

[Vilivian] Round 1: Parallel Regrets

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Sunset over the Ume Bay painted the sky orange. The alleys of Phoenix Coast were filled with people. Day and night workers exchanging shifts, patrons going to and from taverns and few merchants closing up their stalls and shops for the day.

Vilivian walked through the streets as she usually would ever since she arrived in the Crossroads. The fresh air in her lungs, the warm sunlight teasing her skin. Novelties of the outside have yet to wear off on her.

And yet, she had a hard time suppressing the sheer anxiety stemming from her inexperience in dealing with crowds. She couldn't help glancing back every several seconds and would reflexively hold on to her keepsake sword, tied at her back, every time someone would come close to her; anyone a potential thief. Each look directed at her felt judgmental. She felt cornered like an animal in a maze with her humanity barely holding her back.

A wolf in sheep's clothing. A fitting metaphor in Vilivian's opinion. One she did not fully understand until she set out on her first trudge through the Crossroads.

Some would presume her fears exaggerated. True enough, but while the crime is at its lowest whether it's because the residents here are a decent bunch or because the would-be offenders know better than to cross guards and their benefactor remains a fact unknown.

Whatever the answer to that query was, Vilivian opted for vigilance even it was mentally taxing.

And it was on her usual route towards the docks that she broke that concentration and allowed herself to be mesmerized.

A mural painting on the side of the gate that led down the docks compelled her to approach it.

The depiction presented a village at the night time. Comically large stars illuminated the straw shacks and wooden houses, placed atop the gardens of flowers just above the running river that mirrored the sky at the bottom of the painting.

She approached the mural and touched it.

'Hey.'

Sensation of memories flowed from within, but they were not of the place like the one pictured. There was no fragrance of flowers. No chirping of night time creatures and no wind whistling through the grass.

'Hey!'

There was only cold and damp confinement barely illuminated by the cave fungi accompanied by the sound of water dripping from the deeps and a voice that sounded just like—

'HEY!'

Vilivian snapped back to reality and let go of the wet mural. She looked to the side.

Young and red-skinned oni glared at her. Two small horns stuck out of his unkempt short black hair and a tail was tied around his waist. His white t-shirt and cargo shorts were stained with a plethora of colours. In his right hand he was holding a paintbrush whilst his left was stained with paint much like his shirt. He appeared upset as he glared at Vilivian through his bushy eyebrows. She had no idea how to react.

'Sorry?' she guessed.

'Well, you better be,' he exclaimed. *'What'd you touch the wet pain for, eh? Look at your hand, be all dirty now!'*

Vilivian looked at her hand. Indeed, wet paint from the mural lingered on her fingers. She wiped it off on her black pants.

Much to the oni's dismay.

'AAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHH!!!' he yelled out. *'What are you doing?! Do you have any idea how hard it is to wash it off? And it's such a nice pair of pants, too!'*

'It's fine.' Vilivian still had a hard time comprehending the whims of fashion. *'It's wasted on me.'*

'Well, that doesn't mean you should waste it! What did denim ever do to you?!'

'Hypocrite.' Vilivian argued, strangely irritated at the audacity of the child. *'You're stained as well.'*

'Duh. I painted this whole thing. It's a given I'd get dirty in the process.' He said proudly.

Vilivian's irritation momentarily subsided. She looked at the youth in shock.

'You made this?'

The boy chuckled and crossed his arms with confidence. Some of the paint from the brush splattered on the mural.

'A masterpiece, isn't it?' he said with a smug smile.

'It's certainly inspiring . . . I think I've seen a picture similar to this in a book before?' She hesitated. While she was still compelled to touch the mural again, in order to relieve the memories out of curiosity, she restrained herself from doing so.

'Hah. To think somebody else would paint that dump.'

'Still, this artwork must've been a great undertaking . . .'

'Hah. Well, you know me . . .'

'I do not.'

But the boy had already started talking.

'T'was like any other morning, see. I get out of my room and think, wow, what a grand day it is, so I go out into town and take my usual stroll looking for fun and trouble and I find this wicked good waffle place. I take a couple for a road as my elevenses and keep on going on towards the beach, because let me tell you that place is *smashing* in the mornings and that's when I come across this wall. Yes, *this* exact wall and I think to myself "Now that's the least piss-reeking wall in this town I've come across so far!" and with me not being able to pass this chance to celebrate my finding I decided to paint on it. I leg it back to the tavern and ask Chiefu if I can do my artwork. She was on the lash last night, so she vomited, and I took that as a yes. As I was dashing back here I realized that I think better when I'm running so I did two laps around the town and planned out the painting in the meantime. When I was about to get to work I realized I had no paint so I started running again, looking for someplace to get me some and wouldn't you know it, there's a whole cargo boat down in the docks with crates filled with cans of the stuff just waiting to be used! I nicked a couple of them brought them here and let me tell you – the beginnings? They're the hardest. Especially when you're holding a waffle in one hand and try to paint with the other. I finished my food and went looking for a brush but the morning was ending so pressed for time I thought – Who has the bushiest hair in the town? Answer? My aunt! So, I go pick it up and come back here and then,' he presented with his arms the painting. '*My magnum opus.*'

Vilivian was staring. She'd never hear someone talk so much, in such a short time and yet to manage to convey all the information so earnestly.

The boy grinned at her before he blinked and looked up at the sky.

'It's getting really late, innit? Oh, well, off the clock to get some grub. Name's Volley, by the way.'

With a smile he extended his arm. Vilivian looked at him and then at it.

"Volley" didn't seem to be aware of the effect the painting had on her. She wondered if the sensations she encountered really stemmed from the mural and wasn't but a hallucination caused by recent stress and anxiety.

However, nothing like that ever happened. For now, she crossed it off as a mental fluke caused by her inability to properly adjust to a new environment.

'I am Vilivian. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Child.' She ignored his hand.

He retracted it anyway, indignant.

'*Child?! You could be my sister!*'

'I am not one.'

'Yeah, no crap, that doesn't change a fact you're no older than twenty-five!'

'I'm . . . much older than that.'

'What? Thirty-five?'

'*Much* more.'

Volley scratched his head and grinned, showing off his fangs.

'Good for you! You're looking very well for your age!'

'Thank you?' Vilivian was still uncertain about compliments. People in Crossroads carried honesty completely differently from the people Vilivian faced while she was still a Sentinel.

The oni boy smiled again.

'You're welcome.' He discarded the paintbrush to the side and stretched. 'I am going to take my leave now, if you don't mind. I've been at it all day and that got me real hungry. My aunt's probably getting pissed, too.' He turned around to leave before he waved. 'Good night, Miss Viliv!'

'. . . Good night.' Vilivian waved back, slightly surprised.

Their parting was a given, but she couldn't help but feel a little sad. It was entertaining talking to Volley. Or at least, listening to him talk. His enthusiasm was certainly unmatched by anyone at Crossroads.

And yet, strangely familiar.

She looked at the mural again. The village shown in all its rural splendour. She meant to ask him if it was where he came from, but she doubted she'd manage to get a word in with that boy.

She contemplated touching it again, but out of respect for the young artist she refrained. At least, until the paint dries off.

'Excuse me, Miss?'

Vilivian turned around to see two dock-workers approach her. They were relatively familiar people. She'd often see the likes of them working with the boats down in the docks. At times, she'd stop and observe. Sea life was a complete unknown and she showed great curiosity regarding life in the

waters.

But the men in front of her didn't seem to be keen on the idea of exchanging cultural differences and the inner workings of marine life-style. In fact, the man in front seemed to be profusely agitated to the point where his monobrow resembled the letter V.

Vilivian might've been socially inept, but she wasn't a fool. The tension in the air was almost tangible. She needn't use her sensing abilities to realize that men in front of her were a potential threat, and as with any threat, she decided to face it head on.

'Gentlemen.'

Worker in the back appeared more reluctant and hesitant than his colleague. One in front immediately pointed his finger low behind Vilivian. She followed with her eyes and found empty cans of paint.

She looked at her fingers, still slightly stained with the river's blue, same as her pants she tried wiping off with earlier. Her foot touched something. She looked down and noticed a brush Volley left. The hairs painted the side of her boot with white colour.

Implication was obvious and her opinion of the oni boy dropped significantly.

'There's a misunderstanding.'

'It always is.'

'I'm not a thief.'

'It's hard to tell, Miss. Come with us down to the docks and we'll figure it out with the guard. If you're innocent, you'll be on your way.'

'No.' Vilivian frowned and stepped back. 'This has nothing to do with me.'

'Listen,' he reached out his hand to try and grab her.

And for a brief moment all Vilivian saw was a red flash as her instincts took over. When she regained her self-control, the painting on the mural had a slight human-sized indent and the man who reached out to her was lying on his back, with some of the paint and pieces of the wall stuck to him.

Vilivian's body went on full alert. As she heard voices of shock from the few passers-by behind her with right hand she clutched onto her keepsake, fearing for thieves. Her left arm's veins were glowing with blue light, ready to cast magic at any moment.

In her extreme anxiety, the stares of strangers burned more than any silver. She was a foul beast, unleashed in the middle of the town and her human side struggled to keep her beastly instincts in check.

Surrounded. Cornered. A scenario so very familiar to her. She sensed fear and tension and her own body mimicked that. She needed to get out and the only possible way was to slaughter through them. She fixed her eyes on the knocked-out worker's friend. Meek in stature, fearful, but refused to abandon his friend. He wouldn't struggle . . .

Suddenly, from the direction of the docks appeared a new figure. Vilivian focused her eyes on the silhouette boldly approaching her. Clad in elegant dark clothes and a black hat, the arrival had crimson skin and carried a bag on his side.

It wasn't until he was but a few meters away from her when his presence caused her to take on a defensive stance and step back.

The beast within cried louder as it reflected what she sensed in his blood. It was marked with alien taint. Searing and aggressive.

'Stop,' she growled. And so, he did. He retracted his last step and raised his hands to the level of his neck and held them there. She managed to get a good look on his face. It was sharp and attractive and the man didn't carry any sign of apprehension on his expression.

'I'm not here to melee, Miss.' He proclaimed loudly. 'Though, I suppose you could say I'm here regarding that unfortunate thieving accident.'

'I'm not a thief!'

'I never claimed you are,' he said calmly. 'Alas, your reaction leaves little in your defence. Then again, I know just how fraught with distress those kinds of events can be for some people,' he looked to the side and muttered out, as if to himself, 'I *truly* do.' He then turned back to Vilivian. 'The matter of thievery was handled. The guard was called and they found the receipt. If you follow me down to the docks, we will be able to resolve the matter appropriately, without any further injuries.' He glanced at the man lying on the floor. 'Why, I believe even this little incident can be easily swept under the rug.'

'And if I don't come along?'

The negotiator thought for a while.

'Then, I will try, albeit reluctantly, do my best to drag you by myself and will most likely be brutally savaged in the process.'

'That,' Vilivian started sharply, but saw reason. The man was speaking with reason, and though his words clashed with the ferocity of his blood, his confidence instilled calmness. 'Is an accurate assessment.'

'Forsooth? Would you kindly come with me, then? For *my* sake?'

Vilivian's instincts were still on edge, but she relented from her fighting stance. Veins on her arm stopped glowing and she relaxed her expression.

The elegant man lowered his arms and bowed his head with a thankful smile.

‘Thank you, Miss. I knew you’d come around. I am a travelling writer.’ He bowed, ‘I go by Forte. It’s a pleasure.’

‘I am Vilivian. It is likewise a pleasure to meet you, Wordsmith.’

“‘Wordsmith?’” he said, amazed.

‘Is something wrong?’

‘On the contrary, I’m intrigued! But,’ he clapped his hands. Vilivian flinched. ‘Why don’t we go down the docks and have this whole misunderstanding sorted out, shall we?’

Vilivian followed the self-proclaimed author down the docks whilst carrying the unconscious worker on her shoulder.

In black and red uniform, a singular the guard was overseeing the movement of the cargo, partially stolen. When they arrived, Vilivian was met with cold stares from the workers, even though the Forte explained that she wasn’t involved with it at all.

And all should’ve ended then, but it didn’t as Forte wouldn’t stop talking.

She had never seen talk so much about *anything*. Even the oni boy – a real culprit – didn’t move his lips nearly as much, probably because Forte was talking nonsense throughout most of his speech.

And yet, *somehow*, two of the workers teared up, the now conscious unconscious man verbally apologized to her and the guard took off his hat out of solemn respect. It even got to a point where Vilivian was offered a job of moving the cargo. Given that the man she threw at the wall had suffered a concussion and she felt a little bad about this whole ordeal, she accepted the offer and without any struggle helped to move out the cargo for the day.

She was even paid a bag of coins for her effort. And it was a fat one, unlike the ones the nobles who challenged her tried to buy their lives with. Vilivian finally had a chance to repay for the generosity the Bartender of the Fox Den showed her as she sponsored not only meals, but also a room in her tavern.

By the time the sun set completely, Vilivian was walking back to the tavern, holding the pouch in her hand, thinking about today’s encounters, the last of which was yet to end.

Though she could only hear her own boots’ footsteps, Forte the Writer was following closely behind her with a smile on his face and hands behind his back. At first, she thought they were going in the same direction, but the more turns they took the more suspicious she became.

‘What do you want, Wordsmith?’ she asked as they walked finally. Forte laughed, whether at the nickname or her question she couldn’t tell.

‘Why, it’d be unsightly of me to let a lady wander around alone late at night, wouldn’t it?’

‘You approached me with your hands up in the air. Weren’t you afraid?’

‘Afraid? Hardly. Cautious? Most certainly. Indentation in that wall is sure to spawn several urban legends in the future. Some might even start praying to it.’

She stopped in the middle of an empty alley lit by the street lights and turned around. She stared into his heterochronic eyes. His grin remained unwavering.

‘Answer my question.’

‘Is it really that hard to believe that I simply wanted to appear gentlemanly to the good people of Crossroads?’

‘Kindness conceals blades no worse than the shadow of a cloak.’

‘Train of thought heading straight on towards extinction! Surely you realize that my efforts here are a result of your charm and beauty?’

‘I faced men singing exaggerated praises only for me to get distracted with their rabble before they tried to slide a dagger into my back. You are good at what you do, Wordsmith, yet, when I see your lips move all I hear is rubbish.’

‘You needn’t be so reserved, Miss Vilivian. You shan’t find a dagger in my hands lest you consider a glass of wine at the dinner table a suitable tool of carnage. I won’t kill you.’

‘Will you try?’

Forte chuckled.

‘I swear on my honour as an author, Miss Vilivian!’

‘The issue I take with that, Wordsmith, is I’ve had dozens of individuals swear on their supposedly renowned reverence and most, save one, showed nothing but a cowardice oft accompanied by a glint of silver. What say you to that?’

He shrugged.

‘That they’re amateurs? I take pride in preparation, Miss Vilivian. Unlike them, I am fully aware that the person I’m dealing with is capable of tearing the limbs of a man as if they were petals of a flower.’

‘You’re done with the gallantry, then?’

'I shan't ever. But I won't continue to insult your intelligence with unnecessary flattery. You're clearly a woman who knows her own worth.'

'And what am I worth to you? Why, pray tell, despite having no intentions in harming me, have you designed to assist me against your better judgement?'

She realized she must've slighted him in some way as he began scowling and smiling at the same time.

'Your beastly short-sightedness is apparent, Miss Vilivian.' His courtesy coated in venom. 'While to you it might've appeared as if I pulled you out of the worst mistake of your life, to those people I was a saviour who rescued them from a wild animal about to break loose from its chain to gut them. And now they owe me their lives.'

'You planned this whole ordeal?'

'I'm good, Miss Vilivian, but not *that* good. It was by absolute chance that we met then and there. And as for why I'm following you, Miss Vilivian, it is to see whether you are the person of integrity you make out yourself to be with your eloquent disposition or whether you're nothing, but an animal in dire need of caging.'

'You think I owe you.'

'You do owe me, Miss Vilivian. How many would you be able to cut through before you even started to calm down? How many before the God Eater brought down the hammer?'

'And by the boats? When you had me help these workers?'

'I simply wanted to warm you up to myself. I intended to subtly indicate your obligation towards me as we talked by the dinner, but I recognize now that you're no fool. Consider the sack of coins as your introduction to civilization. I, however, must know whether or not you have enough human decency to pay off your tally.'

It hurt her pride to be called beastly by that individual. The man certainly carried his supposed superiority on his sleeve and didn't hide the fact that he was out for himself more than for anyone else. Still, he was right. Her anxiety and her inexperience in dealing with people would have resulted in a massacre had he not arrived to talk her out of it.

'I've my pride, Wordsmith. I'll repay that debt, so long as your request is reasonable. I give you my word.'

Forte laughed mischievously.

'Ah. But that is the word of a monster, isn't it?' That one statement hurt the most. 'No matter as for now it will suffice. Should anything arise, Miss Vilivian, I'll be certain to find you. We'll meet in due time I'm confident. Good night.'

She watched as the self-proclaimed author disappeared in the darkness of the alley. With his words still resounding in her head she turned heel and left for the Fox Den.

With the witching hour slowly approaching the tavern was ripping apart in chaos as the patrons of the establishment were nearing dangerous levels of intoxication. Still, the waiters and waitresses have managed to wrangle them by skilfully subduing the rowdier customers whilst still handling the drinks.

Vilivian pushed through to the bar where the Fox Den's oni owner and barkeeper – Saki - filled the glass pints with beer straight from the tap and handed them over to waiters.

'You're returned rather late this evening,' Saki spoke to her once Vilivian sat down on the barstool. 'Took your time taking in the sights?' she signalled something to one of the waiters.

'A series of strange happenstance had me occupied for the latter part of the day.'

'Oh? Do tell.'

As Vilivian was about to explain she noticed someone familiar sitting on a stool next to her. Wearing the same familiar white shirt with the same unkempt black hair and red skin, an oni boy was chewing on some manner of red fruit or vegetable.

'It's *you*.' She said in mild shock.

He turned to her with his mouth full. He frowned in thought as he swallowed and then he grinned widely, baring his fangs.

'Miss Viliv! What a coincidence to meet you here! How do you do?' said Volley with pieces of food on the sides of his mouth.

'You've met my nephew, I take it?' said Saki as she put a plate of food in front of Vilivian.

'That child is your *kin*?' Vilivian looked in disbelief.

She then proceeded to inform them about the events beginning from meeting Volley to her helping out the dock workers with their cargo. Throughout her retelling she noticed Saki's glare towards her nephew turn sterner and colder.

As she finished, Volley laughed and shrugged.

'Oh, wow.' He said. 'Good thing all's well that ends well, eh? *YEOWCH!*'

He was smacked with a boot Saki took off.

'*You thieving little tyke!*' she scolded him.

'I left receipts!

'With *MY* name on them!'

'Come on! It's not like you ever spend money on anything!'

'I pay taxes!'

'Do you, though? *Ack!*' She struck his head again.

'I'm sorry for him, Vilivian.' Saki sighed and put her shoe back on. 'He got you in the worst kind of trouble possible and was gotten out of it by the worst kind of person too I imagine.'

'The aftermath was less than ideal, but I hold no grudge. I was a victim of a circumstance more than your nephew's folly.'

'Yeah, Auntie, I meant no harm to her.' Said Volley and pushed his plate towards Vilivian. 'Here, Miss Viliv, have some of my watermelon as my plea for forgiveness.'

Vilivian took in hand the red "watery melon" and put a bite-sized piece in her mouth.

The sweet and juicy piece exploded in her mouth.

' . . . It's been many years since I had such an exemplary vegetable.' She stated.

Volley frowned, a little confused, but continued to smile nonetheless.

'It's a fruit.'

'Still, Vilivian, I thought you could tell when someone's related through your sensing abilities?' Saki asked.

'I do,' Vilivian admitted. 'But I have toned it down ever since I arrived here. Sensing too many creatures at once makes this ability a hindrance to my mind.'

'I didn't know you could just "tone down".'

'Neither did I. I suppose I adapted to my environment. With so many beasts and monsters around, the mating seasons in the dungeon were . . . unbearable.'

Volley opened his mouth in amazement and his eyes started to shine with excitement.

'Did you say "*dungeon?*" he asked.

'Yes.' She answered, slightly taken aback.

'What kind?!'

Vilivian wasn't sure on how to answer that question.

'The underground and magical kind?' she guessed. 'It was built and used by my clan back when we still considered it a home.' She tried to recall its layout back when she still used to frequent the higher floors. 'It has several levels and they're mostly occupied by the beasts and monsters.'

'Is there any treasure?!'

'Just one.' She said dryly. 'You've the spirit of an adventurer, don't you, Child?'

'Dungeons, monsters, treasures, good fights and survival! I live for those things. This place is the first one in a while where I stayed for so long since leaving home.'

'Why did you leave? I find it curious to see a child like you on the road unattended.'

He pouted.

'I'm sixteen.'

Vilivian looked at Saki askingly.

'Is that a lot for an oni?'

Saki smirked as she cleaned the glasses.

'Even humans would consider him a pretentious brat. But he's always been an odd one out even amongst the oni. Much wilder than other children. Much stronger too, which is why I recommended him for the tournament.'

Vilivian glared shocked at the oni teenager.

'You're a contestant, too?'

'Wow, and you?!' he exclaimed excitedly. 'That's great! Oh, I can't wait to see you fight! Hey, is that sword your weapon? It looks so imposing!'

He pointed at the sword Vilivian carried. The sheath didn't look much like anything with the cloth wrapped around it.

'It's not mine.'

'Does it have a name?!' he seemed to ignore her.

'It's a keepsake.' She fruitlessly tried to explain.

He frowned.

“‘Keepsake.” That doesn’t fit at all! Imposing swords should have cool names like *Shadowbringer* or *Chaos Shard* or *Excalibur!*’

Vilivian froze up.

‘Truly.’ She said weakly.

‘Ignore him, Vilivian. He’s the type to name a hairbrush. That being said, I need to get a new one. I seem to have misplaced mine . . .’

‘Wow, Auntie.’ Said Volley. ‘That’s crazy.’

She looked at him. He looked at her. She was glaring coldly. He was grinning.

Vilivian barely dodged the incoming swing aimed at Volley’s side of the head, but he managed to duck below it.

‘Ha! Missed m—’

He didn’t dodge the returning strike.

Saki massaged the back of her fist as Volley lay knocked out on the floor.

‘Still . . .’ Vilivian said, watching the knocked out boy. He started snoring. ‘I am rather surprised to see how different the two of you are.’

‘It’s not like I was the one to raise him. He could use a little more tough love during his upbringing, but I suppose he wouldn’t grow to be such an empathetic young man as he is.’

‘He has a certain charm, that’s for certain. I feel like I lower my guard when I’m around him.’

‘That’s the effect he has on people. Someone so good-natured and innocently naïve makes it unbelievably easy for people to endear themselves to him. You think Chifu would let just anyone see her swimming in her own sick? He’s just as good at making friends just as Wendy is at turning any ordinary tea party into an alchemical experiment.’

‘I find it curious that both of you carry the same passion for havoc, but the way each of you wield it is vastly different.’

‘How so?’

‘You, Bartender, are like a river of magma. Calm and mesmerizing, but you’ll relentlessly destroy anything that’s in your path.’

‘Poetic.’

‘Thank you. I’ve been reading a lot lately.’

‘And my nephew?’

‘He’s like . . . What did you call that orange-haired vixen with a metal stick the other day?’

‘Unhinged?’

‘No, no. You used a metaphor.’

‘Ah. “Powder keg.”’

‘Indeed. He’s brimming with energy and yearning for conflict to an extent that any manner of provocation, no matter how miniscule, is enough to set him off exploding.’

‘He’s got a tendency of getting into trouble uninvited.’

‘I can’t help but feel jealous. Merely sixteen, but he’s been striding the world for a few years by now.’

‘I get that blues sometimes, too. I start reminiscing and remind myself that I wasn’t always a hag and had a childhood.’

Vilivian scowled. She tried reaching back into her memory, to the point her head started hurting. She could recall her combat training, her sisters and the lessons her Mother taught her, but other than that . . .

‘I can’t recall much from my childhood, sadly.’

‘It’s been over a thousand years for you, right? It’s a given you’d forget some things.’

Vilivian spent the rest of the evening in wistfulness. She never really thought much about her past, especially so far-reaching one. She still thought she ought to remember some events from that time, but she couldn’t really come up with anything of substance. There was only darkness and fighting, much like throughout most of the rest of her life.

After finishing the meal Saki prepared for her, Vilivian was proud to finally pay for her stay. Though the Fox Den’s bartender insisted on those meals being on the house as a way to repay for Volley’s mischief.

Saki eventually gave in and took some of the Vilivian’s money after which the Matriarch retreated to her room to sleep.

Vilivian rarely slept before coming to Crossroads. As her life was to be in constant challenge, she developed a meditating technique that allowed her to stay on guard whilst receiving the much-needed rest.

It wasn't until she arrived at Crossroads that she for the first time in her life slept in a bed on a soft mattress underneath a clean sheet. It has been so very long since she slept so soundly that the tiniest sounds didn't manage to wake her up.

She, however, had to suffer through her dreams.

And tonight she had trouble falling asleep. Her conversation with Forte the Wordsmith was still haunting her thoughts. Her uncertainty in regards to her own humanity stressed her out.

She struggled in her sleep; sounds of water drops dripping and dripping inside her head were either very distant or oddly close and its direction swayed and Vilivian swayed with it, trying to struggle out of darkness while the volume of the noises steadily increased.

She'd finally make out an image and see herself in a dark room. She was holding a book. One that showed an artwork she recognized as the very same she saw painted on the mural in the city. The picture then shifted into an unrecognizable mess of colours as her heart sunk. Her vision faltered and turned to intangible darkness that started spinning and she felt the ground beneath her fail and disappear. She clutched onto the book hanging in the space, terrified of letting, of slipping and falling down. The sounds came into the crescendo when they suddenly turned into a sound of knocking on a door and Vilivian came awake in bewilderment.

Her head was hurting, her limbs stiff and she tasted blood in her mouth. She had lost her sense of time, but the light coming through the window drapes signified the start of the next morning which meant she slept some hours.

She briefly tried to remember her dream, but her head was in too much pain to focus properly.

Somebody knocked on the door.

'Vilivian?' Saki's voice sounded from outside. 'Are you decent yet?'

She sat on the side of her bed and started picking up her clothes. When she was attired, Saki entered and helped her do her hair as well point out which articles Vilivian put on wrongly.

With her hair tied into a braid they exited her room and made their way down to the tavern. In the mornings, only a few patrons populated the Fox Den. Once down in the tavern, they were welcomed by a cheerful screech of the town's favourite drunkard.

'Ayy, Vilivian! How are you doing, Best Friend?' Chifu the self-proclaimed "friendly neighbourhood kitsune" raised her mug at the sight of Vilivian.

'Our relationship is not that of friends, Trickster,' said Vilivian as she sat down on a bar stool next to Chifu's. 'I must say, not seeing you yesterday evening here at the bar had my mind—'

'Worried?' Chifu teased.

‘Otherwise occupied.’

‘Curious what I was doing, aren’t you?’

‘I wouldn’t want people to make wrong assumptions about me.’

‘That you’re my friend?’

‘That I care.’

‘I heard that you got into a little trouble yesterday.’

‘Yes. I apologize about your wall.’ Vilivian automatically assumed that the Trickster knew everything about everything.

‘Don’t worry. At least the drunkards have got something to admire while they piss at it.’

‘Viliv wouldn’t be in this mess in the first place if you weren’t black out drunk yesterday and didn’t agree to Volley’s whim, y’know?’ Saki said as she placed scrambled eggs and sausage in front of Vilivian and took Chifu’s mug to refill it.

‘Are you really going to chastise me for filling your coffers?’

‘When it comes to discipline of my nephew? Yes. He’s a self-proclaimed “pilgrim,” travelling ‘round the world and he’s got a tendency for getting into trouble and beating his way out of it. That’s why I wanted him to come here; to learn that there’s always someone stronger than him, because otherwise, at one point, if he doesn’t come to conclusion that not everything will go his way, he’s going to get himself into a fight he won’t win and any last-minute epiphanies aren’t going to be of any help.’

‘Saki, please. It’s ten in the bloody morning. Volley’s a child. Let him be and eventually he’ll learn responsibility on his own.’

‘I don’t want him to take advice from a woman who ignores most of her work only to go drinking. How about some water?’

‘I’ll start drinking water when marine life starts taking bathroom breaks, but thanks nonetheless.’

Feeling better, as she ate the meal prepared by Fox Den’s owner, Vilivian thought back to her dream. She remembered the book picturing the very same village that Volley painted on the mural in the city. It was hard to tell the accuracy of the vision. Ever since she started sleeping properly in the Crossroads she had a hard time differentiating between dreams and memories resurfacing from her long life-span.

Vilivian finished her meal and paid for it, still much to Saki's chagrin, but at least this time she didn't complain as she was busy arguing with Chifu about the intricacies of parenthood.

Vilivian realized that she lacked proper skills and knowledge about the subject at hand and made herself scarce.

With the keepsake sword tied behind her back as usual, she intended to go into plains, find a nice meadow and meditate until late afternoon. This time, however, nearly as soon as she crossed the door out of tavern Volley appeared in her immediate vision, wearing his signature fang-baring smile.

The oni boy saluted with his two fingers and other arm on his hip and clicked his heels.

'Tally-ho and pip-pip, Miss Viliv!' Volley greeted her. At least that's what she thought he did. Confused, made her best guess.

'Good morning?'

'Couldn't be finer, could it?' he looked up at the clear sky.

'I wouldn't know.'

'Right. The thing is, Miss Vilivian.' He took a deep breath. He then bowed his head. 'I'm really sorry!'

Vilivian blinked.

'Sorry?'

'Yeah, that's what I'm saying, Miss Viliv.' He tried to look into Vilivian's eyes, but turned away embarrassed. 'Thing is, I completely brushed off the trouble I caused you yesterday, y'know. I never really think about that kind of stuff because the consequences usually just catch up to me and me only, but t'was the first time something happened to someone else, and well, I can't help but feel guilty about it, y'know? I pretended that it didn't bother me, but I honestly just didn't want to admit my mistake and, well . . .' Volley kicked the ground. He looked up at her again and bowed his head. 'I am really sorry.'

Vilivian stood impressed. Both Bartender and the Trickster acted as if Volley was an irresponsible child, but he showed a great level of responsibility for his actions. The most mature humans she met had trouble as much as to admit defeat; something they claimed to be their pride and while she could understand that sentiment there's only so much one can do with only two limbs.

'Raise your head, Child. Sole fact you recognize your mistake speaks volumes.'

'So . . .' he said as he slowly raised his head. 'You're not holding a grudge?'

'No.'

Volley glared.

‘Oh, wow. Yeah, OK. That’s good.’ He then burst out laughing. ‘Oh, that’s good! Very good, Miss Viliv, I was *terrified*, you know?’

‘Were you?’

‘See, Auntie told me a little about you. You spent many years alone and that you weren’t used to the outside world and stuff, so I kind of assumed you’d be a stick in the mud since you also didn’t shake my hand back then . . .’

‘It’s not a custom I’m used to.’

‘Eh, that’s fine, let bygones be bygones, y’know? I’m not mad. But there is one thing I’d like to ask you.’

‘That being?’

‘So, I heard from Auntie that you fought *a lot of people*, right? Whilst protecting that treasure in your dungeon?’

Vilivian grew sceptical.

‘I have.’

‘Truth being, Miss Viliv, I need advice! The tournament’s going to have strong people and I need some kind of weapon. Something cool to beat people with, like your sword!’

‘As I said it’s not my—’

‘And you probably saw a lot of weapons considering your experience, so would you please come with me to the shop and help me pick one out? Please?’

‘Well . . .’

‘Please? Pretty please? Pretty please with a cherry on top?’

Vilivian wouldn’t answer a mere beggary so easily. Usually. But something in Volley’s pleas called out to her.

‘I don’t mind,’ she said finally. ‘But most of the weapons I know of were used on me rather than by me.’

‘Yesss!’ Volley exclaimed happily. ‘Thanks, Miss Viliv! Come, follow me, we have to go to the Business District.’

‘Wait, do you have means of procuring equipment or are you going to misuse your aunt’s wealth again?’

‘Yes and no? She gave me some allowance to spend. There’s enough for something to slice and dice the peeps with.’ He pulled out a small purse from his pocket. ‘Now, come on! I’ll show you some cool stuff on the way there!’

He grabbed her hand and started pulling her towards the district. She was certainly startled, but didn’t resist. Instead, an old feeling resurfaced from within.

That of a sisterly affection.

Vilivian couldn’t help but hold onto the sword. The Business District was bursting with people, much worse than in the streets the evening prior. She’d usually be out in the plains at this time, but as she stuck around with Volley she had no choice.

Still, she followed him and realized again just how much more endearing and good-natured the oni boy is.

‘You’ve eaten breakfast already, haven’t you? I know Auntie made you some, I ate the same thing. After we’re done shopping let’s go to that waffle place I was telling you about yesterday. They were SO worth forging Auntie’s signature and now that I can pay for it we can get some completely fairly and without hassle. Oh, and let’s go check out the mural, too. I’m actually curious about the dent you made, believe it or not. I just hope it won’t be too uncomfortable for you, you know? We can stay away if you’d like, no pressure, wouldn’t want to jinx the day, eh? Oh, I’ve been meaning to ask; do you fish? Because I’d like— Oh, excuse me.’ Volley bumped into an elderly man and spilled his groceries. He quickly picked up the bag and whatever fell out of it and handed it over. ‘Apologies, my good sir. Here. Be safe! Right. What was I talking about?’

‘Fishing.’

‘Right! Thanks. So, I’ve been by the riverside lately and I saw a fish. This big! And I thought to myself . . .’

It was a joy to listen to Volley talk so enthusiastically about every little thing. The energy this Child emanated almost made Vilivian want to start skipping in rhythm to his words. She never had such impulses, but perhaps it was a given. Here, she could be carefree and with Volley around she didn’t worry about her beastly instinct arising.

When was the last time she thought of her siblings? When she felt a sting in her blood that signified that her last sibling passed away? She certainly didn’t think of them during her lonely stay in the dungeon. For the most part she forgot that she even had siblings . . .

Her head suddenly started hurting. It was the same pain she felt when she awakened this morning after having that dream. She resolved herself to ask Volley about his home village later, as she suspected some manner of connection.

‘Here we are, Miss Viliv!’

Volley pointed at the sign above the stone workshop. Smoke emerged from a chimney at the top of the building and from the inside one could hear the sound of metal being struck. The door was wide open for anyone to enter.

She followed him inside and saw the blacksmith at work, hammering a piece of metal on the anvil; blue-haired and clad in black; the smith had his whole right arm covered in metal and his legs resembled a pair of blades. He was certainly young, though he appeared much older, when comparing his height to Volley's.

Smithy looked up with his one uncovered eye and let out an exasperated sigh at the sight of Volley.

'What do you want again, kid?' he asked.

'Kid?!' Volley repeated, indignant. 'We're just a year apart, Nephyl!'

'It's *Nephro*, if you must. Leave. I have work to do and I don't accept payment in forged IOUs for my goods.'

'How about I pull out that stick that's stuck up your ass? It's a win-win; I get something to bludgeon people with and you stop being an insufferable prat. And besides, I've got my own dosh this time.' He pulled out the small purse and shook it. Coins sounded from the inside.

Nephro's face expressed nothing but doubt. He looked at Vilivian.

'Should I call the guards?'

'As far as I know it's his to spend.' Said Vilivian. 'Good to meet you, Meister.'

'Likewise, Miss,' Blacksmith said, slightly taken aback, but he didn't let that expression linger. He turned to Volley. 'Fine. What do you want? That baseball bat from yesterday is up for grabs if you're still interested.'

'Now, now. Since I've brought an expert here,' he pointed at Vilivian with his smile. Nephro raised an eyebrow. 'I want to get an opinion. What do you think, Miss Viliv?'

She hesitated.

'The spear had always caused me a lot of trouble.' Claimed Vilivian the Expert.

'Spear it is! Blacksmith! Where to?'

Nephro pointed towards a neat row of spears and spear-like weapons. Volley approached it and picked one.

The result was comical to say the least. Volley was much too short to use that spear in the most efficient way.

'I'm not feeling it, boss.'

'You look like a monkey with bamboo.' Nephro said without missing a beat.

'Wanna go, blueberry-boy?!' Volley pointed the spear at the smug blacksmith.

'I think,' Vilivian interjected. 'That you should use something that's best for close combat. Like a mace.'

'I've got plenty of those.' Said Nephro and pointed at another pile. 'Take your pick.'

Volley put away the spear back to its place and reached for one of the maces.

He took a few swings with one hand. 'Now that feels good, I'll admit.'

'Great.' Nephro said. 'That'll be—'

'Oh, right. Miss Viliv! Since we're here, why don't you let Nephro check up on your sword?' Volley smiled. 'I'd like to test this thing up against you and I wouldn't want to do some otherwise mitigatable damage.'

'No.' Vilivian clutched the sword. 'That won't be necessary.'

'I have to agree with Volley, as a blacksmith.' Said Nephro. 'You're a contestant and the tournament's right around the corner. You wouldn't want it to falter at the most important moment.'

'I. Said. *No.*' she growled.

Silence befell the workshop. Volley and Nephro stared in shock at Vilivian's angry grimace.

Her scowl was finally interrupted by the loud crack of coal in the furnace. She let go of her blade and looked down, ashamed of her outburst.

'That sword doesn't belong to me,' she explained. 'It's a keepsake that my Friend entrusted to me. And until I can give it back to him I won't let anyone touch it.'

'I understand,' said Nephro apologetically.

'Wait, Miss Viliv. Don't you use any weapon at all then?'

'I used to. But I had no reliable way to maintain it so unarmed combat remained my only way of dealing with my adversaries.'

'Then why don't you get a weapon for yourself, too, Miss Viliv?' Volley smiled earnestly. 'I think a cool sword would be a great fit for you! Like a sabre, or a rapier, or . . .'

‘No. I’m far too experienced in unarmed combat to make a switch like that so suddenly. You shouldn’t look at a weapon as merely a tool for combat, but as an extension of your skill and abilities.’

Volley stared with his mouth open before he suddenly threw the mace back onto the pile.

‘That’s so *COOL!*’ he exclaimed. ‘You’re right, Miss Viliv. I don’t need no weapons! I’ve been fighting, kicking and punching and biting my whole life. There’s no reason to change it up now!’

‘I’m . . . glad?’

‘Come on, Miss Viliv. Let’s go to that waffle place.’

Volley practically ran out of the workshop, leaving both the Meister and Vilivian confused.

‘You know,’ said Nephro after a while. ‘I’m selling some knuckle dusters if you’d like. Good for punching. Some real proper brass and silver.’

‘No, thank you. I am allergic to brass.’

Vilivian caught up to Volley and then he did as he said they would.

Firstly, he led her to the waffle house he mentioned earlier. A neat, not too large parlour that served food through a window. They were delighted by the delicious taste of soft cake and whipped cream. At a certain point she confessed that she never had any dessert before in her life and that most of her meals consisted of raw meat.

‘Whaaaaaat?! That’s crazy, Miss Viliv! Listen, we gotta re-educate you, because food is one of the best parts of life! Let’s go, there’s this shed by the docks where some old guy is selling meat-filled buns to *kill for*, believe it!’

And so, they went towards the docks. They found the restaurant owned by a cute elderly couple. Each of them got a hefty serving of strangely named foods like pasztecik, gołąbki and barszcz.

After resting a while, Volley took a few meat buns to go and headed towards the riverbank.

There, Volley presented to her how to make a fishing rod.

‘You need a good base, so take for example this cool stick I found here. It has to be sturdy and long, but not too long so that it would break under the weight of the fish. Then, you attach a string. Make the knot nice and tight and we still have to attach this smaller string here to the end of the other string. Watch . . . And there. Now, the hook. Having a nice, specialized hook would be fine and dandy, but sometimes all life gives you are lemons so I gotta make do with this very small rock here. So long as the bait hangs on to it anything works. Now, see here . . . Done. Alright, give me one of those meat buns.’

He tied the meat bun to the makeshift hook.

'There's this fish in this river, see. A fat piece of work. I saw it when I first arrived here and have been hunting for it ever since, with no luck. Bastard's smart enough to not get caught by any ordinary means, but today will be different.'

'You're strangely determined for this.'

'Of course, I am! Nothing tastes better than a meal you've caught and gutted on your own!'

'I agree with that. Still, I saw how much you ate. Are you hungry, still?'

'Are you not?'

'I didn't say that.'

Volley laughed out loud as he handed the fishing rod to Vilivian.

'Alright, Miss Viliv, here's the plan.'

She panicked.

'You want me to hold this?'

'Duh? It takes two to catch this big of a game. Don't worry, all you have to do is to pull upwards when the big shadow appears underneath the line. I'll even shout when.' He took off his shirt and went a few meters away from the river. 'OK, Miss Viliv! Throw the bun into water.'

With a quiet splash the bun landed in the water and fully submerged itself. Few quiet seconds passed.

'Gently, Miss Viliv. We are hunters and that fish is the prey. We must exercise a great deal of patience if we want to— NOW, MISS VILIV, THERE'S THE FISH BASTARD!!'

Shadow appeared where the string was submerged and Vilivian immediately pulled upwards. The bun went flying into the air and following it gracefully was a very large catfish.

As Vilivian stood flabbergasted by the sheer majesty of such an animal, Volley took a running start and at the very edge of the bank jumped into the air.

With two legs he kicked the Fish Bastard out of the air, knocking it out in one hit and sending it to the land on the opposite side of the river while Volley himself plummeted down into the waters below.

'Child?!' Vilivian shouted in distress.

After a few seconds, Volley emerged from the water and a huge weight lifted off Vilivian's shoulders. She sighed as the boy laughed wholeheartedly.

'Wow, Miss Viliv! You will not believe . . . How strong . . . This current is . . .!' he laughed and swam to the other side where the catfish landed.

Vilivian smiled. She experienced a completely new feeling, seeing Volley raise the fish triumphantly signifying his success. She felt pride in someone else.

And all he did was catch some fish.

With the fish in tow they went towards the forest. On the way there they gathered some wood and rocks and made a fireplace surrounded with stones to roast the fish on.

'Bastard,' Volley cursed. 'My matches are completely wet.'

'Is that bad?'

'I've got no means to start a fire now, Miss Viliv. Guess I'll have to do this the old-fashioned way.' He reached for a few sticks and a rock.

'Allow me.'

Vilivian extended her arm and pointed her palm at the prepared firewood.

'*Enkindle.*' She chanted, her voice echoing. Veins on her arm flashed with blue light and the wood suddenly burst into flames.

Volley's eyes and mouth opened wide in amazement.

'THAT'S SO COOOOOL!! Was that magic?!'

'Yes. It's not my area of expertise, but I can command it reliably enough.'

They roasted the fish and ate it, all the while Volley continued to question Vilivian about her magical abilities. Queries, to most of which Vilivian couldn't find appropriate answers.

Once done with the fish they rested a while and decided to return to the town.

They went to the last point of their schedule; the mural where Volley painted his artwork on and where Vilivian got into a fight.

There were more people than yesterday, but no one seemed to pay any attention to the village showcased on the wall. The indentation remained and Volley investigated it with fascination.

'Blimey, Miss Viliv, that's a big hole. I've got to say that seeing my work like this? Pretty damn impactful. Damn, I'm good, aren't I, Miss Viliv? Miss Viliv?'

Vilivian stared intensely at the work. The painting was exactly the same as in her dream, but it didn't cause any reflections or remembrance to her. She touched it, to the same lack of effect.

'I've seen a picture such as this before. In a book I read . . . a really long time ago.'

'I remember. Not that surprising.' Volley leaned on the mural. 'There's been plenty of people going in and out of the village. Adventurers, scholars, merchants. Someone's been bound to make a painting of it.'

Vilivian nodded.

'What's it like?' she asked.

'The village? It's great. Lovely, really. Kind of suffocating, though.'

'I see . . .'

'Ah, but I don't mean it in a bad way! It's just . . .' Volley scratched his head. 'It wasn't for me, you know? I love my home, really. Ma' and Pa's there, and all the guys and gals, and I loved the plains out there as well as fishing in the river, but . . . Everything was the same. Same people, same fish, same food and also school . . .' he grimaced. 'The world is just way too beautiful to not enjoy it, you know?'

She didn't answer.

'It has been like that for you too, right, Miss Viliv?'

She turned to him.

'I mean, I know you spent a long time in that dungeon . . . Like, a *really* long time, like holy moly, I wouldn't be able to sit a day in the same place . . . Isn't this . . .' he pointed at the sea that could be seen from the gate next to the mural. 'So much worth leaving that place behind?'

Vilivian stood next to him and looked out onto the sea as well.

'When I was younger,' she started. 'I would often fantasize about leaving the confinement of my sanctuary. Things like sea, rivers, forests, towns and cities were nothing but my delusions in the few times I managed to dream. And now that I am free to explore more of the wide world, that desire is certainly much stronger.' She clutched the keepsake. 'But I have a promise to keep. And this tournament . . . That *wish*. It's the only means through which I can achieve that.'

There was a pause of silence, as they wistfully admired the view.

'Well, then,' Volley said finally. 'How about you come travelling with me?'

She looked at him, perplexed.

‘After you’re done with your promise, of course.’ He smiled. ‘I mean, it’s not like you’ll cease to live after you’re done with it, right? The worst part about travelling alone is that there’s nobody to share your experiences and adventures with you. So, if you’re willing, I’d be one to show you what the world has to offer! What do you say?’

Vilivian smiled, but before she could answer, she was struck with a splitting headache. Her ears started ringing and the pain was so intense that her vision faltered for a moment.

‘Miss Viliv?’ Volley panicked.

‘My head hurts . . .’ she massaged her temple.

‘Auntie Saki probably has some medicine at her place, Miss Viliv! Come, let’s go!’

Volley wasted no time pulling her behind him, and she allowed herself to be escorted as the pain didn’t seem to cease anytime soon.

At Fox Den, Saki immediately gave Vilivian some sour-tasting medicine and told her to sleep on it.

Vilivian did as recommended and bid farewell to Volley before going to her room. There, she fell into the bed immediately, taken by sudden exhaustion.

She struggled to fall asleep. The pain wasn’t going away and she felt as if the world was spinning around her.

Eventually, she’d be drawn into spiralling darkness; not into a dream or a nightmare, but rather a conscious glimpse into her past.

In the lower levels of the Graal Sanctuary she walked through the empty halls lit by golden candelabras. At the crossroads, she turned right and opened a heavy wooden door.

Inside the room, even rows of bookcases surrounded a long stone table in the middle. There, a lone figure studied a tome by the light of a candle.

‘Can you afford to read those volumes considering your current predicament?’

She asked as she sat down on the opposite side of the table. He raised his head. His hair, curly and short, was of fiery-red colour. The candlelight reflected in his emerald eyes.

‘On the contrary, Sister, I find my studies to be reinforcing my strength required for the challenge ahead.’

‘What strength could you possibly garner from those?’

‘That of knowledge.’

‘And what wisdom have you acquired so far?’

‘That of magic.

‘What ludicrous notion. We are half-human, Brother. We are resistant to magic.’

‘*Resistant* doesn’t mean *immune*, Sister. I may not be able to influence your mind, but I may be able to shatter the earth underneath your feet.’

‘It won’t stop me.’

‘It will threaten your footing. Perhaps just enough for my spear to find your heart.’

He grinned and she answered with a smile on her own.

‘There may be truth to your preaching, Brother. Fine then, enlighten me. What arcane advantage have you acquired from this volume?’

‘This one? None to speak of.’

‘You jest?’

‘No. This book is nothing but a recollection of the travels of a certain human. It provides no advantage that could be utilized in combat.

‘Why study it then?’

‘For inspiration, Sister. Unlike you, I have something to look forward to if I leave this place. Much like arcane grimoires and the combat bouts we perform are nourishments for mind and body respectively, inspiration nourishes the soul. I must have a goal to strive for, otherwise, what am I fighting for?’

He turned the book around and pushed it towards her.

‘It describes the world. The locations, geography, the all kinds of people and even food, that is more than just a roasted piece of flesh of whatever meat our sisters managed to hunt. Read it, Sister. Stars only know, you might use some inspiration and perhaps, I’d be one to show you what the World has to offer, someday?’

She took the book in hand. The painted sketch showcased a tall waterfall at midday. She turned the pages and admired the pictures. Manned garrison at noon. A forest during a storm. A village at night.

‘These places may lie in your future, Brother. But to me they are but fantastical delusions. My place is here in the Graal. You, too, Brother, shouldn’t take the privilege of training with me and my sisters for granted.’

'Alas, you're the only one who's willing to spar with me. Only one, in fact, who shows me any sign of affection.'

'You're my Brother.'

'Our sisters don't consider me such.'

'They hide their fear of your strength and potential through mockery, but I know what lies within you. You can overcome the challenge, and become our equal.'

'Even though I'm a male?'

'A notion overruled by your bloodline. They don't realize that, but I do. You're of Lilith's brood just like we are.'

'Thank you, Sister.' He smiled. 'Mother was right when she said that out of all her daughters there's the most human in you.'

'That fragment of my person won't make me go easy on you.'

'I wouldn't slight you by insinuating that. It'd be an honour to face you at your full strength, Vilivian.'

'Be careful what you wish for, Cassius. You won't be able to achieve your dreams if you fall to me.'

His laughter echoed in the chamber, startling her.

'Then, all I have to do is make sure I don't lose, right?'

She wasn't aware when she woke up from the backdrop of her mind. At some point she realized that she was lying in the darkness of her room.

Once her eyes adjusted she noticed the dim light of the moon and stars shining through drapes, barely illuminating her room.

Her headache was gone, and though she felt sluggish she was strangely energized. After ensuring the safety of her keepsake, she left.

Loud singing, violent cackling and overall debauchery in Fox Den remained a constant of Crossroads' nightlife. The priest was drinking with the devil, a teapot dealt in the cards for a horseman, a kitsune and a Polish migrant. The masked vagabonds were the quietest, sitting in the corner slowly sipping their drinks.

Vilivian approached the bar where Saki was tirelessly working the tap.

‘How’s your head?’

‘The pain is gone, Bartender. Thank you.’ She noticed the empty bar stool. ‘Is the Trickster away for tonight?’

‘She’s hard at work actually. Or, as hard as she can work, I suppose. Tournament brackets are out tomorrow, so she’s making sure nothing’s confusing.’

‘Turns out the Trickster is not a slouch she makes herself out to be, then?’

‘Just because you see her drunk in the ditch all the time doesn’t mean that’s her only quality.’

‘It’s certainly her least endearing one.’

‘She would take that as a compliment.’

‘She would.’ Vilivian sighed.

‘Aren’t you famished?’ Saki asked. ‘I can cook you something up if you’d like.’

‘No.’ Vilivian turned towards the exit. ‘I’m going to take a walk.’

Vilivian was caressed by the night time breeze upon exiting the tavern and let her legs naturally gravitate towards the plains.

She couldn’t stop thinking about her . . . vision? It was certainly not a nightmare, as it was too real to be a simple dream. Perhaps her own mind, influenced by her magic, began to uncover memories buried deep inside her heart. The parallels regarding her past were apparent and she feared the next time she’d fall asleep. She was afraid she’d be reminded of the savagery she had committed in the flashes of beastly fury. What she did as a Matriarch was nothing but a tradition, but as a human she committed grave atrocities.

“The most human” of her sisters; Vilivian. She used to take it as an insult, then became indifferent and now she considered herself to be cursed with it. Her human nature is what made all of those feelings and memories resurface after all this time and effort to bury them.

When she left the artificial lights of Crossroads and walked out the gate leading towards the river she could finally see the moon and the stars above this land.

She looked up, unconvinced. The beauty was there, but she couldn’t shake off the feeling that it was merely an illusion created by the Trickster considering her spatial abilities.

Vilivian herself wondered just how much of “human” was she showing. She nearly lost control simply by being falsely accused. She’s agitated any time someone even implies touching the keepsake. She wasn’t cut out for being a human, but she didn’t want to return to the beast either.

She reached the bridge crossing the river when she noticed a character sitting at the riverbank. Volley was sitting with his legs crossed and his tail tied around his waist. He was fishing in the river with a bucket on his side. The source of her woes happily humming in the rhythm of cricketing coming from nearby grass fields.

She approached the Child. He turned to her, very happy to see her.

‘Miss Viliv! Is your headache gone?’

‘Yes, completely.’

‘That’s great to hear! Auntie’s a pro alchemist with grand deal of medical skill so it was satisfaction guaranteed. Would you like to take a seat?’

He moved the empty bucket out of the way and Vilivian sat down.

‘Not biting, I take it?’

‘Oh, they do bite, Miss Viliv, the bucket was for all the meat buns I bought for myself. I’m letting the fish go as I catch them.’

‘What? Why?’

‘Live and let live, Miss Viliv! Besides, we’ve eaten that Fish Bastard earlier, and the smaller ones are barely nourishing. It’s good fun!’

‘Is it now? I’m rather surprised you can still have so much energy at this hour.’

‘I’m giddy with anticipation, Miss Viliv!’ he said excitedly. ‘The brackets are out tomorrow and I just can’t wait to see who’s going to be my opponent! There’s so many contestants and they’re all kinds of fun people! There’s a talking rabbit! And a *witch*! Miss Viliv, I haven’t been this excited in a long time! I see that smirk, Miss Viliv, it’s true! So many strange and strong contestants all in one place just to . . . er . . . I’m sorry.’ He said suddenly.

Vilivian frowned, concerned.

‘What for?’

‘Well,’ he hesitated. ‘You’ve had this headache earlier, right? And I thought that may be because of me. I’ve got quite the mouth, I know, people tell me but sometimes I simply can’t stop talking and so I wouldn’t want to upset and bore you at a time like this and—’

‘Child,’ she interrupted. ‘I am well enough acquainted with you to know that I cannot ever be inconvenienced or bored by conversing with you, even should I wish it.’

He was slightly shocked at her statement, but smiled and turned away, flustered.

‘Thank you, Miss Viliv.’ He then pouted. ‘Though I’d like it if you would cease to call me a child. I have a name, you know?’

‘My people don’t use names lest it’s for our friends or family.’

He caught a fish and then released it.

‘Am I not your friend?’

‘Were I too deem you as such, a certain someone would be very upset.’

Especially since she’d probably learn of it *somehow*.

‘What about your friend?’ he asked. ‘The one who’s sword you’re guarding? Did you call him by his name?’

‘Sometimes. It was hard to get used to it.’

He caught another fish and then released it.

‘What was he like?’

Vilivian stared into the water, quietly watching the tackle bob at the surface of water. Volley got flustered again.

‘Sorry, was I out of line . . .?’

‘No. I was never asked that question, that’s all.’ She thought a little more. ‘He was one of a kind. When challengers approached me in my sanctuary there was always one trait they shared in common. Their injuries. There always was a bloodied bandage hanging off their body, or a broken rib or missing eye or other limb. But the only blood spilled that he brought was that of the monsters he killed without much effort. That’s how I knew, that he’d be the most powerful adversary I’d face.’ She smiled faintly. ‘While the others brought magic, wrath, armies and trickery, all he brought was his sword and conviction – that he wouldn’t yield until he claimed the treasure.’

He caught yet another fish and then released it.

‘So that’s when you decided to become friends, right? Because of his unique resolve?’

‘We fought. I was defeated.’ She touched the scarf tied around her left arm. ‘He removed my shoulder and I would’ve succumbed to my injury had he not removed some of his blood and fed it to me.’

‘Ew.’

‘I get that a lot.’

‘How does that work . . .?’

‘My species feeds on blood. In our true forms we can use it to regenerate parts of our bodies.’

‘Why, that’s convenient— Wait, *true forms*? Miss Viliv, you have a second *form*?!’

‘Yes?’

‘THAT’S SO COOOOL!’ he shouted.

‘. . . Is it?’

‘Hell yes! What’s it like? Do you have wings? A tail? Do you get stronger?’

‘I do have a tail, yes. And I suppose I gain prowess in my abilities.’

‘Can you show me?’

‘I’d rather not.’

‘Right, sorry!’ Volley turned back to fishing. He shook his head happily, baffled. ‘So cool. So, hey, he claimed your treasure, right? What was it?!’

‘It was—’

‘Wait!! Don’t tell me, let me guess . . . A large diamond!’

‘How is that a treasure?’

‘Seriously? To three! Let me to three guesses . . . mmm . . . An imperial regalia! Or a magical sceptre!’

‘Neither. It’s a cup and a fountain. Together capable of granting eternal youth.’

Volley frowned in disappointment. Again, he turned towards the fishes.

‘That’s so boring.’

Vilivian giggled.

‘Isn’t it?’ she said remembering her conversation with the Trickster. When she looked at Volley again, he had his mouth open and eyes fixated on her in amazement. ‘Is something wrong?’ she asked.

‘Oh. Sorry. I didn’t hear you laugh before, that’s all . . .’

‘Well,’ she smiled wryly. ‘I am not the type and I never had a reason to. Even the moments I spent with my Friend have become soured when he left me his sword.’

‘Did he . . . die?’

‘He made such an implication. He made no promises when prompted about his return, but I in my naïve stubbornness promised him that one day I’d return it to him. And I spent the next several centuries hoping that he would be the one to come to me. How pitiful I was.’

‘I think you were exemplary, Miss Viliv.’ She raised her eyebrow. ‘The whole time you spent waiting you never let go of that hope. There was a wish - a goal that you want to achieve, and despite knowing how far-fetched it was you *never* gave up. And now, against all the odds you’ve got that chance to make your wish come true. Why, you even stayed true to your vow and guarded that treasure even though you were probably tempted the whole time to just up and leave, Miss Viliv, I know I would! That kind of persistence takes guts, Miss Viliv! And I say you’ve got a whole lot of ‘em!’

‘Do I?’ she smiled.

He caught a fish. He released it.

‘Since arriving here I’ve been thinking that if I fail I’ll go back to that sanctuary to continue protecting it.’ Volley looked at her with concern. ‘Though this time not to abide by a thousand years old vow, but to protect the artefact of my own accord, from those undeserving.’

‘Don’t even think like that, Miss Viliv!’ Volley scolded her. ‘You need to approach a fight with confidence! Like I do! Though, usually I get my ass handed over to me in the first few seconds . . . but I bounce back. Sometimes literally!’

He laughed and Vilivian couldn’t help but smile at the boy’s positive attitude.

‘And besides,’ he continued. ‘Even if you fail and go back to that dungeon I’ll make sure to visit you. Hell, I’ll even challenge you for that treasure of yours.’

‘If you lose, you will die.’ She said out of habit and before she could stop herself.

Unbothered, Volley smiled as he wrestled with his fishing rod.

‘Then, all I have to do is make sure I don’t lose, right?’

She stared, at loss for words. She *wanted* to say something, but all she managed to do was to sadly look down to the waters below.

‘. . . Right.’

One man once said to Vilivian, that when gods decide whom to grant their favour they do so by throwing a dice. She never paid much heed to that claim nor did she care much for any deities that would look down upon her, even if they exist, because even the almighty must succumb to the whims of fate.

But Fate wasn't whimsical nor did it play dice. It played chess. And for her stay in Crossroads, Vilivian thought she was going to stand some chance going against the grain trying to attain the unachievable in a reality completely different from her own. Even though her memories have been pried open by the presence of an extremely familiar oni child, she thought it as nothing but a slight setback.

It was as she stared at the promotional posters for the tournament and saw her match-up in the first round to be against Volley was when she found out that Fate was playing using two queens all along. Fate won.

The Child was bursting with excitement once the news reached him and though Vilivian smiled along with his jubilation she was dreading the fighting day.

Though his appearance was very lacking, his behaviour and attitude reminded her so much of her late brother that she was certain if she could bring herself to hurting him.

Thus, she prepared the best she could. She avoided sleep as in to not allow any more of sour memories to come to light and instead meditated. Tried to see Volley not as her brother, but as an adversary that she'd revel in every opportunity to defeat.

And up until the very last moment, she thought herself to be prepared.

'Welcome back, Crossroads!'

X's voice exploded in the colosseum amongst the cheers of a few thousand spectators.

Large screens both inside and outside the arena showed the pink-haired host and announcer of the tournament floating on her platform hyping up the viewers to the sound of extremely mediocre rock music.

On the balcony in-between the stands, on a chair as grand as the God Eater's appearance sat the deity herself, overlooking the tournament with a glass of wine in her right hand.

Next to her, for some reason and on a slightly smaller chair, sat Saki.

'I understand it's your nephew fighting and that's why I allowed you to sit here. But did you have to come in dressed like *this*?'

Saki was wearing a cap and a white shirt, both depicting Volley's face.

'I brought you my best wine. Stop complaining.'

'I know you're biased, but couldn't you spare some love for our lovely Matriarch? I thought you were so much closer than that. You put so much effort in that braid, after all'

Saki turned to her and expressionlessly raised a small flag that had Vilivian's face on it.

'Who even sells these?'

X's voice resounded once more after the music ended.

'This is your best girl Miss X coming at you from the Cross Colosseum! With the first semi-final decided and we're now about to see who will take the first spot in the second round of the other side of the bracket! Ladies, gentlemen and variations thereupon! Please, welcome: Volley, the Oni Traveller!'

Wearing a white shirt and cargo pants Volley exited onto the arena amidst the loud ovations. Screens showed as he cheerfully waved back, revelling in the energy of the stadium, most likely the most excited of all the contestants.

When he arrived in the middle the screens focused on X once again.

'His opponent is nothing to scoff at, however. Give the warmest welcomes to our second contender! Vilivian of Lilith!'

Vilivian entered the arena. Her tag – the scarf around her left arm – was gently fondled by the wind as she made her way to the middle to join Volley. She held her keepsake in her right arm.

They stood in the middle, several feet apart. Vilivian stared as Volley did his last-minute stretches. Carefree. Eager. She could sense in his blood that the call to start the fight will be the call for him to unleash all of his strength and energy against her.

'You know what's boring?' X put an arm on her hip. 'An empty stage. So, why don't we put some green up on this canvas!'

She raised her finger up to the sky and, as if with a snap of a finger, the stage began being covered in wild forestry.

Trees and grass started emerging and cracking from the tiled stage. Lush bushes and trees grew thicker and closer towards the outer ends of the arena while area close to the centre remained mostly grass field and only small circle around Volley and Vilivian remained tiled.

While Volley and rest of the arena watched the spectacle in amazement, in her mind everything quieted down. She tried to diverge her focus to the spatial magic, but her mind was already lost and all she could see were the parallels of her regrets.

She remembered how over a thousand years ago, just like Volley now, against her stood her own brother. With the same carefree attitude and boundless energy and skill. She remembered him and what happened afterwards. The flash of red, the monstrous savagery, blood on her hands and the taste of flesh.

She winced and looked at her keepsake. For the first time in her life she prayed. She prayed to her Friend to help her find her resolve and overcome this challenge.

For she couldn't do it by herself.

With his boots tied up and the tag jingling in rhythm to his movements Volley was more than ever prepared to face his first opponent. Past twenty-four hours all he could think of was this fight and he was aching with anticipation. His legs and arms were ready to swing by themselves. He bumped his fist.

'What are you going to do about this sword, Miss Viliv?' he asked, barely containing his happiness.

Silently, Vilivian took the sword in both arms and firmly planted it into the stage next to her.

'Listen, Child,' she said in her usual stern but this time kind of sad voice. 'Fight as if you were to fight for your life. Anything less than that will be nothing short of disrespectful.'

Volley grinned ear to ear showing off his fangs. His tail flailed wildly with excitement.

'You've got it, Miss Viliv.' He bumped his fists.

'Are the fighters ready?!' X's asked as the screens showed the fighters from her perspective.

Vilivian brushed off some of her fire-red hair to the side and clenched her fists.

Volley leaned into a fighting stance and bared his fangs.

'Alright, Miss Viliv!' he shouted. 'Let's make this a *good one!*'

'BEGIN!'

The ground shattered underneath Volley's step due to his unshackled strength. He jumped legs first into a dropkick and flew towards Vilivian.

Just barely, the Matriarch managed to block by crossing her arms but was staggered backwards, barely maintaining balance as she stepped onto the grass whereas Volley landed beautifully and started running at Vilivian full throttle.

She readjusted herself in time and with her right arm tried to strike an upcoming oni. He knee-slid underneath her swing and tied his leg around her leg and tripped her.

Yelling, she fell face first into grass, spawning laughter from the audience.

'Come on, Miss Viliv! Show me what you can do!'

Whilst getting up she turned around swiftly. Her right arm was glowing blue.

'Sink.' she chanted and swung her open palm at his feet. Volley's eyes opened wide as he noticed the ground underneath him to wobble and drop. He looked up and saw Vilivian approaching with malicious intent.

He launched his right fist that was caught easily by her. Her grip was painful and Volley winced in pain. Volley tried to grab her side and throw her, but she quickly proceeded to strike the side of his neck with the edge of her other hand.

He felt a powerful torrent of pain course through his body. He still managed to hold on to her, but he momentarily lost all strength in his grip.

She struck again. This time he couldn't hold out and all his limbs went soft. She grabbed him by his arms properly and started spinning him.

The audience cheered louder with each full spin she performed and concluded at the crescendo when she let go of Volley and threw him head first into a tree.

He regained some air control during his one-second long flight and managed to turn his back towards it. He crashed into a mighty oak with it, shaking the tree and causing some branches and leaves to fall.

His Oni endurance came in clutch as he recovered from that toss. As he got up, he noticed Vilivian raising forward her glowing arm.

'Break.' She chanted and pulled her clenched fist to herself. There was a short sound, as if something simmering, behind him.

He ducked, and the small piece of bark that was precisely behind his head exploded into sharp pieces. He covered himself when he noticed that Vilivian approaching was much closer than he first anticipated.

She reached to grab him and he barely ducked under her arm and rolled behind her. He grabbed her braid and Vilivian tried to reach him with her back turned but he stood at the hair's full length. He pulled and kicked her back, smashing her onto the tree.

She bounced off. Her nose started bleeding with purple blood, but she remained firm on her feet as she tried to regain her composure.

Volley, meanwhile, took a running start and tried to dropkick her yet again. She moved out of the way, but Volley bounced upwards and turned in the air.

As he was falling, he extended his leg as much as he could and Vilivian watched in shock as she was clobbered in the face with his boot.

Audience roared in excitement as both fighters fell to the ground. Volley gathered himself much faster and immediately reached for a nearby branch that fell off the tree.

He took a heavy swing at Vilivian's head who was just standing up.

The branch broke. The upper half simply fell off while Vilivian barely flinched.

Volley looked at the broken branch. He then looked at Vilivian's unamused expression.

'Bollocks.'

'Quite.'

Audience gasped as he was sent flying across the field by Vilivian's powerful punch to his chest. He rolled on the ground and when he stopped he lied for a few seconds before he got on all fours. He coughed violently and when he stood up he held onto his chest. Vilivian wiped the blood off her face and she, too, was panting her lungs out. Both fighters decided to catch a breather.

'Finally, my dear viewers!' X's voice resounded throughout the stadium. 'We get to catch a small respite from the non-stop action ever since the start! Both fighters took on some heavy hits but neither are willing to waver just yet!'

Volley's thoughts raced through the various plans on how to improve his defences. Though they went about even when it came to their respective assaults, Volley had an inkling that Vilivian wasn't nearly as spent as he was. There's only so far, an oni stamina can take you when you take on an opponent of that level.

He realized, from her ground-shaking spell as well as her fire spell she used couple days earlier, that she has, to some extent, to aim where she casts magic. She seemed reliant on it, likely because Volley made himself too evasive to her direct strikes.

There was also something else bothering him in the way she battled. He felt as if she wasn't fighting to the best of her abilities.

He wanted to hit himself for thinking that. Miss Vilivian had her pride and for her to hold back would be hypocritical, but . . .

Volley cracked his knuckles.

'Alright, Miss Viliv! *Here I come!*'

He started running and he did *not* intend to stop at any moment. He carefully watched Vilivian's mouth and arms. As he saw her clench her fist at the ground he jumped immediately.

'*Shatter!*' she chanted, and the ground erupted upwards, but wasn't even close to Volley.

She instead raised her arm and chanted again. '*Rise!*'

From the ground between them emerged a thin earthly wall, but Volley did not care. He smashed his whole body through it much to Vilivian's surprise and audience's enjoyment.

'Ward!' Vilivian chanted once more as stepped back since Volley was right in their face.

A blue and very thin translucent wall appeared between them, but the oni was already in full swing.

The barrier was much tougher than the earth wall, but Volley shattered right through it; the barrier disappeared into sparkling dust. His fist maintained its velocity and struck her right in the face.

As she was sent flying, again, the audience roared once more, but Volley felt no satisfaction from that strike.

Vilivian gathered herself just as quickly as before, and while the exhaustion started showing, it didn't seem like the fight would end anytime soon.

'You know what, Miss Viliv?' Volley grimaced. *'You aren't that strong, at all.'*

She looked at him, surprised.

'I mean, logically speaking, you can't be, right? Unless you're holding back, but I don't believe that to be the case, Miss Vilivian. That would make you a hypocrite, wouldn't it?'

She scowled.

'Don't lecture me, Child.' Her right arm shined as she waved it.

He just barely escaped from the exploding ground. He got taken by surprise by her chantless magic. But that wasn't enough.

He evaded her next two spells and delivered a punch to her stomach and as she bent forward he elbowed the side of her head.

Vilivian was once more lying on the ground, and once more, stood up as if nothing had occurred to her. It was so frustrating to see her like this.

'How about you stop treating me like a child, eh, Miss Viliv?'

'Fine.' She said coldly.

Vilivian crossed her arms in front of her. All veins on her body shined with blue light. Arms, neck and the light even pierced through the clothes.

She then spread out her arms to the sides unleashing a powerful shockwave.

'Destroy.' She commanded.

Earth trembled underneath them, and after a moment cracks started appearing in the ground around where Vilivian was, expanding further around her.

Volley realized that there was nowhere to dodge and so he started running away, but the tremors caught up. With a yell he started falling down.

A large part of the stadium collapsed underground. Trees and bushes were pulled into the ravine, breaking and crashing into pieces. The foundation of the stage itself crumbled to dust and collapsed into the deep.

X was floating around on her platform transmitting everything that had occurred to the arena. From above it was as if someone cut the circle in half and furthermore, both fighters disappeared from view.

Volley was half-covered in dirt when he came to. He opened his eyes to the aftermath of what could only be described as a cataclysm. At the bottom of the large ravine, he stood on a rubble that was probably lying on top of another rubble. He looked up. It was about fifty feet to the topside. He could also make out the keepsake Vilivian stuck into the stage. The piece of ground surrounding the sword was hanging on a prayer. It seemed as if it were to collapse at any second, but somehow remained unmoving.

Volley decided to walk forward along the concrete wall, limping slightly. There was dirt everywhere. In his shoes, in his shirt, in his pockets . . .

The concrete rubble from the foundation the stage was built upon along with collapsed trees and bushes made this giant hole into a labyrinth.

He smiled proudly. Miss Vilivian could really make a mess if she really wanted to. He wondered, however, where is she now? Is she hiding? How did that magic affect her?

He felt a sudden pinch in his leg. He looked down to see that he cut his leg on a sharp tree branch.

‘Man . . .’ he sighed, exasperated. The wound wasn’t big, but it was going to be a pain later if it gets infected.

There was a lot of random stuff lying around. He wouldn’t be surprised if Vilivian were looking to ambush him.

And immediately as he thought that, a pair of arms broke through the concrete wall behind him and pulled him against the wall by his neck.

He struggled with her arms and realized that she was going for the bell hanging on his neck. The tag.

Quick, Volley! He thought to himself. *Use your head!*

And he did.

He rammed the concrete wall with the back of his head. He had to do this twice before the wall collapsed and behind it Vilivian yelled out as the rubble struck her.

He would turn to strike her whilst he had the advantage of surprise but . . .

Volley couldn't help but look at her in disappointment.

Exhausted and spent, Vilivian stood weakly. Gone vestigial, once a stoic woman did not seem so threatening to him anymore.

'You don't intend to fight me seriously, are you?' Volley asked disappointed.

She didn't answer.

'Are you quiet because you know you'll lie?'

No answer, still.

'So, I figured. You won't fight me seriously, and won't tell me why . . .'

 He looked down.

And then smirked

'Fine.' He said. 'If you won't get serious, I will make you get serious.'

He glanced back and upwards at the keepsake still stuck in the ground. Vilivian eyes followed.

'*Don't* try it.' She said coldly with a scowl. She took a step forward.

But Volley already had a mischievous grin painted across his face.

'Oh, yeah? Check this out.' He reached into his pocket and took out some of the dirt and threw it into Vilivian's face. The woman coughed and spit as it got into her mouth and eyes while Volley sprinted towards the wall.

Out of nowhere, X floated in on a platform and started commentating on the climb

'Looks like contestant Volley decided to take on this Olympic climb! Will he manage to reach the figurative gold in the shape of the sword?! Or is Vilivian going to reach him first?!'

It was at least fifty feet tall. Steep and littered with obstacles like large trunks or pipes and other rubble. Volley could see the path even before he started climbing.

It did require a little focus. The trees were wobbling, ready to fall at any time, but he reached almost the half-way point confidently and without much issue. He looked down to see where Vilivian was and she, too, had already started climbing. Despite her exhausted appearance, she was swiftly albeit carefully climbing several feet behind him.

He didn't really care for the keepsake itself. But if it would make Miss Vilivian take this fight seriously then he wasn't going to pass up the opportunity.

He was but fifteen feet away from the top. He made a risky jump from a large tree branch onto a fallen tree. The tree moved and fell down. He barely jumped to a next platform before the tree pummeled down and almost hit Vilivian. She clung to the wall and the falling debris landed below her creating a make-shift bridge between two concrete platforms.

'Heads up, Miss Viliv!' Volley shouted cockishly. 'The sword's almost within my reach!' He jumped to another platform and when he looked below he noticed Vilivian stretching her arm out. He braced himself. There was no time to dodge.

'*Shatter!*' Vilivian commanded, but nothing expected happened.

Unbeknownst to most of Crossroads, magic that Vilivian uses, while very flexible it's also very petty. It's not merely a tool, but a living entity. It reacts according to emotions, needs to be mastered by its user and can get just as well get exhausted. The spell Vilivian used to destroy the arena took as much toll on her body as it did on the magic within her. It required rest and forcing it to work while in that state was akin to slavery. And Magic was very harsh about that. It refused to obey Vilivian and punished her accordingly.

Vilivian screamed in pain as the veins on her right arm snapped one after another, purple blood gushing out. She lost balance and started falling until she stopped on the tree that Volley knocked out earlier, having her stomach impaled on a broken bough.

Under her weight the tree fell off further down and when it struck the ground with a loud thud, Vilivian rolled off to the side. She lied on her back, motionless as she slowly bled out.

'*Miss Vilivian!*' Volley shouted in terror as the audience gasped.

He started climbing down, his heart hammering and a sense of guilt setting in. At half-point he jumped without any care for his well-being. The landing numbed his legs for a second, but he ran up to Vilivian immediately.

'Miss Viliv?' he asked weakly.

He quickly studied her body. Her eyes were closed, her right arm was covered in purple blood. The wound on the side of her stomach was the size of a tennis ball. But despite that, he could tell that she was merely pretending to be unconscious.

'Looks like we *have a winner!*'

Volley looked up to see Miss X floating down the hole.

'What? No, stop!'

The audience cheered loudly. Their laughter further sunk Volley's heart. He was utterly confused by their reaction. He couldn't understand why they cheer when a person is in such a condition. He, who had never taken a life and who treated fighting like sport, did not understand that greatest audiences are brought out by public executions.

'Contestant Vilivian has fallen victim to her own overconfidence and was knocked out by the environment!'

'She's still conscious!' he said, but his voice was muffled. He was no match to the audience in that regard.

Miss X flew out the hole and announced to the audience:

'And thus, the winner of the third fight is the Contestant Vo—'

'I TOLD YOU TO STOP!!!'

Volley's roar silenced the stadium. He reminded everyone that he was an oni.

Miss X looked askingly at Chifu up on the balcony. The God Eater nodded.

'Miss Vilivian.' Said Volley. 'I know you're awake.'

She opened her eyes, likely out of respect for Volley's instinct. She stared into the sky over the arena. Volley thought about the words he should speak to her, but before he could settle on something Vilivian spoke up.

'... Why won't you just take the scarf?'

Her voice was quiet and spent. Volley looked at her tag – the white scarf and thought a while.

'I don't want to win by accident, Miss Viliv! Not like ... *this*. Why did you hold back?'

There was a pause that for Volley felt like an eternity. Vilivian took a long breath and spoke truthfully.

'... I had a brother once. But the Fate willed us both born into a brood of a Matriarch. I was the eldest and strongest. One to become the Sentinel of Graal and guard our home. And my brothers ... A nourishment. Means for the daughters to increase in strength as flesh empowers flesh ...' she paused and took another breath. 'My brother was given a choice by our broodmother – to fight for his freedom against the strongest. I ...' she hesitated. She was holding back tears. 'I saw a spear coming towards my heart and in fear I allowed my monstrous instincts to take over. I shattered the spear and his windpipe. I felt him die in my blood as I consumed his. Every bite was like silver, stabbing at my heart. Painful and burning guilt, that I hid away deep in my soul and you ... You are a walking irony that unearthed it. Fate's constant reminder of my fragile humanity and the nature of a beast. You look nothing alike. You're shorter. You're an oni. Your hair's black while his was flames and his eyes resembled mine, not yours ... Then why ... Why is your attitude ... Your

behaviour. Your words and this boundless positivity no matter the situation . . . Why do you remind me of him so much? I don't want to relive those regrets. I don't want to lose control . . . I don't want to . . . kill . . . Cassius . . . again.'

Tears were falling down her cheeks onto the concrete. Volley watched as the woman he thought impervious cried for her brother. He never would've expected himself to be the cause of her worries. He wasn't surprised at all at her reluctance. He was disgusted at the audience's reaction earlier, and now comparing himself to her he saw in just how different the world Miss Vilivian lived in.

But they were sharing this one and whatever Vilivian's thoughts on their relationship were, Volley considered her a friend. And he refused to leave her in that state.

'Miss Vilivian, I don't think you're not giving yourself enough credit. There's no reason for me to believe you'd ever lose control.'

'I almost killed the man in the docks, that one day. I almost spilled the blood of innocent people. I am a *monster*, proven by my actions and the people who saw me.'

'Miss Viliv, you spent a thousand years in a cave! Everyone would be as cautious as you were! And whoever called you a monster he better put a sock in it before he says something he *really* shouldn't. You fought me, Miss Viliv. Even though you were holding back I did push you to your limits. There were plenty of occasions for you to lose control, but you didn't. You're no monster. You're decisive and unyielding. I saw the flash in your eyes when I threatened to take away your keepsake. I know that your pride and your promise didn't allow you to forfeit the fight outright. I'm not going to imply that I know your brother, but if he really was anything like me then I'm certain he wouldn't hold a grudge.'

'How can you be so sure . . .?'

'Because I'm incapable of holding one.' Volley laughed. 'Just like I believe you're incapable of evil. I say, after a thousand years, people ought to change. And I'd like to believe that you're no longer the same Vilivian you were back then.'

'I don't understand . . . You could simply take the win. Be one step closer to your wish. Why . . .?'

'There's only two things I want right now, Miss Viliv. The first one is a good fight, which only you can grant me at the very moment even despite your injuries. The second, is for you to recognize your own ability, Miss Viliv. As you can see, you're the only person qualified for granting them. So, why don't you hurry up and get up, eh? Don't you have a promise to keep?'

After a few moments of silence Vilivian smiled slightly. She then let out a short scoff and raised her arm.

'Do you mind helping me up, Volley?' she asked.

And with a grand smile he did. Her right arm was slightly numb, but it was functional and the pain ceased. With her other hand she held her wound in the stomach.

'Are you alright, Miss Viliv?' he asked worriedly.

'I'm fine.' She said, 'It's hardly the severest wound I was dealt in my life. And it will most likely be rendered unworthy of consideration later.' She smiled.

'Oh?' he smiled excitedly.

They moved towards the large climbing wall and though Volley was worried whether or not Vilivian would be able to beat the large obstacle; to his surprise she managed to climb up just fine by following behind Volley and listening to his directions.

It took them about ten minutes due to Vilivian's injuries, but they eventually reached the top and were met with both cheers and jeers.

They went towards the middle of the half of the arena that wasn't destroyed by Vilivian's spell. Just like at the start, they stood several feet apart. To one side, a large hole and Vilivian's keepsake stuck as it was, and on the other a thick forest, untouched by Matriarch's arcane.

'My dear Crossroads!' Miss X tried to get a hold of the audience's mood. 'The fighters' truce is about to come to an end! Are you ready for the continuation of the greatest show on heaven and earth?!'

Members of the audience were swept away by X's call to hype and answered with loud cheers.

'... It's not surprising they'd treat us with disdain, though aren't they a little too gullible?' Vilivian said in regards to the audience.

'If a person dying is what makes them cheer they can piss right off.' Volley said then smirked. 'Hell, I just might and go to the town to grab some food just to rile 'em up a little more.'

'That certainly sounds like something you'd do.'

'Doesn't it? I reckon we both acted largely out of character today, eh, Miss Viliv?'

'For better or for worse I suppose.' She chuckled. 'I have to thank you, Volley.'

'Come now, Miss Viliv, let's not get all sappy here ...'

'Truly. Thank you.' She smiled wryly. 'The promise I made to my Friend means the world to me and you reminded me of that. I had forgotten my resolve that allowed me to abandon my duty to pursue the wish and to tackle this completely new world head-on. You reminded me of that ... I do not believe that my regret will pass in many, many years, but thanks to you I also remembered that I shared more with Cassius than just blood. He dreamed of travelling the world. The very same dream you and I have. And once it's all over I intend to live out my life for the sake of this dream.'

Volley laughed cheerfully.

‘Glad to hear it, Miss Viliv! Why don’t I show you some of my favourite places, eh? There are few that have some really good food.’

‘I’d love to.’ She laughed, shortly. ‘I must also apologize to you.’

‘Apologize?’

‘Yes. Imploring you to fight for your life whilst holding back myself was unfair and disrespectful. I wanted for you to stay on your guard in an event that the worst should come. It never would and I understand that now. I disregarded my own humanity that I attained during the years I spent interacting with. I truly apologize.’

‘You needn’t, Miss Viliv, but I’m glad you see it that way. I guess I can consider one of the two wishes granted, then.’

‘Ha. Then all that remains is for me to make up for my lack of courtesy. I won’t delude myself, Volley. Wounded, in this form I cannot possibly hold a candle to your strength and endurance.’

‘Does that mean . . .?’

‘The audience is getting impatient.’

She clenched her fists. All veins on her body lit up with a bright purple light.

‘Only handful pushed me to this point. Just one lived to tell the tale.’ She smiled, almost ravenously. ‘It’s been *too* long.’

Her torso grew in size exponentially, ripping through her blouse. The flesh morphed; her wound healed, her breasts disappeared and her skin changed to a dark, coal-like colour. Her arms grew in length and her fingers turned to claws.

Her legs and feet grew in size tearing through trousers and boots respectively. Her feet turned to talons and from her back she started growing a tail.

Her head had lost all its hair; falling off and withering away in a sparkling dust. Her head turned white in colour and grew in both size and length, starting to resemble a calf skull. Her eyes and nose disappeared inside the skull-like flesh

And, with a loud *thud* as Vilivian’s newly grown tail – long, bone-like and segmented – crashed onto the floor, the transformation was complete.

Cross Colosseum stood silent as Vilivian towered over the oni warrior, at least triple his size.

Most if not all were disturbed by the terrible spectacle of flesh and bones. Her body continued to twitch and stretch a little as it accommodated its new size. Her purple heart could be faintly seen

beating underneath her thin chest. Her long arms housed her vile claws that reached her knees and her pointy tail scraped the floor. There were no eyeballs though there were eye sockets. No mouth to speak of. The only article of clothing that remained intact was her tag. The white scarf adapted to new body and was snugly tied around Vilivian's left arm.

She was a creature accommodated solely for hunting. A cryptid horror. And as Volley watched in an expression that was somewhere between terror and amazement, he could only utter two words.

' . . . So cool.'

It was Miss X's voice that broke the silence.

'What is this?! It looks like Contestant Vilivian who seemed to be in a lot of trouble had an ace up her (now torn to shreds) sleeve! She's turned into a bona-fide monster!'

I AM A DEMON.

Everyone flinched as they heard Vilivian's morphed voice resound in their heads. It was echoing, almost hollow. Her telepathy reached all the living beings in the stadium.

Miss X looked around confused. 'What's going on?' she asked.

Volley took a few steps back and put up fists. His destructive nature of an oni was at an all time high, but at the same time there was this feeling in the back of his mind that his fighting spirit won't be enough to topple Vilivian in that form. She had an advantage in every aspect.

'That's it, Miss Viliv. No more holding back, got it?!' he shouted.

I SHALL GIVE YOU YOUR GOOD FIGHT, she said and then immediately got on all fours, ready to pounce at any moment. THOUGH IT MAY BE TURN OUT TO BE TOO GOOD FOR YOU.

'And I wouldn't have it any other way!'

GOOD! FEAST YOUR EYES ON *THE MIGHT OF THE MATRIARCH!!!*

She rushed him on all fours and though Volley barely reacted and managed to jump to the side, he was caught by Vilivian's right hand and was carried a distance. She ran on her two legs at ludicrous speed with her tail wailing around in the wind.

With her one arm, she crushed him into a tree, scraping off the bark with his body. His shirt was torn and his back was bleeding as she then planted him into the ground like a tree.

He gasped out for air as his body was crushed by her hand. She raised her fists into the air and cast them down at him.

Perhaps it was the impending doom that granted Volley a second wind, but he managed to crawl underneath her legs as she attacked.

Her fists quaked the earth and Volley lost balance for a moment. He turned to see her tail coming to stab him and he grabbed it.

He fruitlessly tried to wrestle with it. Perhaps to topple her to the ground. *Anything* to gain him advantage.

But instead, she lifted the tail and Volley along with it and through a quick fling crashed him into yet another tree.

Bark and leaves fell on knocked out Volley, who struggled to maintain steadfastness in the situation, but he was certain that something was broken. Before he managed to even notice Vilivian she had lifted him with her left arm.

‘You know,’ he said weakly. ‘Despite what I said, I wouldn’t mind if you held back *a little*.’

I AM HOLDING BACK.

‘Ah. Bully for you, then.’

He was tossed at the ground and rolled on towards the thicket.

Yep. Something’s broken, alright.

But at this point pain was a minor inconvenience. Thankfully, he realized that brute force wasn’t going to cut it when he did.

YOUR RESILIENCE IS ADMIRABLE, VOLLEY, Vilivian’s voice reached him as she trudged towards his direction. Her talons crashed the ground beneath with ease. BUT YOU WON’T BE ABLE TO HOLD OUT FOR LONG.

Volley laughed

‘Yeah, well . . .’ he raised his tail. It was holding onto a white scarf. ‘I don’t have to.’

Vilivian looked at her left arm. Her tag *was* gone.

HOW . . .? Her hollow voice for the first time sounded confused.

‘I snatched it when you grabbed me. And now . . .’

He shoved the white scarf into his mouth and tried to swallow it.

FOOL OF AN ONI! Her voice echoed strongly in his head, almost dazing him.

She rushed towards him in all fours, but Volley had already jumped into the thicket, trying to hide himself and escape.

'I simply cannot believe it! Contestant Volley who was on his backfoot since Vilivian's transformation had managed to snatch away his adversary's tag and then ATE it! Will he be able to overcome this challenge?! Find out in THIRTY SECONDS!'

Thirty seconds. That's all he had to run around for. He had hoped he'd be able to swallow this thing whole, but it was too thick to go down his throat and was actually choking on it. So, he simply held it in his mouth, opening it just enough to get air when he needed.

He crawled on his stomach through the grass as Vilivian desperately rampaged just behind him. His small frame actually allowed him to remain somewhat stealthy.

He knew that it wasn't the most "honourable" way of settling things, especially after all the big talk he did earlier, but that woman was capable of using his body as a lumberjacking tool. He was never as thankful for his oni heritage as he was now as it allowed him to survive her first onslaught.

Suddenly, the sounds stopped and so did he as to not give away his position.

I CAN SENSE YOU.

His heart almost jumped out when Vilivian broke through a nearby tree and lunged for him.

'Ten seconds!'

X's voice resounded as Vilivian grabbed him and started slamming his back into the ground.

'Nine!'

Thud! She slammed him again, but he valiantly kept his mouth shut and the scarf safe.

'Eight!'

Thud!

'Seven!'

Thud!

'Six!'

RELINQUISH IT.

'Nuh-uh!' he uttered.

'Five!!'

THUD!!! and Volley felt something *break*.

He opened his mouth to scream and the scarf fell out. Vilivian snatched it with her own tongue – long and red and as flexible as her tail.

She then threw him out of the forest like a baseball. He rolled on the ground and the audience gasped as he almost fell down to the ravine.

'She did! Contestant Vilivian retrieved the tag!'

Yeah, I know, he thought. He stood up, somehow. He had a rib broken. Maybe two. Perhaps three. There was also something sloshing inside him and it couldn't be good. Also, he was getting hungry.

He turned back and saw Vilivian slowly walking out of the forest. Her tongue out holding her own scarf. She put it all inside her mouth.

Yeah, he deserved it. Good on her, he laughed in spirit, because laughing physically hurt him.

He was in a predicament. What else was there for him to do? The only good idea he had just went down her stomach. Ask her nicely to surrender? It had the biggest chance for success!

He didn't intend to go down without a fight. As long as he could stand, as long as there was an oni blood coursing through his veins, he was willing to fight. He was *going* to fight.

Volley then looked to the side and saw it.

The keepsake.

She said that her friend used it to cut her in half. If he could use it. Just one good swing.

He looked at her and she stopped moving. She waited.

She knows, doesn't she? He thought.

Of course. She can easily stop him from reaching for it. Hell, she's probably daring him to go for it. "Piss around and find out" is what she's probably thinking, he guessed.

Well, I just might piss around and potentially find out! I will piss around and fight until I drop dead!

He laughed weakly.

As if . . . Yeah, maybe yesterday. Or a week ago, he would've. But Miss Vilivian wouldn't want him to do that. She's gone through enough already. And there was also Auntie watching . . . and the creeps in the audience would get turned on by that.

No. He got what he wanted. His *good* fight. He wasn't keen on dying during it. So laughable, his attitude was. Ah . . .

But all he needs . . . is one good swing.

Volley smiled.

Then sat down on the floor.

'I can't keep this up anymore.' He laughed happily and took off his tag. 'I surrender.'

There was a brief silence and then an explosion of applause.

'And that's it! Contestant Volley forfeits his tag! Everyone! Please! Warm ovations to the winner of today's third fight and the third semi-finalist: Vilivian of Lilith!'

Volley lied on his back. Exhausted, spent and hungry. He laughed as much as he could without feeling too much pain.

ARE YOU SATISFIED WITH THIS? Vilivian's tender voice echoed in his mind.

'Aye,' he said, unsure if she could even hear him. 'T'was a bloody good fight.'

Sunset over the Ume Bay painted the sky orange and Vilivian watched it from a distance; from over a calmness of the Zo River to be exact, as rare as it happened. She was leisurely spending her time fishing. Her keepsake sword was stuck in the ground next to her and an empty bucket on the other. She was given a new set of clothes after her fight. A loose white blouse and short pants along with "sneakers". Her right arm was bandaged and her wound on the stomach treated as there was a scar left.

'Poor haul?'

She looked up. Chifu was standing above her holding a large bottle, probably of some alcohol.

'It'd be great. If I was slightly better at it.' She waved her fishing rod.

There was a bite. It escaped.

'You weren't there to see the last fight of the day.'

Chifu sat down next to her.

'No.'

'Aren't you interested in who you will go up against?'

'I'll see tomorrow.'

'Taking it easy at last, hm?'

Vilivian smiled briefly.

‘Yes.’

‘You know, that was some fight. Saki was literally at the edge of the seat the whole time. Frankly, I was thinking that I’d have to hold her back from jumping into the arena when you started mauling the poor boy down.’

‘I would never hurt him.’

‘Yes. I’m glad to see you understand that yourself now.’

Vilivian smiled again.

‘That being said, where is Volley?’

‘He’s resting. I might’ve broken several of his ribs and also caused heavy internal and external bleeding. But he’ll be fine.’

‘I’d expect him to be with you. He’s your friend after all, you know? Since you used his first name and all.’

There was a bite. It escaped.

‘Isn’t jealousy generally frowned upon in deities?’

‘There are gods much pettier than I, Viliv, trust me.’ Chifu sighed. ‘And to think that I even sent for a bottle of your local delicacy.’

Vilivian glanced at the bottle. ‘What is it?’

‘*Mushroom Juice*. I have to say, Viliv, if the mages of your world were as competent at magic as they are at making alcohols from deep-dwelling magical mushrooms then maybe they wouldn’t lose almost a thousand years’ worth of history.’

‘What?’

‘Nothing. Why don’t you have a sip?’

Vilivian took the bottle and uncorked it. She took a sip and moved it around in her mouth then swallowed it.

‘How is it?’

‘Bloody.’ She handed back the bottle and Chifu took a sip.

‘I’d say it tastes kind of like a sweet tomato.’

‘I never had a tomato.’

‘Goodness me! what does Saki feed you, then?’

‘Meat.’

‘Right. Birds of a feather . . . You know, that bottle was really difficult to obtain.’

There was a bite. It escaped.

‘I doubt that.’

‘Alright, it wasn’t that *hard*, but I had to go certain lengths, you know?’

‘I appreciate it, Trickster.’

‘I just feel like our friendship isn’t moving anywhere . . .’

‘Our relationship is progressing just fine, Trickster.’

‘I’m just worried that you’ll start calling Saki by her name before me . . .’

‘Your fears are understandable, Trickster.’

‘Now, you’re just mocking me, aren’t you?’

‘I would never.’ Vilivian said deadpan.

There was a bite. It escaped.

And then they both laughed.

‘Ah, Viliv, your melodic laughter is a cure for the soul. Judging by your attempts at humour, is it alright to assume that you’ve let go of all your regrets and are now ready to lead a carefree life in pursuit of happiness?’

That caused Vilivian to ponder.

Where would she be if she had lost the first round? If she succumbed to her depression and guilt? Would she return to her home world and join her sisters in the Pendulum? Or would she return to Graal to try and wait until someone kills her.

It was difficult to not cling onto the past. The regrets and traumas were a part of her experience. She wondered even, for a little while, whether or not she should change her wish.

Though, knowing him, he would be much angrier than happy if she brought him back. And besides, she wanted to live out their dream for the both of them.

Crossroads proved that there are worlds worthy of travelling to, but if she were to leave now, she’d like to walk hers. Visit the places that she and her brother would read about the volumes in their

library.

It wouldn't be anytime soon that she'd come to forgive herself for what she did, but that way she could at least exercise some of his will.

Vilivian smiled at the river.

'If only it were so easy.'

There was a bite.

She caught the fish.

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