as if it had been fished out of a large trash heap and gifted to her in the form of old hand-me-downs. Vomiting aside, this woman looked borderline revolting... and for a moment, Vari couldn't determine whether the red in her eyes had simply reflected their natural hue, or if her vomiting had managed to break a few blood vessels on the way out.

Either way, the woman eventually groaned to herself as she finally managed to recover into some degree of normalcy. Using the sleeve of her blue turtleneck, she lazily wiped away whatever remnants of puke still clung to her lips before spitting onto the ground with several sputtering coughs. As the woman knelt there panting above her own sick, another blonde, slightly shorter woman suddenly rushed out of the Fox Den and ran hurriedly to her side – this one looking much more put-together than the girl she was currently helping. She gently wrapped an arm around the woman's shoulder and, slowly, started to lift her back onto her feet while Vari watched on...

"You call *that* cutting back?!" the blonde woman shouted as they both finally staggered themselves upright. "God, you never drink before a job!"

"I still don't!" the paler woman quipped. She then leaned her head back and wiped the sweat trickling down her brow. "It was the fucking... fruit 'mocktail' or whatever Saki served me! Seriously, who the fuck puts cranberries in a cocktail?!"

"Oh, come off it, An!" the blonde snapped. "Are you truly so dependent on booze now that you can't even drink *fruit juice* without throwing it all up?!"

"Ugh... maybe?" the brunette replied. "Either that, or Vivian poisoned my ramen the other day when I wasn't looking. At this point, it's hard to say..."

Vari examined the two women in annoyed silence from her place on the street, her sour expression morphing into something resembling curiosity as her eyes spotted a revolver which dangled from the hip of the brunette. She stared at it for a moment, catching what few glimpses of its barrel she could as the unmistakable shape of its handle peeked out from beneath its holster. Vari was surprised to see one here. Firearms were an uncommon weapon of choice back home in Merydia due to their luxury status, and those who wielded them usually tended to land themselves in much more trouble than they were worth; but those who garnered proficiency over the weapon often grew to become masters of their class, causing many people to outright avoid encounters with a marksman if the situation allowed it.

Come to think of it, didn't Korinth mention something about her opponent being a sharpshooter...?

“Hey Carrots.” The brunette called out, the sharpness of her voice immediately severing Vari’s line of thought and rapidly shifting her attention towards the woman’s ruby irises. With a concerned raise of her brow, the blonde, too, turned to face her – though whatever frustration she’d felt for her companion had quickly melted away upon spotting Vari, replaced instead by a brimming curiosity.

“What the hell are you still looking at?” the brunette continued. “Beat it.”

At this, Vari’s face darkened into an antagonizing scowl.

“You got vomit on my boots.” She pointedly replied. The brunette, however, only seemed to scoff at Vari’s answer with a notable roll of her eyes.

“Please. You were in the line of fire.” She said with a dismissive wave of her hand. “Go wash it off with a hose or something, you’ll be fine.”

“Andrea!” the blonde exclaimed. Vari’s hand was now clutched tightly into a fist...

“What?! Does she want a cookie?” Andrea asked. “She’s the one gawking at me like I’m a fucking art exhibit!”

“And who could blame her with the way you’ve made such a spectacle of yourself today?” the blonde replied, her golden eyes narrowing into a stubborn glare through the rim of her blue-framed glasses. She then turned to face Vari with an apologetic smile on her face – all before quickly adjusting the collar of her pink duffel coat and rushing over to greet her.

Despite the company this woman kept, she certainly looked much more put-together than her companion did. Even the way she walked bore a certain grace to it...

“My sincerest apologies for my sister’s rudeness!” the blonde smiled cheerfully, the woman quickly stretching out her hand for Vari to shake. “Please, allow me to introduce myself! My name is Octavia, and this is my sister, Andrea. We’re both still adjusting to the Crossroads, so please do forgive us if we seem a little... erm... rough around the edges...”

Her words soon appeared to falter into a hesitant silence as Vari simply glared at her with impatience in her eyes. Octavia met her gaze with a sudden look of hesitation before gradually lowering her hand and stepping back a couple of paces, her friendly smile from before quickly morphing into something much more timid and uncertain than before. Upon noticing this, Andrea couldn't help but chuckle and shake her head a bit – the woman a little too amused at how quickly her sister's cheery attitude had deflated.

“Welp. *That* didn't last long.” Andrea smirked. “Hey Tavia! Your new friend giving you the creeps?”

“No, no, it's not that. It's just...” Octavia replied. “I think I recognize her.”

At this, even Vari squinted her eyes and curiously tilted her head in confusion. She hadn't quite expected that answer...

“Doubt it. We've hardly met before.” Vari replied, the Leporian stubbornly folding her arms.

“Yeah, I think I'm with Carrots on that one. Are you sure?” Andrea asked uncertainly. “I mean, unless you've had more trouble keeping it in your pants than I thought. In which case, Ayane's gonna be real sore when she finds out she's been replaced by a-”

“*Shut up*, and listen.” Octavia snapped to her sister. “While you were off gallivanting the morning of your first round-”

“*Gallivanting?*”

“Or sleeping, or drinking, or whatever it is you do when I'm not around.” Octavia grumbled. “I took the liberty of actually watching some of the other matches in your bracket. The purple hair, the sword, the... *stern* demeanor – I almost didn't recognize her without her visor on, but now that I've gotten a closer look...”

“Stern's one way to put it...” Andrea muttered.

“An.” Octavia sighed impatiently. “She’s your next opponent – the one that Saki drew last night? *She’s* Varila Na’tara.”

Upon hearing this, Andrea’s eyes widened in mild surprise and rapidly shot back towards Vari. Vari, too, met Andrea’s gaze again – a glimmer of realization now finally reflecting off of the lavender pools which warily scanned the gunslinger from a distance. Gods, that’s right; how had Vari not known immediately?

*A sharpshooter.*

Vari had half a mind to slap herself, she felt so oblivious. Her next opponent had been standing right in front of her this whole time, and it was only until someone spelled it out for her that she’d finally been able to take notice. She’d been so distant during Korinth’s hospital visit, so miserably fixated on the outcome of her first round that she hadn’t even thought to listen to him whenever he’d tried to give her the details on her next opponent. He hadn’t even been able to give her the names of who she’d be facing, much less a proper description – and it was only just now that she’d realized just how unwise it had been to make him wait. In fact, had Vari not stumbled upon both sisters on her way to the Colosseum, there was a decent chance that she would’ve gone into this match almost completely blind...

Neither Vari nor Andrea, however, had properly been given a chance to react to their meeting before the sound of bells suddenly rang out from behind them – catching them both off-guard.

“Andrea? Andrea, dear, are you still out here?” a voice called out. Then, as if on cue, a head of rich, cherry-red hair popped out from underneath the noren which acted as the front entrance to the Fox Den. A woman wearing what looked like a modified Crossguard uniform then stepped out into the open sunlight, her hand brushing a few stray strands of hair back behind her shoulder as a pair of mismatched eyes – both brown and gold – greeted all three women with devilish delight. Petals of a white flower adorned the fox ears which poked out from underneath her Crossguard hat, and underneath it was a fair-skinned young woman who couldn’t have looked any older than Vari. She looked spry, mischievous and eye-catching all at once; the look in her eyes almost daring one to try and unravel all her mysteries.

Vari distrusted her immediately.

“Ah! *There* you two are.” She smiled before making her way over. “I see you still have your wits about you, Andrea... which is good because Saki is simply beside herself with worry! She wanted me to let you know that she’s got another drink ready for you on the house, and that she’s sorry about the cran-“

As the woman made her way closer to the small trio, her multicolored eyes slowly widened upon spotting Vari standing tall behind both Andrea and Octavia. The Leporian merely shot her a mild look of annoyance as the woman came up to greet the two sisters, her expression practically radiating a look which asked 'What now?'

The kitsune, however, positively came to life upon spotting Vari.

"Hello~..." she smiled in delight. "Making new friends, are we?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Chiifu, meet uh..."

"Varila." Octavia chimed in.

"Right, *Varila*." Andrea continued. "Carrots over here is gonna be my next opponent. We met after I puked on her shoes or whatever, but honestly, it looks like an improvement to me..."

At this, Vari shot her another lethal glare. With the way Andrea had continuously managed to irritate her so far, Vari was already experiencing some serious déjà vu...

"I see." Chiifu mused, her voice now lowering into a curious hum as she looked up at Vari's tall frame. She then decided to close the gap between them, her hand reaching out to greet a tired-looking Vari who simply regarded her with weary lavender eyes.

"Hello there! My name is Chiifu – remember the double 'i'." Chiifu smiled. "And I must say, it's quite a pleasure to meet you, Varila! I assume you've acquainted yourself with the competition?"

"Unfortunately." Vari said apathetically, this time earning a scowl from Andrea which Vari chose to ignore. Chiifu and Octavia, however, couldn't help but chuckle at the remark.

"Ahh, yes. The Crossguards warned me you'd be a bit more on the blunt side." Chiifu chuckled before retracting her hand and coyly placing it on her lips. "Tomas in particular said you had a 'rough exterior' but a heart of gold~. Was he correct?"

At this, Vari genuinely seemed taken aback – her dead-eyed expression briefly coming to life with surprise.

“Tomas? You mean the guard at the front gate?” Vari asked.

Chiifu’s smile widened. “The very same!” she smirked. “He’s a natural at reading people and great at conversation, so I usually tend to trust his judgement on these things. Every once in a while, though, he manages to give me some truly juicy details about the competitors who walk in here. *You*, for example, liked to hop dimensions before you came here, didn’t you? I’m told the crowds simply adored how flashy you were out in the Colosseum, and how valiant you were in saving Kiriata’s life! Oh, to have been there myself and seen it all~...”

The longer Chiifu spoke, the more unnerved Vari became. She let her eyes drift off to the side once the kitsune mentioned her ‘valiance’ in the arena, clearly unsure how to respond as Chiifu playfully tilted her head to the side with a smile of feigned innocence. A spark of frustration began to well within Vari as well, the woman distinctly unhappy with the thought of discussing her skillset any further while her next opponent stood a mere few feet away from her. Even more unappealing was the thought of discussing the fact that Vari had just lost her biggest advantage in a fight. Sure, Octavia knew, and Andrea would know soon enough once they got into the arena – but discussing her decision to discard the ADT in any capacity was a topic that still felt much too sensitive for her liking.

Letting this conversation play out any further was a bad idea. She shouldn’t have even spoken with her to begin with.

“I don’t have time for this.” Vari finally said after a moment of silence. Now with a look of surprise and mild confusion on their faces, Andrea and Octavia simply watched as Vari opted to leave mid-conversation – the move even catching Chiifu off-guard as Vari quickly turned around and began making her way down the road to the Colosseum again. Chiifu, however, quickly dashed in front of Vari at surprising speeds, causing Vari to jump in place before halting with a frustrated scowl. Why was it that everybody insisted on bothering her today?

“Now, now! I know you have a match to attend to, but don’t you think it’s a little premature to leave in such a hurry? There’s still so much time to visit!” Chiifu smirked.

“Does it matter?” Vari dryly remarked. “Being anywhere other than the arena right now is a colossal waste of time.”



“Jeez, some fucking fun you must be...” Andrea muttered to herself. Again, Vari chose to ignore her.

“Hmm... well, if a change of scenery is what you want, then how about we at least make our way there together?” Chiifu offered, the kitsune seemingly unbothered by Vari’s stubborn words. “My dear friend Andrea was just about to leave for the Colosseum anyway, and I’ve been dying to finally watch a round without interruption! We could all make a little field trip out of it~.”

“Hell no.” Vari and Andrea both said in unison, but it was Andrea who chose to elaborate on her answer first.

“Going anywhere with Carrots over here is bound to be a painfully sobering experience.” Andrea told her. “No thank you.”

“And I don’t want to listen to her speak.” Vari said simply. Again, Andrea shot her a look of annoyance as Chiifu giggled mirthfully beneath her fingertips. Much to her sister’s surprise, however, Octavia did not appear outright dismissive of the idea.

“I’m not so sure, An.” Octavia told her. “Perhaps it would be best to have a tournament official escort you to the Colosseum when offered...”

“You saying I tend to get lost?” Andrea asked.

“I’m saying you tend to get *distracted*.” Octavia snapped. “The fact that you didn’t even know what your opponent *looked like* until now tells me that you could use the supervision.”

“And *you* could use the company.” Chiifu smirked before poking Vari on the shoulder. “Surely it couldn’t hurt to let us tag along, even for a few minutes?”

With an exasperated sigh, Vari brought her hand up to her brow and grudgingly shook her head. If she really wanted to, she supposed she could stand here all day trying to dismiss the potential merits of Chiifu’s little ‘field trip’; but frankly, she was much too tired to argue about this. Ironically, it seemed spending her time with these people was now going to be the fastest way to ensure that she got to the Colosseum at all before her match started.

Tossing her hand up in quiet surrender, Vari looked to Chiifu with an exasperated shake of her head.

“I guess.” Vari said, and immediately, Chiifu’s expression brightened again. It seemed that was all she needed to hear.

“Fantastic! Let’s go, then.” Chiifu smiled. Then, without missing a beat, the kitsune quickly turned on her heel – the sound of bells accompanying her footsteps towards the Colosseum while waves of her cherry-red hair swayed playfully behind her. Slowly but surely, Andrea and Octavia decided to follow her as well, leaving a hesitant Vari to quietly deliberate before finally walking the path forward.

And so, the hunter had spotted its prey...

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## Cornered Prey

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It didn't take long to reach the Colosseum.

It was just as bright and loud as it had usually been. Fixed above each entryway were the enormous digital screens that Vari had encountered during her previous visit to the arena; and, just like last time, various scenes cherry-picked from the Colosseum's expansive, bloody history played on repeat as Vari approached the structure – each of them depicting various scenes of glorious victory and perilous defeat as the crowd inside eagerly awaited the next match. Bassy, energetic music echoed in the background as Chiifu happily approached the front gates with all three contestants in tow; and, as Vari briefly allowed herself to tune into the song's vibrant melody from afar, she once again heard the very familiar boom of Miss X's voice trickling out from the arena's interior. As expected, whatever song she was currently singing had been met with an atmosphere that – even from the outside – had felt absolutely electrifying to experience. It had been so stimulating, in fact, that Chiifu had practically been absorbed into her own little world as she stepped in tune to the music. She couldn't help but glide towards the Colosseum with a distinct, sprightly vigor as each rhythmic note punctuated the many hums emanating from her smiling lips – almost as if she'd memorized the song a long time ago. Even Andrea and Octavia paused their casual bickering for a few moments as they approached the nearest gate, the sisters knowing full well they wouldn't be able to exchange banter over a crowd *that* excited.

It had all still been too much. The roar of the crowd, the flashing lights, the sickeningly sweet food – Vari could still hear, see, and smell it all in such striking detail. To even attempt to ignore it all had quickly proven to be impossible... no matter how hard Vari tried.

Fortunately, however, the newfound pep in Chiifu's step meant that she had also picked up the pace. The familiarity with which she and the Crossguards greeted each other at the front gate had also expedited their entry even further. All it took was a simple wave and a smile to the guards, and after a quick salute, each of them were let inside without question. Before long, the deafening cries of the Colosseum's audience had become faint and muffled underneath the many layers of concrete which composed the waiting lobby.

Finally, and after a surprising amount of delay, Vari had arrived.

“And here we are!” Chiifu presented with flourishing arms. “I know it’s not as exciting in here as it is out there, but believe me, the excitement will only ramp up once the crowd sees your lovely faces again!”

“Sure...” Vari muttered with a roll of her eyes. “Lovely experience, being surrounded by a crowd so massive you can hardly hear yourself think.”

“Isn’t it?” Chiifu beamed emphatically. “Ahh, to be there when they finally open the doors! One of you simply *must* drop by the Fox Den afterwards so you can let me know who won. The anticipation is already killing me!”

At this, Vari, Andrea, and Octavia turned to each other in mutual confusion.

‘Afterwards’...?

“Huh? You won’t be staying to watch the fight?” Andrea asked. “Didn’t you say something about wanting to watch the round in person?”

“Yes, well... that was the plan *originally*.” Chiifu said with a wistful sigh. “But I’ve just remembered that my duties as Chief of the Crossroads demand that I be elsewhere for now. Truth be told, there’s an abundance of business I have to attend to that I just can’t put off any longer, so I really must get to it! Don’t worry, though – I’ll be there in spirit~.” She added with a wink.

Unamused, Vari simply furrowed her brow. To say something felt off about this would have been an understatement.

“Wait, ‘Chief of the Crossroads’?” Andrea chimed in again, now growing more curious. “As in, the kind of Chief who gives orders and whatnot to the other Crossguards? *That* kind of chief? That, uh... makes a lot more sense, now that I think about it.”

“Well, it *was* in the name, An.” Octavia remarked. “Think about it. Chiifu – *Chief*? She was the one who drew our brackets the first time around, remember?”

“Yeah, but... still.” Andrea replied. “I mean, I figured by her getup that she was a tourney official n’ all, but I didn’t know she was *that* important.”

“Oh, did I let that little detail slip by back at the Fox Den?” Chiifu giggled before placing a finger onto her lips. “How careless of me~! My apologies, you two...”

With another skeptical glance, Vari merely folded her arms without a word. It was surprisingly difficult to read this woman despite her laissez-faire attitude, though it wasn’t difficult to discern the mischief in her eyes whenever she spoke. The Leporian briefly looked down to her side for a moment, halfway expecting Korinth to be there so that she could ask for his input on the matter. Unfortunately, however, he was still absent – gone, despite his assurances that he would be there to see her off on the day of her second round.

Part of her wondered what sort of ‘business’ he must be tending to right now, and if it had anything to do with the business this ‘Chiifu’ had spoken of as well.

“Aaanywho, I’ll be taking my leave now.” Chiifu smiled. “Good luck, Andrea! Saki will have that drink waiting for you when you get back. Oh, and Varila?”

Vari did not remove her gaze from Chiifu as she suddenly began to approach her again – the kitsune once more extending her hand out for a handshake.

“It really was a pleasure to meet you.” She said, the woman seemingly unbothered by the piercing lavender stare that Vari was shooting at her. “Regardless of how the round pans out for you, I really do hope you find what it is you’re looking for...”

Chiifu punctuated her remark with a brief glance down towards the wedding ring on Vari’s finger. She gave Vari a knowing smirk as her mismatched eyes rapidly shot back up again, the subtle gesture immediately catching Vari off-guard and causing her expression to darken before hiding her hand underneath her folded arms. Again, Vari opted not to return her handshake – this time out of a small measure of spite which now openly resonated from her souring demeanor.

“Tomas talks too much for his own good.” Vari simply replied, her voice growing lower the harder she clenched her wedding band.

“Tomas didn’t do all the talking.” Chiifu winked back before again retracting her hand with a cool smile. “Still, I’ll crack that shell of yours one day! But for now... just be sure to tell Korinth ‘hello’ for me. I do so miss that grumpy old tuft of fur~.”

This time, Vari’s eyes widened from surprise instead of anger. Before she could say anything else, however, Chiifu gave Vari an innocent enough wave before happily strolling back towards the exit. The sound of bells echoed out through the waiting lobby as she went, her heels clacking against the white-tile floor at a pace which matched the muffled beats of the music outside.

Now feeling utterly perplexed, Vari quietly watched her go with an intense, studying glare.

“I, erm... I suppose that’s my cue to go as well.” Octavia timidly muttered as the door behind Chiifu swung to a close. She then turned to Andrea who met her words with a nonchalant wave of her hand, and although Octavia had briefly gone to say something else, it seemed that she had opted to give her sister a very abrupt hug instead.

“Oof!”

Upon being met with her sister’s sudden embrace, Andrea awkwardly fumbled over her words before eventually sighing and reciprocating it... albeit with a mote of hesitation that suggested this may have been the first time in a long while they had actually embraced like this. Eventually, a simple pat on Octavia’s back signaled for her to let go.

“Alright, alright, that’s enough of that...” Andrea muttered before finally being released. “Geez, Tavia – you’re shaking like a leaf. You know that *I’m* the one who’ll be doing all the fighting, right?”

“Yes, well...” Octavia began, the woman granting a cautious glance over to Vari before quickly turning back to face her sister. “You know I can’t help but worry. Just... be careful in there, okay? For me, if not for father.”

“Pfft, please. I’m a strider; this’ll be just another walk in the park for me.” Andrea scoffed. “Besides, if she’s anything like the *last* girl I fought, this’ll be even easier than usual. Now go – sit back and save a drink for me once I win, yeah?”

“Mm... perhaps I’ll save you a soda instead.” Octavia said with a subtle smirk. Immediately, Andrea let out a defeated sigh; there was just no winning with her sister, it seemed.

“Fine, a soda. Whatever.” Andrea said, shaking her head. Still forcing the smirk onto her lips, Octavia merely nodded with a chuckle before turning and walking towards a flight of stairs which stood behind her – their steps leading up towards the many cushioned seats lined throughout the Colosseum’s massive audience.

Upon stepping foot onto the first set of steps, however, Octavia briefly turned to look at her sister again – this time with a visibly anxious look on her face – before finally rushing her way upstairs.

It was just Vari and Andrea now.

“Soooo...” Andrea finally said after a long, pensive silence. “Another swordswoman, eh? Hah, guess I lucked out again.”

She then patted the revolver at her side, the woman brushing the tips of her fingers against its worn hilt with a deep sense of familiarity.

“Maurice here has *plenty* of experience with fighters like you.” She smirked.

Vari, however, merely rolled her eyes with a stifled groan as she steadily began pacing back and forth across the waiting lobby. If this woman was trying to provide more motivation for Vari to fight her, she was doing a good job of it – but right now, anything Andrea had to say meant very little to her.

That woman from the Fox Den, on the other hand... her words still rang clearly in Vari’s mind. Just who the Hells was she?

“Gotta admit, though, the rabbit ears are new.” Andrea continued, ignoring Vari’s gesture of disapproval. “And your sword looks way less impressive than the last one I saw. Sure makes me wonder what my sister thought was so scary about you...”

This time, Vari shot her opponent a pointed but questioning look. Was this just idle smalltalk, or was Andrea trying to goad more information out of her...?

“You talk too much...” Vari merely muttered in response, deciding she wouldn’t entertain notions of either. With the way she and her sister had been rambling throughout the entire trip to the Colosseum, one would’ve thought that any one of those conversations might have proven informative.

“Pfft.” Andrea scoffed with a roll of her eyes. “And you don’t talk *enough*. Come on, be real with me for a second – what are you even doing here? You looking for stacks of gold? A bag of carrots? ...Your long-lost parents?”

“None of your damn business.” Vari shot, this time making sure to keep the wedding ring around her finger firmly hidden from prying eyes. As far as she was concerned, the only one who needed to know anything about her wish was the God Eater...

At this, however, Andrea merely sighed under her breath. She was beginning to lose her patience.

“Come on. You telling me Chiifu took an interest in you for no reason?” Andrea asked, curiosity clearly getting the better of her. “I mean, *I’m* only fighting to make sure my dad doesn’t throw me to the political wolves once he kicks the bucket. You-”

“Then maybe you should focus on that instead.” Vari said, the Leporian quick to cut off her opponent before she could try employing some half-assed form of quid pro quo. If Andrea valued what others thought of her opponent so highly, then maybe she should have asked them while they were still here, Vari thought. She was certain that Chiifu would’ve adored the chance to gossip about her anyway, or perhaps Octavia would have been glad to continue discussing Vari’s abilities with her so that she’d actually know what to expect. Of course, Vari would entertain no such conversations, nor would she show her hand before the round even started.

Andrea, however, merely squinted in vexation at this and quietly placed her hands into the pockets of her jeans. The strider then closed the gap between them a bit, her ruby eyes looking Vari up and down while she approached her with a scowl.



“Alright.” She said, the strider now clearly annoyed. “Is every opponent I get in this tourney going to be some mopey, impassive knobhead?” There was a hint of frustration in her voice that hadn’t quite been there before.

“Is every opponent I get going to talk so much?” Vari retorted, her tone cold and apathetic.

Andrea clutched her hands inside of her pockets.

“Oh, I’m sorry – am I annoying you, Carrots?” Andrea asked. “Gee, how inconsiderate of me. Here, let me try a different approach then...”

At a speed faster than Vari could process, the strider then stepped forward and grabbed Vari by the collar of her leather armor, quickly yanking her down in order to meet her at eye level. She then placed a hand on the revolver at her hip, her bloodshot eyes glaring straight into Vari’s lavender ones while she firmly held her in place. The sudden surge of fury Vari had felt in that moment had actually given her pause, it was so potent – but before Vari could even open her mouth to speak, Andrea had spoken first.

“Truth is, I don’t give a damn about whatever worthless wish you’ve got hidden away.” Andrea remarked, her fingers remaining clenched around Vari’s collar as the Leporian reached up to grab her ironclad wrist. “Not really, because despite what everyone else seems to think, I know it’d just be wasted on someone like you. Y’see, I shoot to kill, Varila. I fight to *win*. You, however, don’t seem to give a shit about anything. It’s pathetic, which is why the second you and I walk out into that arena, Maurice and I are gonna put a bullet right between your-”

Vari, now livid and staring daggers into her opponent’s eyes, violently smacked Andrea’s hand away and, with as much force as she could muster, pushed her back with one arm – the push coming so harshly and so suddenly that Andrea couldn’t help but stumble down onto the floor with a yelp once it came. She landed back onto her arms as she fell, the leverage roughly breaking her fall and causing her to bounce against the tiles, but it was only when Vari placed her hand onto the hilt of her sword that Andrea once more placed hers onto her revolver... and stared.

Just as Andrea let the barrel of her gun stay wrapped underneath the leather of her holster, Vari fully resisted the urge to unsheathe her sword and start fighting right in the middle of the waiting lobby.

But just barely.

“You touch me again, and you’re *fucking dead*.” Vari growled, her eyes unflinching and piercing with rage. Her hand trembled as it hovered above the hilt of her blade, the Leporian now desperately fighting her urge to pull it out and slash Andrea straight across her chest. A massive part of her knew she’d regret it, and that it’d perhaps even get her disqualified from the tournament if she gave into the temptation. Even so...

*No one* called her wish worthless.

Andrea, however, merely stared at her opponent before gradually letting a subtle smile crawl onto her lips. Then, her smile morphed into a chuckle. Despite having learned nothing about her opponent and fiercely being pushed onto the ground, a cold, but taunting laugh of amusement started echoing throughout the room as she then took the opportunity to stand herself up and dust off her jeans – the strider seemingly unbothered, even satisfied with the sudden change in Vari’s demeanor.

“See, *now* this is gonna be fun.” She smirked through her fading chuckles. Perhaps that had been enough.

Again, Vari opened her mouth to say something else – right up until the screech of an intercom cut off her train of thought.

“Hi hi, everyone!!! Hope you’re all ready for yet another JAW-DROPPING FIGHT here in the CROSS COLOSSEUM!” Miss X announced, the muffled cheering of the crowd outside growing considerably more chaotic with the introduction of her voice. “As always, I am your gracious host – the AMAZING and MARVELOUS Miss X! Today, we have another lethal matchup cooked up for you all! So please give your warmest welcome for our next TWO competitors: VARILA NA’TARA and ANDREA GRANT!”

As Miss X’s voice echoed throughout the arena to uproarious applause, footsteps could be heard from all around as a squad of Crossguards suddenly marched their way into the room. They wasted little time in lining themselves up next to Vari and Andrea, their movements remaining just as rigid and well-practiced as they’d been during her previous round. Still, none of their faces looked similar to the members of the squad that escorted her last time, nor did the stony pale face of the woman who led them ring any bells. There was a distinct look of irritation on her face as she walked into the room as well – causing Vari to wonder if she had perhaps seen what Vari and Andrea were about to do before her crossguards came in...

“Contestants! You’re starting a little sooner than expected.” she barked. “A crossguard is going to escort you out into the arena. You resist, talk back, or start fighting early, you’re disqualified – no questions asked. Squad Karma, get moving.”

A sudden shove ushered Vari forward, both catching her by surprise and causing her feet to march forward as if by instinct. She took this as a sign that yes, they had indeed noticed the way her temper had just flared against her opponent; starting the match earlier than expected had also likely been a result of this. Even so, Vari refused to feign any sign of regret for her actions – opting instead to simply keep her eyes forward as a pair of crossguards slowly opened the large set of metal doors which led into the arena. A dark, gloomy tunnel awaited both contestants as the squad of crossguards continued to guide them onwards, and as Vari stepped foot into the structure’s overwhelming shadow, the sound of ecstatic cheering could be heard growing louder with each and every step she made into the darkness.

Just like before, Vari’s stomach twisted into a knot. Her heart raced, and her senses shot straight into overdrive.

It had been a long time since she’d felt this vulnerable.

Chiifu, Andrea, the abundance of Crossguards... Hells, even the audience outside made her wish that she’d never let that visor drop down into the fire.

She felt watched. Cornered. And, once this match began, she’d be hunted too. The Leporian, however, wouldn’t dare let the fear show on her face – not even as she made her way into the darkness of the tunnel which now threatened to smother her with its suffocating atmosphere. No matter what happened, she’d long since resolved herself to either save Mira or die trying.

She would *never* be prey.

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## Hunting Grounds

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It was the roar of the audience which ripped Vari away from her thoughts again. Sand scuffed up from underneath her boots as a small team of crossguards guided her out of the tunnel and steered her towards the outer rim of the arena. Just like before, thousands upon thousands of people had been there to cheer both contestants on as their respective crossguards escorted them closer to the arena's halfway point. Under 'normal' circumstances, Vari wouldn't have bothered to show any form of interest towards the crowd who seemed so keen on watching contestants kill one another for sport – but this time, part of her still couldn't resist the temptation to glance towards the cheering faces of the audience in the hopes of spotting a narrow pair of fox eyes watching among them. Between the rowdier members of the crowd and the sea of flashing cameras, however, discerning any face with some semblance of clarity was bound to be a nigh-impossible task – one that Vari swiftly gave up on as she anxiously glanced back down towards her feet.

*“An-dre-a! An-dre-a!”*

*“Va-ri-la! Va-ri-la!”*

Again, the knot in her stomach twisted itself even tighter as her rabbit ears recognized the sound of her own name being chanted alongside her opponent's. If she listened long enough, she could still hear the sound of her lover's voice screaming out among them – crying, begging, even shouting at her for the help she couldn't give. Her racing heart beat even faster, and her breathing became ragged as she stubbornly willed the voice to go away inside her head... all to limited effect.

With her hands beginning to tremble, Vari quietly closed her eyes as she continued to trudge forward.

Breathe.

Focus...

*BOOM!*

The sound of fireworks quickly snatched Vari's attention again, the noise eliciting a gasp from Vari's lips and another roar from the crowd as she rapidly turned to face the source of the commotion. Dazzling, shimmering sparks of fire rapidly zipped throughout the afternoon sky to form a bright pink Sakura flower as she walked – its petals dancing below the sun for a moment before finally fizzling out into modest puffs of smoke that only left the crowd begging for more. There to punctuate the fireworks' resounding boom were the beginning chords of another song by Miss X, and soon, the entirety of the Colosseum had shot up to their feet in excitement while the holographic idol began singing her most recent hit. As usual, it seemed the tournament officials had spared no expense when it came to building up hype. The crowd was perhaps going even crazier than last time...

Not long after the song began, Vari and Andrea were separated from their crossguards and had now been pointed towards the center of the arena. From where she walked, she could see Tenki eagerly waiting for them in the Colosseum's center – his coy smile still visible from afar as Andrea ignored her side of the crowd entirely. She lazily trailed onwards as the music grew more energetic, her ruby eyes seemingly fixated on Vari as the Leporian also did her best to ignore the show. A swift hand unfolded Tenki's fan as the two women finally reached their destination, and soon enough, the two contestants had finally come face-to-face.

Though neither spoke to one another.

Soon, whether by magic or by clever audio leveling, the music seemed to fade into the background along with the cheers of the audience around them as Tenki finally moved to speak.

"Welcome back, wishmakers." The man greeted. His attention then rapidly turned towards Vari with another cool smirk on his face as he slyly examined her with sky-blue eyes.

"My, my, if it isn't the lovely Miss Varila!" Tenki said, his smirk only becoming more devious as he fluttered the fan below his face. "I see you've recovered quite nicely from your little stumble the other day. I'm glad to see it – or rather, I'm sure my sister is. You wouldn't *believe* how distraught she was last time, knowing she wouldn't be able to grab you for a post-match interview. Frankly, I think you owe her an apology for making her worry so much~."

Vari, however, merely kept her eyes on Andrea as she silently rested the center of her palm against the hilt of her katana. She said nothing in response to what she believed were Tenki's feigned words of

relief; at this point, there was very little that could convince her that any of the judges would actually care if she somehow dropped dead in the middle of the arena.

Knowing better than to take offense, Tenki shrugged and turned his attention to Andrea – his expression remaining just as full of curiosity as it had been for the Leporian.

“Ahh, and the daring Miss Grant!” Tenki smiled. “I don’t believe we had the chance to acquaint ourselves last time, did we? A shame – I’m sure you and Vivian both would have benefitted from my inspiring presence~.”

“Yeah, you’re definitely new.” Andrea said with a crossing of her arms. “Never seen you wandering the Crossroads before, either. So, what’s your deal, anyway? You an announcer? A referee? ...A cheerleader?”

“I’m so glad you asked!” the dragon chuckled. “My name is Tenki, and today, I’ll be setting the stage for your upcoming battle. As Varila can surely attest, I’ll be taking suggestions into account on where you want your fight to take place – meaning that if you have a special place where you’d like to duke it out, I can most certainly make that happen! Just so long as it doesn’t kill you, of course~.”

“Huh? Wait, you’re saying I can actually *choose* where I wanna fight this time?” Andrea remarked. “That’s handy.”

“Indeed!” Tenki nodded. “Or at least, it can be. Keep in mind that I’ll be open to hearing your opponent’s suggestion, too... meaning that if there should be a disagreement between competitors – and yes, there often is – it’ll be up to me to decide how the battlefield gets chosen. So, with that being said... where to, Miss Grant?”

At this, Andrea pondered for a moment – the strider’s red-gloved hand curiously making its way up to her chin as she debated her decision. It wasn’t long before she smiled and chuckled to herself, however, apparently knowing full-well the place she’d like to go next.

“You know what?” Andrea said. “How about one of those old-fashioned towns set out in the Wild West – you know, the ones filled with gunslingers like myself? I’ve always wanted to drink in one of those old-timey saloons.”

“Ahh, yes, I believe I can do that.” Tenki chuckled. “Places like those have a surprising number of amenities one can indulge in. Personally, I’m not a fan of arid deserts – but hey, it’s your battle.”

The dragon then turned his attention back towards Vari, who this time turned to meet his gaze in return.

“And what about you, Miss Varila?” Tenki smirked. “Are we taking another trip out into the woods, or do you want something different this time around?”

With a stifled breath, Vari considered the question with great thought. She looked back towards her opponent for a moment, the Leporian finding herself surprisingly unsure of where she wanted to take this battle. Despite how deeply it annoyed her to admit it, she was at a considerable advantage when it came to her weapon of choice against Andrea’s revolver. If she had the ADT in her possession, this wouldn’t be a problem... but of course, it had to be the round she went up against a marksman that she chose to somehow fight without it.

This meant that her options were now narrowed considerably. The only way Vari could win, she supposed, was if she decided to fight in an area with close quarters and plenty of obstacles – preferably a jungle or some sort of thicket. She would need every advantage she could get, and if she could somehow secure a fight on familiar ground, that would give her even better chances for survival...

Suddenly, Vari’s eyes widened a bit in realization. This was the only place that made sense to her.

“I’d like to fight in an abandoned replica of my home.” Vari answered. “The Na’tara Village.”

With no small amount of delight, Tenki’s eyes came to life.

“Oho! A place familiar to you? How fascinating!” Tenki beamed. “And here I thought I’d never get to know anything about you~. Very well, then – it seems we have our picks. Now, for the deciding factor...”

It was then that Vari could finally hear Miss X’s performance coming to a close behind Tenki as he folded his fan again. The audience, now hyped beyond all measure, practically jumped out of their seats as another series of fireworks suddenly began to pop off around the arena – this time adorning the sky with petals from a number of different species of flower. From where Vari stood, she could see dashing blues, passionate reds, and regal purples all coalescing into one large sky-bound garden for the entire

audience to enjoy. Miss X and her backup dancers held their various poses as the fireworks fizzled out from above, and upon turning his back to both Vari and Andrea, Tenki promptly raised his hands up in order to catch the audience's attention.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" his voice boomed out, his sudden increase in volume quickly catching the audience's attention as the music and fireworks faded away. "It seems that our contestants have differing opinions on where they'd like to fight! You know what that means..."

Now readying herself, Vari took a deep breath as the camera attached to Miss X's platform pointed its lens towards Tenki's sleeve. All eyes were on him as he then reached into the sleeve of his shrug and pulled out a single golden coin – one side decorated with the face of a fox, and the other displaying its many tails.

It was there that Vari suddenly wished she'd had something of value to bribe him with...

"Call it, ladies!" Tenki said, the dragon now turning his attention back towards both contestants with a cool smirk. "Fox or Tails?"

"Tails." Vari said near-instantly. Upon hearing the speed at which Vari answered, Tenki couldn't help but chuckle a bit at the eagerness she restrained. Andrea had barely looked as if she'd had enough time to register what they were even doing before Vari decided on her answer.

Even so, Vari felt more than certain of her decision. If Tails had won her the coin toss last time around, she'd gladly risk picking it again.

With an annoyed expression on her face, Andrea stubbornly shook her head before raising her arms with a shrug. "Fox, then." the strider decided.

Vari intently watched Tenki's fingers as they smoothly flipped the coin onto his thumb.

"And there we have it, folks! Sides are called!" he announced to uproarious applause. "Miss Andrea favors the fox, and Miss Varila chases its tails! Can you guess who'll win~?"



Now seemingly sharing in the crowd's audible excitement, Tenki closed his eyes as he then stretched out his arm in order to give the camera a clear shot of the coin. Then, with a startling amount of force, Tenki flipped the coin straight up in the air at blinding speeds – causing Andrea to reflexively jump back as Vari's bunny ear twitched from the resulting shockwave.

“Bloody fucking Hell!” Andrea exclaimed, the strider quickly brushing a strand of stray hair from her face before staring up into the sky in awe. Vari, however, merely let her eyes trail back down to Tenki once the coin had essentially vanished from sight. Even if she had seen this little trick before, Vari still couldn't help but wonder just how much strength a dragon like Tenki bore if *this* was the result of a simple coin toss...

Eventually, a golden glint in the sky shimmering against the mid-day sun signaled the coin's descent back into the Colosseum. It plummeted back onto the ground in front of them, kicking up a small cloud of sand with a metallic *thunk* as it finally hit the sandstone below Vari's feet. Upon hearing the coin land, Tenki opened one of his eyes – the dragon watching for the dust to finally clear so he could get this match started.

Vari, however, felt a rock sink to the bottom of her stomach as her proximity to the coin granted her an early look at the result...

“... It seems we're taking a trip to the Wild West, everyone!” Tenki called out.

Immediately, a wave of cheers, shouts, and applause roared throughout the arena in response. Vari merely stared at the coin in cold disappointment as the dust finally settled from its impact into the sand, and once she finally dared to gauge her opponent's reaction, she spotted a smug smile from Andrea just waiting there to greet her.

The coin had landed on Fox.

“Well... would you look at that?” Andrea taunted.

Again, Vari gripped the hilt of her sword in frustration.

“Without further ado, I now turn your attention back to our stunning Miss X!” Tenki announced.  
“Though if you’d like to give *me* more attention, I’d never say no~.”

“Unfortunately for *you*, I still control the spotlight, Ki!” Miss X winked. She then careened down towards the contestants as the camera on her platform trailed close behind her, the idol cheekily taking a quick opportunity to loop around both competitors before taking centerstage directly underneath the jumbotron. The camera on her platform focused directly in on her face once she landed, her heart-shaped eyes beaming with an almost child-like excitement as she then promptly cleared her throat...

“Alllllrighty everyone!!! It seems Andrea has won a ticket for two down to the Old West!” she called out, her voice now being broadcast across all the digital speakers scattered throughout the Colosseum. “Will Varila be able to carve her way to victory, or will Andrea prove too good a shot for her to handle? Aaaaa, the excitement is killing me!!!”

Then, as if on cue, a bright, pearlescent glow started to emanate from the crystal orb which Tenki now held out for all to see. The light rapidly expanded from the center of Tenki’s palm and made its way across the entirety of the arena he stood in – causing the firm sandstone underneath him to morph into much looser grains of sand while small clusters of tumbleweeds started rolling into reality. The occasional chirps of Cactus Wrens could now be heard in the distance alongside the startled cries of Coyotes as one reality shifted into another. Their yelps and startled whimpers carried off into the desert as both Varila and Andrea stood in the center of an unfurling Western town.

In truth, Vari had no idea why Andrea would have wanted to come to a place out in the middle of the desert, nor did she know what the woman meant when she’d described it as a town from the ‘Wild West’. She supposed the place must have been significant in some way to the history of Andrea’s world, or perhaps she’d felt at home given its apparent reputation for housing ‘gunslingers’ like her. Either way, Vari didn’t hesitate to start examining her surroundings as the town gradually morphed into reality. Around her, there were wagons, buildings, stalls, and barrels – with rolling hills in the distance and dusty streets on both sides that were mostly comprised of creaky wooden planks. From where she stood, Vari could spot various cacti standing still against sunset skies, the setting sun on the horizon creating a dim and lonely atmosphere as thin clouds above were streaked with violet and orange. Much to her surprise, she could also read many of the town’s signs as they swung into existence – with many of the town’s structures labeled simply and neatly in plain view for her to read. A saloon, bakery, gunsmith and boarding house were amongst the first buildings that Vari could see popping into existence. She could also see what looked like a bank and a schoolhouse appearing next to them, along with other various unlabeled buildings that she knew she’d have no chance of recognizing without hints.

“As I’m sure you all know, the conditions of the match are as follows!” Miss X continued – the words ringing in Vari’s ears near-verbatim from when the popstar last read them off. “Matches are decided via

knockout or by the acquisition of an opponent's tag! If a combatant manages to hold onto their opponent's tag for 30 seconds, they're declared the winner and proceed onwards into GLORY! ...And if they win enough times, our esteemed hall of fame!"

Her bronze skin began to tingle with goosebumps as a shot of adrenaline suddenly coursed through her trembling hands. She placed her hand onto the hilt of her katana as she again took a deep, shaky breath in quiet preparation. Even from here, Vari's eyes could see the hilt which stuck out from the holster at Andrea's hip. The strider's hand was hovering just above the metal of the gun as well, shaking and quivering as if it were just itching for the chance in which it'd get to pull the trigger. With beads of sweat now trickling down her face, Vari quickly shifted her eyes from side to side as she frantically searched for anywhere else to go. Fortunately, an old broken cart had been slanted just a few feet away from where she stood... though whether or not she would be able to take cover behind it in time remained to be seen. The only other features of note were the cars of a train she'd spotted sitting in the distance... its wheels remaining unmoving atop the tracks which stretched out towards a set of hills from afar.

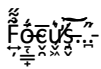
Other than the buildings lined up on both sides of town, however, it seemed that Vari had now found herself standing right in the middle of a dangerously open space – with Andrea positioned directly in front of her.

"As always, any and all gear you've brought along with you is fair game! You will both be granted as much time as you need to complete the duel... err, I mean the match!" Miss X corrected. "Just try not to drag things out for too long, otherwise things might get pretty boring! Now, with that being said..."

With shaking breaths, Vari again closed her eyes as she visualized the next course of action in her mind. If Andrea made the first move, which she realistically knew she was the only one who could, then the only way Vari would survive was if she took cover – and fast...

"Ready your weapons!!! Aaaaaand..." Miss X began. Vari exhaled another shaky breath from her nostrils as Andrea's lips curled into a confident smirk...

Breathe.



"DRAW!!!"

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## Round 2: Varila Na'tara vs. Andrea Grant

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*BANG BANG BANG!*

It was as soon as the round began that three shots fired off in rapid succession from the barrel of Andrea's revolver. With Vari's eyes now wide open, the Leporian quickly dashed straight towards the old cart which stood steadily to her right – immediately opting to take cover and shield herself from Andrea's volley. Unfortunately for her opponent, Vari had been quick in her movements; perhaps a little quicker than expected, as it was as soon as Vari made her way to the safety of the cart that a faint expletive escaped from Andrea's lips. All of her bullets had missed their mark...

Well, almost all of them.

Blood trickled down the length of Vari's left rabbit ear as she panted breathlessly behind the broken wagon. A hole had made itself at home in the sensitive skin of her inner ear, the bullet-shaped outline still burning with an acute, singed pain which made her ears ring and her balance briefly wobbly. The one silver lining of having been shot in such a place was that the bullet had simply gone right through – and although it hurt like hell, the pain was still fleeting at most. Even so, Vari didn't have a plan beyond this... she'd only had the time and mental fortitude to plan on where she'd take cover once the round started. Unless she thought of something quickly, she'd very likely be stuck here until Andrea decided to advance.

It was then, however, that an idea quickly made itself available to Vari.

"Alright, Carrots – come on out." Andrea called. "You heard what Miss X said... no point in drawing this out any longer than we need to-"

*POOF!*

A light series of coughs suddenly caught Andrea off-guard as she immediately raised her arm to cover her mouth and nostrils. An annoyed glare pierced its way through the shroud of the smoke bomb which Vari had just thrown out into the street, its smoke quickly enveloping Andrea in a thick layer of vapor which wafted all around her. The sound of Vari's footsteps quickly caught Andrea's attention, however, causing the strider to raise her pistol in mere tenths of a second and fire again towards the wagon.

*POW!*

Shit. Another missed shot.

*POW! POW!*

Another two shots were fired blindly into Vari's shadows, with both of them just narrowly missing their mark. With the smoke now stinging her eyes, Andrea focused her aim on the shadow that was now sprinting towards her at blinding speeds... and once she was certain the shot would land its mark, her finger quickly squeezed down onto the trigger.

*Click.*

"Fuck- WARD!"

*CLANG, CLACK, TING, CLANG!*

A flurry of strikes faster than Andrea could process suddenly struck against her translucent shield, the strider's ward spell only just barely withstanding the sheer brutality of Vari's repeated swings, thrusts, and slashes. Despite spotting the protruding glow of Andrea's magic shield radiating through the wafting smoke, Vari didn't let up on her assault once it started – growling and grunting between each savage strike as the edge of her blade simply bounced off of the shield's surface and swung down for another. Her strikes bore no small amount of effect as they came, however, with each of them repeatedly throwing Andrea off balance and nearly sending her to the ground from the sharp intensity of their force. Though she worked to reload her weapon amidst Vari's strikes, Andrea couldn't hope to do so without fumbling her bullets down into the sand underneath her – the Leporian repeatedly throwing her off-balance with her terrifying strength. There had even been a visible touch of fear in Andrea's eyes upon spotting the tip of Vari's blade briefly piercing the perimeter of her gradually weakening ward spell...

Eventually, Andrea had enough.

“Fuck OFF!” Andrea shouted, and upon wrapping the length of her silver chain around her fist, Andrea leaned her weight into a single powerful blow which bounced straight off of the interior of her shield and sent them both flying in opposite directions.

A powerful explosion echoed out into the dry desert air as Vari bounced and skidded away from Andrea’s position – her sword having skyrocketed straight up into the sky as a result of whatever trick that the strider had just used to secure some distance. She eventually slid to a halt once the explosive boom faded into the sky like retreating thunder, the Leporian halfway convinced that she might have just had her limbs blown off due to the sheer concussive force of Andrea’s blast. Despite her fears, however, the pain which began to course through Vari’s muscles had swiftly assured her otherwise, and with a frustrated groan, Vari struggled to rise up from her place in the sand while her legs started to shake from the strain...

...only to gasp and fall back onto her rear again as her sword suddenly plunged straight into the ground right in front of her. The tip of its blade dug straight into the ground and wobbled once it landed, its metal planting itself a mere few feet away from Vari and giving her another surge of fear-laced adrenaline as its hilt pointed directly towards the sky. Gods, that had been too close.

With her arms now trembling and her legs still shaking from the growing exhaustion, Vari slowly stretched her palm out onto the hilt of her sword and used it to lift herself upright again – the strength of her sword’s myhril holding strong as Vari clamored to recover herself. She then lowered her other hand down onto the hilt of her blade once she rose higher; and, with a strained grunt, Vari finally yanked it free from the dirt as she steadily found her footing...

*CLINK!*

The metallic clang of silver *cracked* into the open air as suddenly, Vari felt Andrea’s chain wrap itself around her sword arm and restrain it completely. Vari cried out in both pain and frustration as the chain then pulled her closer to Andrea with a forceful tug, almost as if the strider were attempting to throw Vari back down onto the ground again so she could keep her off-balance. Vari’s feet stood firm in the sand, however, as Andrea dragged her; and, upon being dragged another few inches further, Vari muttered a curse under her breath before eventually deciding to drop her sword. Instead, she grabbed the silver chain and gave it a powerful tug of her own.

This threw Andrea and her revolver right back down onto the ground – a loud ‘*OOF!*’ escaping Andrea’s lips as she immediately had the wind knocked out of her.

With Andrea’s chain falling limply down onto the ground, Vari tossed it aside before picking her sword back up and building her speed into a sprint – right over to where Andrea now laid.

Andrea, now wheezing and gasping for air, focused her eyes on Vari again as she watched her sprint back over to her at the same terrifying speed as before. She then turned her eyes towards the revolver which lay at her side, and soon, another mote of panic had made its way into her ruby eyes while Vari rushed to close the gap. Exhaustion had left Vari’s movements muddled and ragged, but there was no denying that if she made her way over to Andrea while in this state, the strider would lose her tag for sure – perhaps even her life.

“W-ahh! *WARD!!!*”

Andrea had just managed to wheeze the incantation to her spell in time as again, Vari fiercely threw all of her strength into a single, devastating thrust of her sword. Her blade narrowly managed to pierce Andrea’s shield again as Vari let out a long, vicious warcry. The sword hovered mere inches above Andrea’s shooting arm as Vari grunted, growled, and forced the hilt of her blade even further down into the strider’s shield... albeit at a slow and agonizing pace.

Still, Andrea’s eyes widened in shock once she again noticed that Vari was now actually managing to pierce the magic of her shield through raw strength alone.

Another vicious, furious cry from Vari echoed out into the town as Vari forced her sword down even further into her shield. Its intensity rattled Andrea’s bones as the metal of Vari’s katana inched itself down towards where she laid, until eventually, Andrea herself began to scream with strained cries of agony as Vari’s sword painstakingly pierced her skin inch by inch. Lower, and lower, and lower Vari sank her blade – its tip plunging directly into the skin of Andrea’s shoulder while Vari placed as much of her body weight as she could muster down onto her hilt. Blood began to pour from Andrea’s skin as she wailed in a fierce, prolonged misery, and just as Vari thought she’d finally be able to land some significant damage...

Andrea’s chain *CRACKED* out from behind her, shredding right through the leather of her armor with ease and leaving a slash across Vari’s back.

Vari roared with pain before yanking her sword free out of reflex, the Leporian falling down onto her back and writhing in agony while blood quickly began to trickle from her open wound and spill into the sand below. Andrea clutched the wound on her shoulder and recoiled with sharp, pointed expletives as she hurriedly scrambled back to her gun. Now reaching into the pocket of her jeans, Andrea flicked open the chamber of her revolver before fumbling her fingers in a feverish attempt to reload it. Her hands shook with wild intensity as she struggled to place even a single bullet into its cylinder, though with Vari's wounds, she figured she'd have plenty of time.

Eventually, the tears of pain which stung Vari's eyes began to subside as her vision finally started to clear. She'd had no idea why or how the chain had managed to do what it had done, but the one thing she did know was that if she didn't make it back up onto her feet, Andrea was going to reload that weapon and shoot her in the head. Now forcing her body to comply with a stubborn punch down into the sand, Vari cried out in strained agony as she shakily forced herself up onto all fours. The frantic *clinking* of metal behind her indicated that Andrea had still been fidgeting with her weapon, though it was when Vari eventually heard a decisive *CLACK* that she realized Andrea must have finally loaded it back up – even if it had been with just one bullet.

“Fucking... piece of shit...” Andrea growled, and just as Vari had finally mustered the willpower necessary to stand herself back onto her feet, Andrea cocked the hammer, rolled right onto her back and – *POW!* – fired a bullet straight into Vari's shoulder.

A wild, almost rabid scream of shock and pain rattled out into the town as Vari felt the bullet lodge into her muscles. Her entire body now screamed at her to flee as the Leporian desperately clutched her arm onto her shoulder. She seethed into an adrenaline-laced rage as blood soon began to trickle down the length of her musclebound arm and pool into the sand below. Deciding that a direct confrontation was no longer worth it, Vari retreated in a panic as Andrea stubbornly continued to fumble with the mechanism of her revolver. The strider's chain was now slithering like a snake across the side of the road as Vari ran, its metallic links once more reuniting with their owner as it telepathically coiled itself around the length of Andrea's wounded arm. Slowly, Andrea painstakingly reloaded another six bullets into each chamber...

And Vari dashed through the doors of the saloon with panting breaths.

The saloon looked like it could provide ample enough cover for now, she decided. There were tables scattered all around the inside, each of them empty and looking as if they hadn't been occupied for a century or more. Lined along shelves behind the front counter were dozens upon dozens of various liquors and spirits, with each of their bottles glowing various shades of amber due to the smooth, dim lighting emanating from the gaslit lanterns hung across each wall. To Vari's left was a set of stairs which she figured must have led up to some sort of lounge area, or perhaps a number of rooms where patrons



could stay the night. Vari's attention, however, firmly fixated itself onto the counter at the bar as she sprinted her way over to it. She then crouched down onto her knees with a grunt, the woman doing her best to stifle her groans of pain as she concealed herself from sight.

Her hand still trembling and applying pressure to her wound, Vari briefly removed her hand from her shoulder to examine her bloody palm.

Fuck.

Vari cursed herself internally for acting too recklessly at the start of the round. True, both of them were now injured, and Vari had at least made some progress in subduing her opponent – but her exhaustion from before the round had even started was now beginning to catch up to her again. She didn't even want to think about the bullet that was currently lodged in her shoulder, and she didn't have to check for an exit wound to know that tiny fragments of lead were still sizzling underneath her skin.

Gods-damnit, she *really* wished she had the ADT right now. This fight would be ten times easier with the ability to teleport behind Andrea and disarm her.

Suddenly, Vari's lavender eyes began to widen as she slowly turned to her left to find an oddity stashed underneath the counter she was hiding behind. She wasn't very good at using these things, but...

It certainly looked deadly enough.

"HEY VARILA!" Andrea shouted as she stormed into the saloon with a sudden slam. The swinging wooden doors at the front of the saloon had nearly been knocked off their hinges once Andrea walked in; they crashed against the walls with a loud *thud*, immediately signaling her presence to Vari who still hid quietly behind the counter. Vari's hands gripped her new weapon and held it close to her chest as Andrea cautiously paced her way inside...

"Got another present for ya!" Andrea angrily called out. "Six of them, actually! Would be a shame if you weren't here to receive 'em..."

It wasn't long before Andrea suddenly paused as she spotted the thick droplets of blood which trailed their way over behind the counter. Noticing the strider's sudden pause in movement, Vari's grip on her weapon tightened as she remained focused on restraining her growing panic...

"Yup! Daaaamn shame..." Andrea added, again cocking her hammer back as she approached the counter.

Vari's ear twitched once she heard the *click*.

*BOOM!*

Andrea fell down onto the floor with a shriek of terror as Vari suddenly emerged from behind the counter and blasted the table in front of her with a large double-barrel shotgun. The spread of each shotgun pellet was much narrower than Vari initially thought it'd be, resulting in the Leporian just barely missing her mark as Andrea suddenly kicked down a table in order to use it for cover. Vari again pulled the trigger on her shotgun with a deafening *BOOM*, the resulting volley sending chunks of wood flying from the edge of Andrea's table and causing the strider to flinch while her heart threatened to beat its way out of her chest.

"ARE WE HAVING FUN YET?!" Vari shouted, her answer being met with a blind shot from Andrea's revolver which shattered a glass of whiskey on the shelf behind her and caused Vari to flinch out of reflex. She immediately crouched to take cover again as she clumsily fumbled with the mechanism of the shotgun – her fingers scrambling to load another two shells which had been positioned just inside one of the counter's cubbies for the previous owner to use. The weapon was large, hefty and awkward – and it looked nothing like the firearms she'd encountered back in her homeworld – but the operating principles were more or less the same, and right now she didn't have the time or the means to search for a more suitable alternative.

Upon loading both barrels up with another two shells, Vari *clacked* the components back into place before perching her weapon back onto the top of the counter. These things were so fucking clumsy.

*BOOM!*

The glass from several empty whiskey bottles shattered beside Andrea as Vari again missed her shot. Her aim was clumsy, too – likely as a result of her injuries – but the strider was by no means about to

risk lining up her sights for a better shot as she again fired blindly from behind her table. Another bullet whizzed right past Vari and shattered the giant glass mirror which reflected the shelves behind her.

“HOW IS YOUR AIM SO SHIT?” Andrea tauntingly shouted, a primal mix of fear and frustration in her voice as she clung to her position behind cover. This prompted Vari to wordlessly raise her weapon and spray another set of glass and splinters across the room with a thundering *BOOM*. She then crouched behind the counter again before reaching for another two shells – only to find that, unfortunately, the person who’d originally worked behind this bar had only stashed four shots for the gun to use... and in her eagerness to defend herself, Vari had just used all of them. Vari cursed under her breath as she angrily tossed the shotgun aside, opting once again to place her hand onto the hilt of the katana at her feet...

*POW! POW!*

Another two shots whizzed above Vari’s head and shattered another set of bottles, their glass showering down onto the top of Vari’s head and leaving minor lacerations across her skin. The shotgun had been a welcome addition to her arsenal for all of about two minutes... though unfortunately for Vari, the combination of her injuries along with her general inexperience with firearms had meant that she’d all but wasted the precious shells which had been stashed underneath the bar. She always had been a pretty poor shot...

As another surge of adrenaline started coursing through each vein, Vari gauged what little she could of her surroundings while she tried to think of her next course of action. Should she keep fighting? Should she run? She was certain Andrea still had plenty of bullets to reload her revolver with, and drawing out this particular encounter while her opponent still had the advantage was likely a death sentence. If she stayed here, it would only be a matter of time before she caught a stray bullet.

With her arm still throbbing and her teeth being grit from frustration, Vari reached into the small pouch which dangled from her hip and searched for her only means of escape. She needed a new location. A new plan. She needed to think of a different approach to this fight entirely before she fell unconscious from the blood loss.

Upon finally finding what she was looking for, Vari tightly gripped the hilt of her katana and prepared herself to move quickly...

“VARI? YOU STILL BREATHING BACK THERE?” Andrea shouted. She then dared a quick peek out from behind her table, the strider unsure whether she should advance or merely weather the storm until Vari

ran out of ammo. The bar fell silent for a moment as Andrea merely waited for her opponent's response, panting and heaving behind cover as the unusual smell of whiskey and gunpowder wafted throughout the room. She then wondered if Vari had already run out of ammo, the still silence indicating that Vari had perhaps started a gunfight which she had no chance of finishing.

*POOF!*

Thick layers of smoke perforated throughout the room as a smoke bomb suddenly landed in front of the table which Andrea had stationed herself behind. As a result, the saloon was enshrouded in seconds – the distraction again causing Andrea to raise her arm across her nostrils and start coughing from where she sat. Back and forth, her ruby eyes shifted from side to side until she again lifted her gaze over the table and made an attempt to discern Vari's outline through the smoke.

Where would she approach from this time, Andrea wondered?

Before she could even begin to debate on whether she needed to shoot or change positions, however, the sound of a door slamming shut from behind the bar signaled that Vari had already fled the scene.

With a scoff, Andrea slumped back down behind the table before taking a moment to reload her revolver.

Typical.

One by one, the strider shakily reloaded each chamber within her revolver. This fight had no right to feel as exhausting as it did so far, and though her opponent's fighting style was sloppy and erratic, Andrea realized it was becoming quite difficult to perform even the simplest of maneuvers the longer this fight went on. What was going on with her? Why did she feel so off today? With these questions in mind, Andrea was resolved to get herself together once she could finally get this gun loaded again... but it was upon seeing another stray bullet fall onto the floor that Andrea finally realized her hands *weren't* simply shaking as a result of adrenaline or her injuries.

The effects of withdrawal were again taking hold of her.

Frustrated, Andrea sighed. She poured the last of her focus into loading her reserve ammunition into her weapon, and it was once she finally snapped the cylinder back shut that Andrea noticed a sealed bottle of whiskey laying at her feet.

She'd still never drank in a saloon before...

...

The bleeding in Vari's shoulder hadn't quite managed to stop yet.

As a result, Vari was becoming a little too lightheaded for her own comfort. Her muscles were becoming positively rigid as she made her way up the nearest hill and over towards the nearby train tracks which had surrounded the town's perimeter. She had no idea if Andrea was on her trail, or if she had simply taken a moment to rest – but either way, she figured she was fast enough that she'd at least be able to make it onto one of the train cars before the strider made it out of the saloon.

Vari clutched her arm as she rapidly approached the train's caboose. Its frozen wheels were lined along the train tracks as she approached, almost if it had been ripped straight from the pages of an old history book and frozen in time. If she was being completely honest, she really didn't like how claustrophobic the cars of the train looked from the outside, nor did she particularly like the notion of fighting on a train to begin with... but she supposed that was the point. Fighting out in the street was a death sentence, and fighting in one of the town's many buildings hadn't quite closed the gap between them enough to prove itself effective. Fighting inside a train, on the other hand, was perhaps the best chance she had of luring Andrea into a close-quarters situation while also giving her plenty of time to think up a plan. Her blood would also act as a very serviceable trail for Andrea to follow, and by now, she'd known that the strider had no qualms with going on the offensive – perhaps even preferring it. She clutched the wound on her shoulder again as her feet climbed onto a small set of steps, and though she briefly worried over the possibility of the train's car doors being locked, it seemed she had zero issues making her way into the train's interior once her hand pushed open the caboose door.

Or rather, nearly flung it off its hinges.

Upon stepping inside of the train, Vari kicked the door shut behind her and was greeted with numerous rows of decorative, cushioned leather seats that she could see were now caked in layers of dust. They all had been completely empty, their buttoned burgundy leather now appearing faded and worn with the passage of time. Beside each seat, there were curtained windows which at one point had surely granted passengers clear views out into the world while it hurriedly passed them by. Rays of orange sunlight

trickled into the train from the west side and shimmered against the rivulets of crimson which decorated Vari's bronze skin as quickly, she began to make her way to the next car. The Leporian soon rushed back into a light jog as she opened the door to the next compartment – knowingly leaving a visible trail of blood behind her as her feet staggered from row to row.

Eventually, Vari made it all the way up towards the front of the train before stopping to catch her breath. Sitting right before her was the interior of yet another passenger car, except this time, the space had looked noticeably different. In addition to the previous cars' lavish leather seats, this particular car had a series of wooden tables placed in front of each chair – all of them draped over with a simple cotton cloth which sat firmly beneath various sets of antique plates and silverware. Vari briefly wondered if it could have been possible that people actually dined on these trains during their various journeys, but the compact kitchen which peeked out from the front end of the train suggested to her that yes, they must have done just that, as various utensils and liquor bottles could be seen lined up along the sill of a small window that sat near the front end of the car. Beside it, Vari could spot a door which she was certain must have led into the conductor's booth or some sort of equivalent.

Not knowing where else to go and quickly running out of adrenaline to numb her pain, Vari decided to make her way through the door which directly guided her into the train's engine room.

Although, she wasn't exactly impressed with what she saw. She stopped in front of the old handle of a shovel once she stepped inside, which she could see poked out from the coals of what she assumed must have been the train's engine. It likely hadn't seen use in decades – perhaps even longer. She could only assume that Andrea must have lost track of her somehow, as by this point, she was certain that the strider would have been able to catch up to her with little issue. Still, she hadn't... and that fact alone had given Vari cause to gauge the severity of her condition. She felt, and likely looked like shit.

Finally, she sat onto the floor with a sigh.

With trembling hands, Vari finally reached into one of the many pouches at her hip and pulled out a small roll of gauze. She quickly began applying the bandage to her wound, wrapping it around her bloody shoulder with various grunts and hisses while she listened for any signs of Andrea's pursuit. Her dressing of the wound was sloppy, and she knew it to only be a temporary solution as the bullet lodged in her muscles still burned with a sharp, fiery intensity; but at the very least, she knew she could at least stop the bleeding before she fell unconscious from the blood loss.

As she dressed her wound, Vari quietly started to recall her days back in the Na'tara village with a strange sense of nostalgia.

Gods, how she wished she'd won that coin toss. Even if it did carry a sea of bad memories with it, seeing the village in which she grew up one last time would have been a decent way to end her days if she lost.

It was then that thoughts of her younger years began to creep into her mind as memories of her village transitioned into others. She still remembered those days with some measure of fondness, despite how turbulent they had been. Her friends, her sisters, the village elders and even her parents all raced through her mind as she applied more pressure into the center of her wound. The world had felt so much more forgiving when she was living back in her old home, Vari thought, and though she'd run away for a reason, she could still remember the many days she spent smiling with her little sisters if she tried.

Smiling...

When was the last time she'd done that?

She used to so often. She couldn't imagine she was that same person anymore – that same carefree little Leporian girl who'd arrived fresh off the boat from the jungle. She used to think so clearly back then... so deeply and acutely. In fact, one might have been able to argue that it was her specialty before her mind had become so deeply clouded with grief. She'd always liked to plan, strategize, and make use of her natural cunning during her days in the village; and it had quickly earned her many accolades upon being recruited into the ranks of her home's many talented huntresses. If only she had been placed within the confines of her village just one last time, Vari thought... perhaps then she'd be able to construct a trap of some sort to rid Andrea of her tag.

Quietly, Vari's eyes then drifted towards the coals which still sat in the train's smokebox.

A trap...

Frantically, Vari suddenly rose to her feet before rushing back into the dining car.

She made her way over to the compact kitchen window which bore several varieties of wines, liquors, and spirits on the front shelf. She then grabbed two bottles at random, popping both of the lids from their glasses as she walked back into the engine room and began dousing the inside of the smokebox with alcohol. Once she was sure they had been emptied, Vari placed both bottles back onto one of the

dining tables and strolled back into the kitchen to find another... and another... and yet another. Each and every liquor bottle she could find, Vari emptied into the smokebox of the train – dousing and lathering the thick layers of blackened soot with as much alcohol as possible while also making sure to splash some onto the floor beneath her for good measure.

Perhaps the loss of blood was making her delirious, and perhaps she'd never get the chance to follow through on this tactic, but if she managed to ignite the doused coals inside the engine room while Andrea was stuck, she'd at the very least have the potential to incapacitate her so that she could steal her tag. She wasn't blind to the possibility that this could very well kill Andrea, however, and if she timed her ambush correctly, the trap probably wouldn't even be necessary... but a direct confrontation hadn't exactly worked out for her so far, and Vari had long since been resolved to win this competition. If killing someone who'd already tried to kill her a dozen times over meant finding and saving her wife, she'd gladly deal with the mental fallout later.

Now setting aside numerous empty liquor bottles, Vari reached up to grab one of the many various lamps hung along the walls of the dining car. Then another. Then a couple more.

One by one, she began tossing them into the train's smokebox – the glass shattering and leaking an oily, pale-yellow liquid into the train's engine. If these lamps were anything like the old oil lamps she used to use while dungeon-crawling, these would make for a pretty volatile fuel source.

Once the engine room had been thoroughly doused in as much flammable liquid as she could find, Vari stepped back to examine her handiwork. Unless Andrea took a peek inside the engine, Vari was certain she'd be too focused on her hunt to notice the majority of what the Leporian had done. The liquor splashed across the floor would be noticeable once Andrea stepped inside, sure, but if she was already inside the room, Vari was certain it would be too late regardless.

All she needed now was a way to start the fire.

With little time to lose, Vari brought the door to a near-close behind her and made her way back into the dining car kitchen. The space was small, with a miniature stove and a thin, single-door pantry in the corner of the room being the only notable features she could find. She briefly wondered how anybody could have cooked dishes in such a room as she frantically rummaged her way through a set of small drawers placed beside the stove, and just as she had been about to search elsewhere, Vari paused...

... and pulled out a tiny, card-sized box with a striking surface at its side.



Curiously, Vari pulled the box loose from the sleeve which covered it, and upon looking inside, she recognized what exactly this box was meant to contain.

Matchsticks.

There weren't very many left inside – perhaps only ten or so – but as long as one managed to catch fire, that would be enough.

Her eyes now drifting back towards the thin pantry, Vari opened the tall door in order to briefly examine the space's contents. Inside, she could see a pair of wooden shelves hanging towards the top along with a number of broken ones scattered at her feet. She was certain at one point that this pantry must have housed a fair number of ingredients for the train's chefs to use, but for the purposes of this competition...

It would serve as an excellent hiding place.

With her newfound box of matches and her sword still dangling from her hip, Vari quietly stepped foot inside the old pantry...

And waited.

...

*SLAM!*

Andrea barged her way through the door into the old caboose with a swift kick into its wooden frame. She downed back another several swigs from the bottle of whiskey in her hand as she continued to follow the blood trail which Carrots had so kindly left behind for her, her ruby eyes keenly examining the seats on both sides as she went. She was still pissed at Varila for having given her such a massive headache over the course of this round, as fighting her had proven itself to be a much more life-threatening experience than Andrea had first bargained for. It had been such a run through the wringer, in fact, that Andrea couldn't help but down nearly the entire bottle of whiskey she'd found at the saloon before eventually continuing her hunt for Varila. She tried to avoid drinking while working, and she was

sure Octavia was going to give her shit for it once the round was over... but ever since Vivian had literally blown up the flask inside her jacket, she had firmly found herself without a means of numbing the annoyance she felt from particularly sobering experiences.

And the stab wound which throbbed in her shoulder had left her feeling much too fucking sober.

Andrea clutched the whiskey bottle in her steadying hands as she continued to make her way through the train. God, she'd needed this. Already, she felt much more sure of herself as she continued to make her way over towards the front of the train where Varila had gone, the strider cocking the hammer back on her revolver as she confidently strode from car to car. She knew what Varila was doing, of course – it hardly took a genius to figure out that fighting close-quarters on a train was much more preferable for a swordswoman than having a brawl out in an open street against a gunslinger. Still, she didn't feel like waiting for Varila's cowardice to subside, nor was she necessarily distraught at the idea of fighting close-quarters to begin with. After all, she'd always been much too brave for her own good, though her sister might have been quicker to call it stupidity more than anything else.

Still, was she really stupid if she always came back alive? The answer, Andrea decided, was fuck no.

Upon finally making her way towards the front of the train, Andrea paused as she realized that the scenery of this particular car looked different than that of the others. The car still bore the same gaudy seats that the other ones did, except this one also had the luxury of having dining tables added into the mix. Various bottles of liquor were scattered across each table along with dusty old plates and silverware, and at the other end of the car was a door left slightly ajar – a hint which must have meant that Varila was somewhere nearby.

Still, the door must have been left open for a reason.

Now raising her revolver, Andrea cautiously quieted her footsteps as she made her way from table to table.

She carefully pointed her gun at each table as she went, the strider full-well expecting the possibility that Varila may have actually hidden herself under one of them. It would've been the most obvious place for someone to hide on a train, Andrea thought, but it also would've been one of the *only* places she could hide. Even so, Andrea did notice the small kitchen which stood near the door on the other side of the car – a kitchen which, at first glance, appeared completely empty and very likely as a hiding place. She took another sip of her drink, finishing the last of her whiskey before deciding to give the kitchen a quick pass-through. It didn't take the strider very long to notice the layers of dust which coated the

stove and nearby cabinets, their compact frames appearing almost commendably-sized against the room's tiny walls.

Her focus quickly began to falter, however, upon spotting the series of empty liquor bottles standing idly atop the kitchen window. She glanced down towards the whiskey bottle she still held in her hands before thirstily turning her attention back towards the array of liquors, wines, and spirits that waited for her on the kitchen's windowsill. Her lips already began to feel parched again as she briefly found herself staring at their enticing labels, questioning to herself how these particular vintages must have aged after so much time untouched. She wondered if there might have been a few more bottles stashed away in one of these cabinets for her to try...?

It wasn't long after having that particular thought that she swiftly shook her head and forced her attention away from the bottles – along with the kitchen entirely.

No, she decided. She still had a job to do... and a trail to finish.

Quietly, her eyes shifted back towards the door which she knew must have led into the conductor's booth. She placed her empty whiskey bottle down onto the edge of one of the nearby dining tables, deciding to put the drink out of her mind entirely before cautiously making her way over towards the booth. Though her better judgment naggingly advised against it, this was the only other room on the train which Andrea hadn't checked yet. Varila had most certainly been inside the room at one point, and though it very well could have been a trap, Andrea knew she'd be able to figure out a way past it regardless.

Her movement now slowing down to a crawl, Andrea stretched her hand out to gently push the door open...

Her opponent had lost a lot of blood, she reasoned. She was on her last legs. If anything, Andrea wouldn't have been surprised to see Varila bleeding out in a corner once she stepped inside...

Unfortunately for her, however, no such sight was there to greet her.

Instead, Andrea merely pointed the tip of her barrel at nothing upon stepping foot inside the booth. The sound of liquid splashing against her boots immediately caused her to look down onto the shallow

puddle on the floor, the strider eyeing it questioningly with a deep furrow of her brow. Was this... water? Oil? Andrea couldn't tell, though if this was a trap, it would've been a poor one.

Again, Andrea consulted the trail which ultimately led her here as her eyes followed the droplets of blood behind her. The trail just... stopped, right in the conductor's booth. She didn't know if that meant that Varila had jumped off the train or if she had somehow managed to treat her wounds, but either way, Miss X still hadn't called off the match. At the very least, that meant Varila hadn't yet succumbed to her injuries.

Maybe she should check the kitchen again...

...

Carefully, Vari opened the door to the pantry and stepped out into the kitchen...

She'd heard Andrea coming long before she even set foot in the dining car. She'd certainly taken her sweet time getting here, but whatever held her up, Vari was thankful for it. It had given her plenty of time to set the trap that she knew the strider had just fallen into.

Upon hearing another booted footstep splash against the liquor in the conductor's booth, Vari's ear began to twitch. Slowly, but surely, she raised her sword from her hip and readied its blade as she approached – the Leporian fully confident that her ambush would negate the need for her trap entirely...

... That is, until Andrea stepped back out into the dining car and came face to face with Vari.

They stared at one another for a moment in shocked silence.

*BANG!*

Vari charged forward with a desperate warcry the moment she saw Andrea raise her revolver and shoot. The tip of her katana pierced its way straight through the wooden paneling of the wall behind Andrea as the bullet whizzed right by, promptly shattering a wine glass. The strider then threw a punch towards

Vari once she closed the gap, the chain on her fist landing itself squarely in the Leporian's jaw and nearly causing her to stagger to the floor as blood splattered forth from her lips. Already, the silver of her chain had lacerated Vari's cheek a bit upon making contact with her skin, but once Andrea had reeled her fist back for another strike, Vari landed a kick straight into the strider's abdomen and sent her flying back into the conductor's booth. Andrea bashed her head against the steel of the smokebox once she landed, the point of contact briefly sending her into a daze; and from there, Vari quickly fumbled into the satchel she kept at her side and pulled out the box of matches.

*CHK!*

She scraped it against the cardboard box, igniting its phosphorous tip.

Upon hearing the match ignite, Andrea looked up in a hazy panic as Vari tossed the match inside and rapidly slammed the door in front of her.

"W-WARD!"

*WHOOSH!*

Immediately, the room had turned into its own hotbox as layers of liquor, soot, coal, and kerosene were set ablaze with a burning roar. The ignition of the fuel was so sudden and so violent that even though the layers of flammable liquid hadn't quite managed to produce an explosion, it very well *sounded* like it had as Vari pressed the entirety of her body weight against the door and barricaded her opponent inside. The ward had managed to protect Andrea from the majority of the flames, but the odorous fumes exuding from the foul mixture of coal and kerosene were working quick to make Andrea fall deep into the throes of a very deadly coughing fit.

With the ward still holding strong, Andrea repeatedly began to throw herself against the frame of the door which Vari kept shut behind her back. Again and again, Andrea threw her shoulder into the door – the strider coughing and wheezing and pounding against its frame in a desperate attempt to free herself from the trap that Vari had somehow placed her in. She was angry at Vari, angry at *herself* for taking such obvious bait; though she wouldn't have ever dreamed that she could find herself in such a perilous situation on a train of all places... regardless of what sort of trap Vari could set.

Eventually, Andrea shakily raised the barrel of her revolver again and let the magic of her spell dissipate.

*BAM! BAM!*

Vari screamed as another bullet ripped through the wood of the door behind her and tore straight into her abdomen. She clutched her newfound wound at her side with both hands as she suddenly fell to the floor in agony, the removal of her body weight promptly signaling Andrea to break through the door and land right next to her with a series of wheezing coughs. Even through the pain, Vari could see that Andrea was absolutely covered in scorch marks, the strider almost looking as if she'd just come back from a day in the coal mines after having spent mere seconds in the engine room.

With a shaky, trembling hand, Andrea again raised her revolver to point it at Vari's head before suddenly feeling a kick land straight into her stomach – the blow causing her to get sent back straight into one of the nearby tables and drop her revolver with a *BANG*. A bullet ricocheted straight through one of the train's windows as the gun suddenly clattered onto the floor alongside an empty whiskey bottle, and though Vari's sword was still left poking out of the wall near the engine room, Vari viciously began sending another series of kicks straight into Andrea's stomach while she worked to find leverage against the dining table.

This was it, Vari thought.

That extra bullet had removed her strength to stand, not to mention her strength to fight. Her stamina was spent, and her vision was becoming hazy, but she wouldn't let the round end without inflicting as much damage to her opponent as possible before she fell. After all, she'd already made a promise to herself: she'd either save Mira or die trying, and if losing here meant that she'd never be able to see her wife again...

She'd gladly do the latter.

Eventually, Andrea roared in frustration through the fading strength of Vari's kicks, the strider grappling her legs and forcefully tossing them aside. She then threw her weight down on top of Vari before landing a series of savage punches straight into Vari's jaw, repeatedly striking her in an attempt to overwhelm her with sheer concussive trauma. Over, and over, and over again Andrea beat her – screaming and yelling in frustration until Vari suddenly reached her hands up to drag her nails across Andrea's face. The strider reeled back from the pain, the sharpness of Vari's nails taking her aback before suddenly being kicked back against the table again. Slowly, and sluggishly, Vari rolled onto her side before gradually crawling over to the gun which laid beside her on the floor... only to cry out in

torturous agony once Andrea's boot suddenly landed itself straight into the gunshot wound placed in Vari's abdomen.

Now feeling the last of her strength beginning to dissipate, Vari was sent into a foggy haze of shock and pain as Andrea knelt back down on top of her chest and landed a firm punch straight into her face. The bloody *crack* which accompanied the blow signaled to Vari that her nose had broken completely.

"This shit... IS OVER..." Andrea yelled, her fury only being interrupted by the sudden coughing fit that her weakening lungs had once again spiraled her into. With one last surge of desperation, Vari weakly raised her left hand from where she laid in an attempt to wrap it around Andrea's neck and strangle her. Her cries of agony, however, instantly came roaring back to her as the silver chain on Andrea's wrist suddenly bound her wrist to the floor with a metallic *SNAP* and dug straight into her skin. She'd nearly been rendered helpless from the pain.

"Oh, Carrots..." Andrea wheezed, her anger briefly giving way to hints of amusement. "You never chill the fuck out, do you?"

With a rabid, furious growl, Vari lifted her other hand in one last attempt to inflict some measure of suffering onto her opponent... only for her rage to morph into agony again as Andrea tauntingly dug her thumb directly into the gauze which dressed her bullet wound.

Limply, Vari's hand again dropped to the floor.

"Case in point..." Andrea breathed. "Now, I want you to know, Varila – that despite everything you've done, all the *shit* you've tried to pull during this match... I still managed to get a drink out of all this."

With ragged breaths, Andrea then reached over to lift her revolver off the floor – the strider briefly flicking open its cylinder to examine the bullets inside before deftly snapping it back shut. She then pointed the barrel directly at Vari's head and, with panting breaths, cocked back the hammer.

"So I'm offering you a deal: agree to give me your tag, and I'll let you walk away from this." Andrea said. "Refuse, and you die right here."

Now staring prideful daggers into Andrea's very soul, Vari merely glared at her for a moment before eventually meeting her offer with a defiant glob of spit straight into her eye.

Andrea growled, nearly roared in frustration as she stubbornly wiped the vile mix of blood and saliva from the tender scratches near her eyes. Now presented with the third, and perhaps final opportunity she'd ever have, Vari's hand suddenly slid across the floor and fumbled against the neck of a nearby whiskey bottle while Andrea furiously rubbed her eyes. She tightly latched onto it with her fingers, steadily dragging it across the floor and into her palm as Andrea angrily clenched one of her hands into a fist and removed it from her face. Then, upon meeting her opponent's gaze one more time, Andrea gradually lowered the barrel of her gun back down onto Vari's head and placed her finger on the trigger.

"Welp... can't say I didn't try." Andrea glared, and just as her finger began to pull back...

*CRASH!*

The sound of shattering glass echoed throughout the train compartment as Andrea fell to the floor with a thud.

With the cold stare of death still freshly baked into Vari's mind, the Leporian's arm fell limply back down onto the floor as she quietly stared up at the ceiling – panting. Shards of broken glass had scattered themselves all along the carpet below while she laid there, her hand tightly gripping the broken whiskey bottle she'd used to knock the strider unconscious while she breathlessly attempted to gather her bearings...

Her breaths still shaking from the adrenaline, Vari tiredly looking over to her opponent who now laid motionless beside her.

Had she... had she won?

Quietly, Vari's lavender eyes drifted right back towards the ceiling of the train car as she finally began to come down from the shock of what happened. Her heart was still beating itself into a frenzy, and her adrenaline had already begun to subside back into a violent, twisting pain which surged itself across her whole body with each movement. It was all Vari could do to block out the pain of Andrea's bullets as blood trickled out from her wounds and pooled down onto the frayed carpet underneath her...



Now grunting and whimpering from the intensity of her wounds, Vari shakily pushed herself up off the ground with a pained hiss. She then reached her hand over to grab the choker wrapped around Andrea's neck...

And weakly snapped it free.

"WOW!!! Well everyone, around here is when I'd usually start the countdown..." Miss X announced, her voice immediately piercing through the fierce crackling of the engine's flames. "But it looks like after a long and brutal exchange, Varila has not only managed to rip Andrea's tag off her neck – but has finished her off with a full-blown KNOCKOUT! Give it up everyone, WE HAVE OUR WINNER!"

The audience could faintly be heard cheering over the roar of the fire as Vari raggedly stumbled onto her knees – then eventually, after much trial and error, onto trembling feet. She was barely holding on to consciousness now, and the fact that she was even able to stand at all had, in itself, been nothing short of a miracle. Even so, the smoke from the fire behind her soon began to disappear as reality slowly collapsed in on itself – the sunset skies outside morphing back into the sunny backdrop of the Colosseum while everything around her stopped, furled, and dissipated back into the Crossroads. She merely watched her surroundings puff into smoke until eventually, the full roar of the Colosseum was now blaring into her ears in all of its unmitigated excitement.

Above, Vari could only just make out the words that were now displaying on the jumbotron as Miss X's cameras floated down to catch a shot of the Colosseum's latest victor.

**WINNER: VARILA NA'TARA**

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## To Die Trying

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Her ears were still ringing.

Louder than they'd rang before. It was all Vari could do to remain on her feet as the constant flashing of cameras bounced off of the lifeless irises in her weary eyes. All around her, the audience rippled with cries of emotion and exhilaration – all of which coalesced into a giant, nonstop display of fervor and excitement that carried itself into each and every direction she looked. Slowly, almost absently, Vari raised her gaze to meet the energy of the crowd which had now practically been begging to capture her attention – but whether their cries of celebration were real or a mere projection of what her brain wanted to hear, Vari's hazy mind still couldn't quite decide.

Still, it all certainly *looked* real to her.

The joyful smiles.

The raised fists.

The passionate rallies of rejoice.

All of them began to arrive in waves as again, the crowd rhythmically started chanting her name while the blood from her injuries trickled down into the battle-worn sands beneath her feet. This time, Vari didn't react as the voices in the crowd gradually morphed back into the desperate calls of her wife.

*Va-ri-la.*

*Va-ri-la.*

With her pain fading back into numbness again, Vari absently raised the whiskey bottle she held in her hand to gauge the extent of its damage... only to realize with no reaction at all that its glass had long since dissipated from her grip. Only she, Andrea, and the weapons they left behind remained in the arena – a fact which briefly caused her delirious mind to wonder if any of this had been real at all.

Suddenly, Miss X swiveled down from atop her platform and floated her way over to Vari with an excited grin on her face. She, too, appeared like a vision conjured from the depths of Vari's blood loss... smiling and cheering along with the crowd as if she had been rooting for her from the very beginning. Listlessly, Vari's legs attempted to begin carrying her back towards the tunnel which would lead her straight into the Colosseum's waiting lobby again... though she hadn't even made it a few feet before promptly being stopped by the inquisitive floating popstar.

"Varila!!! Ohmygosh Varila, that was FANTASTIC!!! A mind-blowing performance!" Miss X beamed, the idol playfully orbiting around her for a moment before eagerly placing a holographic microphone to Vari's lips. It was difficult to tell whether she had even noticed Vari's injuries amidst all her excitement...

"Quickly! Give us the details!" Miss X continued. "How were you feeling when you started the match? Were you calm? Scared? Angry? Scared? Oop, I already said scared! What did you think about your opponent? About the town you fought in, or the train you used to even out the playing field? Aaaaa, and the gunfight!! That was seriously so incredible!"

Listlessly, Vari didn't bother to respond to Miss X's barrage of questions as her eyes gradually lifted themselves back up towards the crowd – particularly towards a pair of golden eyes which even through her hazy vision, Vari could see glared right back at her in apparent shock and horror. Rapidly, the blonde figure stood straight up from her place in the bleachers and rushed down underneath the stadium, the fabric of her coat creating a blurry trail of pink behind her as she sprinted towards the nearest set of stairs and descended. She then disappeared out of sight, prompting Vari to look behind her to check on the condition of her opponent...

... only to find that Andrea was now being carried away and tended to on a stretcher. She was covered in blood, scratches, and scorch marks – the nurses quickly attaching a breathing apparatus to her mouth and nostrils as she was promptly escorted away by another squad of Crossguards. A second set of nurses escorted by guards were now rushing their way over to Vari as Miss X waited for her answer, and the popstar even went as far as to give Vari a pleading set of puppy-dog eyes while she hovered there in anticipation – a gesture which hinted at the insatiable need for information she barely kept hidden underneath her bubbly expression.

Still reeling from her injuries, however, Vari briefly turned back towards Miss X before squinting her vision at a figure who now stood directly in front of her – just a few feet behind where the popstar was floating.

And once Vari recognized her, the Leporian's eyes suddenly came to life.

There, draped in a burgundy red dress and appearing like a divine figure sent from the heavens, Mira simply smiled at Vari knowingly from afar. Her dress seemed to sparkle against the bright afternoon sun as their eyes met, the Felynian noting her wife's condition with a curious tilt of her head before gradually making her way over to her with slow and cautious steps. She then stretched out her hand as she walked, the sapphires in her eyes almost begging her wife to come closer so that she could take it and begin tending to her wounds.

"M-Mira...?" Vari asked. She almost couldn't believe it.

Confused, Miss X merely raised her brow before quizzically scratching her head in response.

"Mee-ra? Who's that?" the idol asked, but before Vari could point to the figure approaching from behind her...

Vari collapsed into the sand and let her consciousness fade into the roaring crowd.