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## A Night to Remember

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The moon looked beautiful tonight.

Mira stood wistfully out on the balcony of the large, opulent dance hall she'd practically been dragged to by her best friend – its warm, regal lights shining rays of gold onto her pale back as she leaned quietly against the stone railing. Eyes of sapphire fixated themselves onto the full moon which hung high above her in the night sky, illuminating the empty streets below and brilliantly reflecting the sheen of her crimson red dress which she still thought had looked much too expensive for her tastes. Strands of her platinum blonde hair, which for tonight had been fashioned into two long braids, dangled freely below the pointed tips of her feline ears as she occasionally looked down to adjust the pearls of her necklace or straighten the fabric of her dress. The sounds of music could be heard emanating from the inside of the building behind her, with their muffled but melodic notes dancing amidst the chill of cool winds that lulled her nerves into a sense of much-needed calm. She still couldn't resist the temptation to fidget with her wardrobe every now and then, the girl fussily mumbling to herself as she did her best to negotiate with the fabric which clung to her petite figure like glue. For a dress that flaunted so much of her figure, it felt surprisingly stuffy on her – and though she normally wouldn't have bothered to wear something so 'fancy', she continuously made a point of reminding herself that she wasn't doing so for the sake of appealing to high society.

There was someone else she was desperately attempting to look her best for tonight. Someone she was especially keen on winning over with a dress that she knew bore her favorite color. If only she would simply look her way...

"There you are." A female voice called out from behind her. "I almost thought you'd ran off."

Mira turned around to face her friend with a light gasp, the noise escaping her lips involuntarily as the sight of her tall, violet silhouette quite literally took her breath away.

Vari approached Mira with a wry, cool smirk on her face as the door to the ballroom clacked shut behind her. Sweet, dulcet tones once again became muffled into the background as Vari stepped away from the warm lighting of the hall's chandeliers and stepped out into the night's silvery glow. Mira's burgundy red

heels practically jumped in place once they turned to face the tips of Vari's purple ones, and the deep, alluring shade of indigo which comprised the fabric of Vari's dress had blended in near-perfectly to the shroud of night which surrounded them both. Smoothly, the Leporian made her way closer to Mira and gave her a knowing smirk.

Mira, however, could only freeze as her sapphire eyes made contact with Vari's amethyst ones. The sight of her best friend now approaching her in that inviting and risqué dress of hers had for some reason made Mira's cheeks begin to blush with unabashed intensity. She could only hope for the night around her to conceal how flustered her expression had become as Vari casually proceeded to lean her elbows down onto the same stone railing beside her – the Leporian's light bronze skin reflecting the silver of the moon beautifully as she towered high above her with that lean, musclebound frame she always bore.

Why was it Vari that always made her feel this way?

"Whatcha doing out here?" Vari asked, a rare hint of playfulness in her tone. "You're missing the party. It's not every day you get to hear the 'Bards of Lannervale' come all the way out here just to play for us."

"Oh! Uhm... yeah, I know." Mira stammered. "Sorry, I really am enjoying the party. It's just, um... I needed a bit of fresh air, is all..."

"Fresh air, huh?" Vari asked after a brief pause, her coy smile goading Mira to say more.

"Yeah." Mira admitted with a shy chuckle. "The music, the lights, the people... it was all a little much."

At this, Vari simply hummed under her breath – her voice reverberating deep tones of curiosity as her lavender eyes drifted back towards the light of the ballroom behind her. Through the glass of the balcony door, she and Mira both could still see the dozens of noble aristocrats who danced elegantly to the sounds of muffled instruments and harmonic voices coalescing into one joyous melody. The bards continued to pluck at their instruments as lords and ladies alike lost themselves in the sway of music, their feet carrying them up and far away into the night as each and every one of them – for one evening, at least – put aside the petty scheming of their politics and indulged themselves in a night of quiet civility.

It wasn't long, however, before Vari looked back at her friend with a smile.

“Yeah. I think I know what you mean.” Vari finally told her. “Between you and me, I’ve never actually been to one of these things. The Admiral has tried to convince me to attend one of his dances for a few years now at *least*, but I’ve always said no – told him I had better things to do than play dress-up with a bunch of snooty politicians. Imagine the dumb look on his face when this year, I actually said yes.”

Mira couldn’t help but chuckle again, her kitty tail flicking behind her in idle amusement.

“Well, I was surprised too!” Mira giggled. “Don’t take this the wrong way, Vari, but you don’t really seem the type to attend fancy dance parties... or drink champagne... or laugh at people’s jokes. Kind of makes me wonder if you’re turning over a new leaf. Or if you’re actually opening yourself up to the Admiral’s courtship...?”

The question had come out a little more dejected than Mira had initially intended, but even so, Vari couldn’t help but chuckle at the idea – as if the mere suggestion had been a joke.

“Pfft, *him?*” Vari scoffed. “Please. For all the decorations pinned to his chest, I’ve met *cadets* who look more impressive than he does. I mean, have you *seen* that stupid eyepatch he wears? He’s not even blind in that eye! And that stupid fucking haircut, ugh...”

Again, Mira laughed – this time a little louder as Vari couldn’t help but break out into laughter right along with her. Their giggles mingled freely together in the nighttime air as warm music continued to seep out from the dance hall behind them, its notes dancing out into chilly coastal winds. It wasn’t long before Mira subconsciously began to close the distance between them, her nerves from before now all but gone as their laughter eventually subsided into comfortable silence.

She didn’t know why, but she couldn’t help but feel relieved for some reason.

“So... why even come here at all?” Mira eventually asked her. “Don’t get me wrong, I *am* having fun. The food, the wine, the music – it’s all been fantastic. But...”

“But?” Vari asked, her smile again egging Mira into saying more.

“But it’s not *you*.” Mira decided on saying. “If anything, I figured you would’ve been crawling another cave or beating someone up. So, um... why hang out with ‘snooty politicians’ instead?”

Another chuckle sputtered from Vari's lips at Mira's question, and with another shake of her head, Vari let her smile rest on her lips for a while before sighing and leaning in close.

"I don't know." Vari purred. "Maybe I just wanted an excuse to see you in that cute red dress of yours."

At this, the beet-red blush on Mira's pale cheeks promptly returned - her eyes shifting away from Vari's faster than she could even register. She briefly began twiddling her braids with her fingers, and her tail stood straight up behind her as her frayed nerves once again started to return. She'd *just* managed to calm herself down, and now Vari was saying stuff like that?!

"V-Vari!" Mira whined. "Come on, that's not funny!"

Vari, however, simply laughed - the woman's warmth radiating from her lips like the soft ringing of a bell. It was at that moment, though, that Mira started to wonder to herself if she'd actually been joking or not...

It seemed that question would go unanswered regardless as Vari's bunny ear suddenly twitched, and a look of realization suddenly entered her eyes.

"Oh! Hey, do you hear that?" Vari asked, her expression growing excited for a moment as she rapidly spun herself around to face the dance hall behind her. Mira looked up at her friend with a curious tilt of her head in response, the girl somewhat caught off guard by the unusual mote of excitement which had found its way into Vari's demeanor.

"H-huh? Hear what?" Mira asked.

"The music." Vari smiled. "This is one of my favorites! Gods, I haven't heard it in forever..."

"O-oh!" Mira stuttered. "What-"

“C’mon!” Vari said excitedly before snatching Mira’s hand into hers. “Come dance with me!”

“W-wait, dance?! Vari, I’m not-“

“Come on already!” Vari laughed, and suddenly, Mira was whisked back into the dance hall – the light of the chandeliers cascading over both of them as Vari ushered her through the crowd of dancing noblemen and guided her towards the center of the room.

Immediately, Mira blushed as Vari lead her onwards. It was all she could do not to stare at Vari’s hand so familiarly intertwining itself with hers as they hurried forward...

The notes of a soft, almost jazz-like song echoed out into the large dance hall as Vari eventually came to a stop in the middle of the large dance hall. She then turned to Mira with a breath and a smile, wrapping her free hand around Mira’s waist and lacing their fingers together as she then prepared herself. Again, Mira couldn’t help but shake her head in sheepish protest – her timidness outright betraying the desire she felt to grant Vari this dance.

“Vari, I’m really not that great of a dancer...” the Felynian girl hurriedly whispered – knowing full well she was going to mess this up.

“Don’t worry about that.” Vari whispered confidently in response, her feet already beginning to shuffle to the bards’ melodic voices and instruments. “Just follow my lead, yeah? I’ll get you where you need to go...”

Hesitation met Vari’s reassuring words. She’d truly never done this before, and come to think of it, Mira had never actually seen Vari dance before, either. Compared to all of these people whom she was certain had been raised learning how to dance and mingle during concerts, waltzes, and balls, Mira felt she’d be about as graceful as a limp-legged roly-poly in comparison. How could Vari be so confident right now, she wondered?

“Trust me.” She whispered with a smile.

It was when Mira once again looked into Vari’s lavender eyes, however, that any and all doubts she may have had slowly began to melt away...

“O-okay...” Mira nodded with a blush, and soon, her feet began to shuffle too – almost as if they had been waiting for permission.

And from there, Vari simply swept her away.

Mira followed Vari’s lead as best she could, her feet moving in tandem with Vari’s as the Leporian guided her across the dance floor without so much as a single misstep. She stayed close to Vari as they danced, mirroring her friend’s movements to the best of her abilities and even taking a few daring steps of improvisation which in turn made Vari giggle under her breath. In truth, Mira was quite impressed with herself for even being able to feign any form of proficiency in dancing... especially when her dance partner was proving herself to be so encouraging and distracting at the same time.

Even so, Vari was the truly impressive one in her eyes. Her movements came to her with such ease that one might’ve been forgiven for thinking she’d practiced beforehand – the pair practically gliding across the room as she spun Mira on her heels and caught her in musclebound arms. She then pulled Mira close and briefly lifted her up into the air with a spin, her burgundy red dress shining and fluttering amongst the warm lights of the chandeliers above and creating a surprisingly flashy display for all to see. She was then placed back down onto her feet again with unmatched grace and finesse, and though Mira mentally felt as if she’d still been several steps behind Vari, her feet seemed to be on autopilot as they easily picked up right where they left off – shuffling and twirling underneath her as if by instinct.

Mira’s cheeks must have been even redder than her dress, since it was as soon as Mira’s heels clacked back down onto the floor that Vari met her awe-struck expression with a wry smirk. She had lifted Mira up into the air with such ease that it had practically left her breathless – and judging by the look on her face, Vari knew full well that the maneuver they’d just pulled off together had been nothing short of impressive.

She was amazing – truly amazing, in every sense of the word.

They continued twirling and gliding across the floor as the bards played their song, each swelling note met with a maneuver that Mira herself hadn’t even known she could pull off until she was placed into Vari’s arms. Slowly, but surely, she learned to adjust herself to Vari’s movements; she stepped back when Vari moved forward, trusted Vari’s arms to catch her when she dipped downwards, and twirled herself in place to Vari’s little cues and signals. With no small amount of guidance from her partner, they were weaving a tapestry of grace and movement together that constantly ebbed to the music – inspiring a sense of awe in any and all who were watching.

Mira, however, felt her nerves begin to get the better of her once she noticed that *many* people were indeed watching. Much more than she'd initially thought.

"Everyone's looking at us..." Mira whispered between movements. She blushed as she resisted the urge to let her gaze drift towards the people around her, their various smiles and looks of adoration causing her to briefly stumble from embarrassment. Vari, however, quickly caught her – making the movement look as purposeful and natural as any of the other myriad maneuvers they'd managed to pull together. Vari pulled Mira close again as they danced and swayed, looking deeply into her eyes as the Leporian's face inched closer towards hers.

"Don't worry about them." Vari simply whispered under warm breaths.

Mira's heart skipped a beat as she blushed and nodded in response.

Soon, they were right back to their regular pace – dancing and spinning in tandem with the bards' voices as perhaps the entire ballroom watched in quiet awe. Their movements were like fluid, dashing and careening freely across the floor as they both let their emotions guide them. Mira could feel it; her heart was completely in tune with Vari's in that moment, and their bodies had united in a way that she would've never thought possible had Vari not shown her how. She was completely and utterly enchanted under Vari's spell, and for a moment, she couldn't help but wonder where their impromptu dance was leading.

The notes swelled into their final crescendo as Vari pulled Mira even closer into her frame than before. Vari's face then began to inch closer to hers as the song gradually drew to a close.

"Vari..." Mira whispered. "I..."

Whatever she'd been about to say was completely lost on her as Vari pulled her into their first kiss.

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## From the Ashes

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Vari opened her eyes.

Unlike the last time she had awoken, there was no panic this time once she finally stepped back into reality. There were no cries, no tears, not even a whimper of protest as her lavender eyes gradually opened to the sight of white ceiling tiles hanging from above. There was only numbness as the woman merely stared at the ceiling fan of her hospital room for a while, her expression unchanging as the sound of the music from her dreams faded into a lonely, unceremonious silence. A single tear trickled down her bronze cheek as she quietly rested her palms against the sheets of her bed – her body still aching from the mild burns and tremendous injuries she had sustained from her fight with Kiri.

Kiri...

Her fingers dug themselves into her mattress.

Memories of what she had done in her previous round were now starting to flood back to her, acting as a cruel reminder of the mistake she had made in the name of a complete and total stranger. How long had she been out for, exactly? She remembered the trees and how they burned – their smoke and ashes filling her tired lungs. She remembered fireballs whirring past her, the sound of the crowd as they cheered on each and every blow they exchanged in the name of blood and entertainment. She remembered the visor of her ADT falling, spiraling into flames and eventually being engulfed by their ravenous heat. Every mistake, every misstep she had made during that fight all rushed back into the forefront of her mind, and though Vari had dug deep in order to find the rage necessary to express how her heart felt in that moment, all she could manage was the one tear she had so far shed along with a weak but lingering sense of sadness. Despair.

Defeat.

Vari turned herself onto her side and stared listlessly into the seat of an empty chair which sat in the corner of the room. She wasn't sure which was worse – the constant nightmares which for years had plagued and haunted her, or the rare and precious dreams which only served to remind her of the terror she was currently living. Both were insufferable, and had gradually eaten away at her tired mind day by



day, hour by hour, minute by minute. With the ADT now lost, she wasn't sure how much longer she could force herself to go on. How much effort she could expend before finally, her tired mind simply gave up right alongside her body.

A knock came at the door to her room.

Vari, however, didn't react. She merely remained silent as the door proceeded to open anyway without her say-so, and as if on cue, the familiar patter of paws began to inch their way closer towards the side of her bed. She could tell by sound alone; it was Korinth who had come to visit her, though how exactly he had only managed to greet her in times of emotional duress, she could not say. Even so, his paws continued to make their way closer to her bed as the door then suddenly shut behind him – a Crossguard or nurse having most likely let him in. He then paused right beside Vari's bedside as she remained unmoving, unwavering in her right to silence.

"Greetings, miss Varila." The fox telepathically beamed, likely with another bow of its head.

At this, Vari didn't move or respond. She remained silent as the fox waited, and eventually stopped waiting, for her acknowledgement.

"I bring thee tidings once more." He continued, the fox opting to speak if Vari wouldn't. "Thine second round in the tournament is set to begin two days from now. Thine opponents have already been decided, and the brackets have been set within your respective league. More notably, it appears that thou will be among the first to fight their second round – a result of the judge's satisfaction with your prior performance, I am sure."

A tired sigh left Vari's lips upon hearing this – both signaling to Korinth her frustration and confirming to him that she was indeed awake to hear this. Clearly, the judges hadn't been intent on letting her rest... though she supposed it would be out of character for them to grant her any leniency when she had only just barely made it through her first round.

"Thine opponents for the next round include two young women, both of them sisters." Korinth informed her, the fox ignoring her frustration. "They are competing together, though I am told that one of them will likely not be joining the other in battle due to her lack of combat experience. Thus, there will only be one opponent facing thee in the coming battle. With this in mind, I would like to note that your opponent is a gifted sharpshooter as well. She will be able to strike thee from a distance, which I believe will be cause enough for caution when the fight begins--"

“It doesn’t matter.” Vari finally muttered.

At this, Korinth promptly fell silent. Were Vari to look at him, she was certain she’d find a vague look of displeasure on the fox’s face – but it was as she said. It didn’t matter. Nothing mattered now that she had lost her lifeline.

Mira’s lifeline.

“I should’ve just let the bitch fall, Korinth.” Vari eventually continued, her voice sharply piercing the silence that had fallen between them. “I had every opportunity, every right to do it. The ADT was *right there*. I could’ve easily just grabbed the damn thing and been on my way with her tag... just taken the win and forgot about her and her dead god. But she was just a dumb kid... a wide-eyed brat who didn’t know any better. I couldn’t just let the flames take her, no matter how deeply I wanted to.”

For a moment, Korinth merely sat in attentive silence. He said nothing while she spoke, his eyes merely glued to the back of her head as the regrets continued to pour out of her mouth.

“I fucked up. I fucked up so badly that I’ve doomed myself – win or lose.” Vari whispered. “Even if I manage to win now... even if I manage to make my wish and get her back, I’ll have no idea how to bring us home. Not even you will know. How could you, when we met on some burning rock in the middle of nowhere? My friends, my family – they’ll have no idea just how far away we are. My sisters will grow up without me. Build lives, foster families without me. Instead, I’ll be stuck here – stewing on the consequences of my mercy... no, of my own *stupidity*. I deserve this...”

Vari’s voice trailed off into silence again as Korinth sat without a word.

There was nothing but the sound of the ceiling fan whirring above them as Vari laid there in the cold quiet. Her eyes remained distant as she simply stared at the empty chair across from her, the woman idly waiting for Korinth to give her some ham-fisted response that she was sure would be too vague to be of any help. Perhaps he didn’t even have one to give this time. Perhaps he would simply lose his patience with her and walk away, or tell his ‘Madame’ that she had given up on the tournament and leave her to stew in her nightmares forever.

Eventually, however, Korinth did say something.

“Miss Varila...” Korinth began, the hesitation in his voice suggesting the deliberation with which he spoke every word. “I am surprised thou wouldst consider removing thyself from the tournament at this juncture. Though the path forward has not been easy, the sheer determination with which you have proven yourself as a contestant has left many of the judges – including the Madame herself – quite pleased with their decision to grant you entry. Thou should not discount thine efforts to make it this far as mere foolishness.”

Vari’s expression remained unchanging as Korinth spoke. She supposed he would tell her to ‘clear her mind’ next...

“... Though I must admit, I cannot say I do not understand thine sentiment.” He added, and for the first time during their conversation, Vari turned her head to look back at him with a single lavender eye.

“In truth, miss Varila, I cannot profess to know whether thine decision was the correct one to make.” The fox continued. “Such questions are not for me to decide. I will, however, offer thee this: there are not many I know of who would have possessed the strength in order to do what thou did. There was much on the line for thee, and despite knowing the risks associated with performing the more selfless act, thou committed to it regardless. Thou sacrificed thine own desires to save a life – an act which, I will not deny, is a refreshing change of pace.”

This time, Vari’s gaze softened as she directed her eyes back towards the empty chair in front of her. Another silent tear trickled down her cheek and fell onto her pillow as he spoke with that subtle hint of admiration, but again, she said nothing.

“It is true that thine visor has been lost,” Korinth told her. “and it is true that the decision to save someone else has come at a great price. But thou art still here. The tournament continues on, and despite the great pain which burdens thee, I would urge thee to continue fighting in it – for if thou should choose to resign thyself to defeat, that will be thine result.”

Another bout of silence. Vari clenched her fingers into the fabric of her hospital bed as Korinth spoke, though she could not will herself to ignore his words. One of her ears twitched as Korinth then turned to leave the room.

“Consider where thine loyalties lie, miss Varila.” He finally told her. “Then decide for thyself if surrender is still an option.”

It was then that Vari's ears shot straight up as she sat herself upright from her spot on the hospital bed. She then directed her gaze straight towards him again, the sudden movement even catching Korinth off-guard as he then reared his head around with a questioning look in his eye – clearly wondering what had prompted such a change.

Vari, however, merely squinted at the fox in mild annoyance.

That was the second time he had spoken of loyalties, and it seemed just as unprompted as it had the first.

“What the hell does that even mean?” Vari asked, her melancholy now rising into mild frustration as she struggled to wrap her head around his overly cryptic advice. “Who exactly do you suppose I should be loyal to, here? If you're talking about your Madame or some other time-bending deity you revere, you can fuck right off.”

At this, Korinth gave her a confused raise of his furry brow. He then tilted his head to the side a bit, almost as if he were unsure what Vari had even been referring to. The gesture, however, only served to annoy Vari even further. It had been rather difficult for her to forget when she'd first heard those words inside the Colosseum, so playing dumb now was only going to piss her off even further. Finally, the fox inched his way back towards her bedside and sat on the white-tile floor again as Vari merely stared at him – her glare firmly expecting an answer.

“Dost thou truly not comprehend?” Korinth asked. “I presumed the meaning behind mine words would have proven itself quite clear by this point.”

“Just answer the damn question.” Vari snapped.

And with his best imitation at a sigh, Korinth briefly looked to the floor before again meeting her gaze.

“Very well.” Korinth conceded. “Dost thou remember the question thou asked of me upon our first meeting? The question regarding mine own loyalties to the Madame, and those who would wear her face?”

“Yes...” Vari answered, exasperated at his dramatic description of it. “Vaguely.”

“It was a question that stuck with me long after thou asked it.” Korinth continued. “For all my years of existence, I had never once pondered the possibility of my Madame bearing a living reflection. At the time, it seemed preposterous to me – yet I could not deny the veracity of thine question, nor the answer I had ultimately given. I simply could not bring myself to choose any other Madame besides my own.”

“Do you ever stop beating around the bush?” Vari asked, now growing impatient.

“To put it simply...” Korinth said. “Thou art competing in this tournament for the same reason I serve my Madame: loyalty. Thou hast shown an undying, unyielding loyalty to the one thou loves – and it is that selfsame loyalty which compelled me to answer thine question the way I did. Thine loved one is the only one in thy heart whom has been deemed deserving of this love and dedication, and it is why thou even went as far as to partake in the tournament in the hopes of saving her. Were I placed into a similar position, I’ve concluded that I would be of a similar mind – to save my Madame at all costs.”

At this, Vari’s expression instantly softened again - her anger and frustration finally melting away into hints of understanding as the fox made his reasoning known to her.

“Not only hast thou risked thine life in the pursuit of saving thine loved one, but thou hast also searched countless worlds yet unexplored and delved myriad perils yet unconquered in the name of her safety. Put bluntly, this alone should be thine reason to continue the tournament. It is bonds such as thine which made miss Kirata and her companion such fierce opponents as well; thou bested them not by drawing from thine own strength, but by not losing focus of what matters most to thee.”

Korinth then inched his way even closer to Vari’s bedside as understanding finally took hold of her. She supposed it really had been quite simple...

“Thine wife, Varila.” Korinth finally told her. “Thou art loyal to thine wife. *She* should be the one who guides thine blade – not anybody else.”

As Vari stared down at the fox in sullen contemplation, another tear began to trickle down her cheek – the woman not bothering to hide this one from view. Even before the tournament, she had come so far, done so much in the name of one day reuniting with her beloved. Surrendering now, letting go of her journey now – all of it would have been for nothing if she’d simply let this opportunity pass. Even the

mere thought of giving up after her first match had now sickened her so deeply that it very well could have driven her to retch. How could she have even once contemplated such a thing, she wondered, when she had been the one to prevail in her first match?

No, she decided.

What's done was done.

She wasn't giving in, and she wasn't letting go. There was no turning back now.

"Her name was Mira, by the way..." Vari finally offered, the Leporian quietly bracing herself for his reaction at showing what was perhaps the very first sign of vulnerability she'd yet given him. Instead, however, Korinth tilted his head again – only to then chuckle to himself at Vari's muted reveal. Much to her confusion, it seemed Korinth had found something funny in what she'd just said... though she couldn't have imagined what.

"Miss Varila..." he sighed. No, he hadn't simply sounded amused... but touched, too.

"I appreciate the gesture, but I'm afraid thou hast revealed her name once before." Korinth replied with a smile in his eyes. "This, too, was upon our first meeting."

With a subtle look of realization, Vari fought the urge to scoff and shake her head at her own pointless dramatics as Korinth reminded her of their encounter at the inn. Yes, she supposed he was right – she *had* given him her name already... and quite loudly, to boot.

Now feeling a touch embarrassed at her little unveiling, Vari sullenly turned her eyes away from him and sighed.

"Oh. Yeah, I guess I did." She muttered, the woman making her best attempt to mask her subtle blush as she brushed her matted hair back behind her shoulders. "Nevermind, then. Just forget I said anything..."

Instead of complying with Vari's gesture to leave, however, Korinth merely sat and continued to look up at her. His previous look of amusement had now transformed into an attentive curiosity, and for a moment, Vari thought he was about to part some more words of wisdom, until...

"Tell me more about this 'Mira'." Korinth finally told her, the fox's words visibly catching Vari off-guard. "I would like to know more of why thou carest so preciously for her."

For a moment, Vari blankly stared at him. It had come out as more of a request than it had a command...

But it had almost managed to make her smile.

"Yeah... why not?" Vari said, only for her rabbit ears to suddenly perk up again as another knock came at the door. This time, Vari could see that it was a nurse who had stepped inside – her simple white gown overshadowed by the distinct red Crossguard symbol she bore on her white nurse's cap. Unlike the other Crossguards Vari had seen, this one did not wear any armor or a visor... but seemed wholly dedicated to the practice of medicine. Vari eyed her with minor annoyance as she stepped inside.

"Master Korinth?" the nurse asked. "I'm sorry to cut this short, but I'm afraid visiting hours are almost over. The contestant will need her rest if she's going to continue with the tournament, and I'm afraid not even you can be permitted to stay too much longer..."

At this, both Vari and Korinth gave a vague look of disappointment as they turned back to face one another – words of unspoken discontent being exchanged under the nurse's watchful eye. It seemed Vari's tales of Mira would have to wait, if only until the next round was over.

Even so, Vari opted to hide the heavy heart with which she ultimately shooed Korinth away.

"Go on. I've had enough socializing for one day anyway." She lied nonchalantly. "You can give me the details on my next round tomorrow."

Upon hearing those last few words, Korinth gave her a 'smiling' nod and bowed his head – seemingly content to let the conversation come to a close.

“Normally I would be glad to do so, miss Varila – though I’m afraid I have some business to attend to which will keep me quite occupied.” Korinth told her. “There is much preparation to be done on my end, and little time to do it. I will see to it that I am there to see thou off for thine second round, however.”

At this, Vari raised a brow at the fox as it promptly turned around and made its way towards the exit. Korinth gave the nurse a polite nod as he left, and upon seeing the door come to a close, Vari merely sat in her bed for a while before quietly slinking back down onto her mattress and staring back up at the ceiling.

And, as her mind gradually began to gravitate towards thoughts of her first round again, Vari did not find herself becoming nearly as distressed as she’d been before. No – this time, a familiar spark of determination had returned to her lavender eyes. She laid in silent contemplation as her mind sifted through images of burning trees. Of clashing steel. Of roaring crowds.

Then, Vari suddenly clenched her hand into a fist – her nails nearly drawing blood as she stared at the whirring fans above her with quiet resolve.

Two opponents, five opponents, ten opponents, or a hundred.

It wouldn’t matter. None of it would.

She would get Mira back or die trying.