

[Vilivian] Round 2: Good Fun

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It was a couple hours before midnight in Crossroads – the greatest melting pot of cultures on that side of nowhere and also there. A thin rain drizzled from the dark empty sky, barely visible in the streetlight, spilling from rooftops into small crevices in the concrete and created a tiny river that coiled around town's streets. Night's damp cloak caused even the most nocturnal of residents to seek refuge from the drizzle with few exceptions.

One of the semi-finalists of the Crossroads Tournament – Pembroke Artysup – was one of those exceptions. Alone, he staggered slalom down the alleys of Crossroads, unbothered by the rain falling on his exposed head.

Pembroke wasn't the kind of person to drink a lot. He liked to but never pushed himself beyond a certain limit. Tonight, however, was a cause for jubilation – he won! The moment he entered the Fox Den the drinks started pouring and as a semi-finalist he had no other option but to indulge himself along with some other patrons. He was eventually advised by the barkeep to get out and get some fresh air – true, he might've become very noticeably ill from too much drinking. Either that or she told him to leave because he called another patron a cunt.

But that's how it is sometimes. For every couple dozen people celebrating your victory there's always that one person who will undermine your achievements. A natural thing would be to ignore such individuals and get on with the drinking, but at the time the natural thing seemed to be mouthing them off.

Yes, Pembroke might've achieved his victory through very underhanded means. Yes, he might've abused the naivete of his opponent, but that's *life*. And life is like a . . . like a . . .

He almost walked into a lamp post, but he managed to (through drunken grace) avoid it at the last second. He grabbed it, did a full spin and continued walking down.

He breathed in the air and started humming as he continued his line of thought.

Life is like an animal. A mammal. Female mammal. Think chicken. Hen. That's poultry. Think pets. Puppies. Dog. *Bitch*. Life's a *bitch*. It's perfect, in the beginning – you care for it and in exchange it smothers you with love and affection. But then it grows up. It starts biting when you try to pet it. You go out on a walk and it pulls the leash. You collapse into mud and then it starts pissing on you. So, you decide to train it and it takes years of hard work and commitment to teach it one trick, but you're done and are proud of it so you take it to the park to let it play with the other dogs and all the other dogs are much younger and far more talented and disciplined and you get jealous, but you still care for your dog because, well, it's your dog and you only get one so you stick by it and

when, just when, it finally opens its bitter heart to you, starts caring about you . . . then you realize that it's dying and miserable and you start thinking about putting it down but you don't because despite everything it never let you go and after all this time you've grown so attached that despite all of its flaws you hold onto it because it's *yours*. Even when laying stuck in a gutter, with everything lost or gone, your life . . . that bitch . . . It's all you've ever had.

His world started spinning so he crouched down by the nearby wall and belched. He stared down the water moving through the street into the drainage. After he calmed down he decided to call it a day. He stood up and decided to find his way onto the beach.

Pembroke took a few steps before a character emerged from darkness. She was a shorter woman. Her red hair glittered, wet from the rain and her sharp emerald eyes drilled into him intensely, like a hunter analysing their prey.

'What's that smell?' he asked.

The woman raised a bucket in her two hands showing him the insides. A few small fish were gathered at the bottom. They were a rather miserable haul.

'I see.' He said and got a closer look at the woman. Her right arm was bandaged and through her shirt he could see that so was her stomach. He took a long and good look before he sobered up and realized that her white blouse was completely see-through.

'Ma'am, your shirt!' He turned away shyly.

'What about it?' she asked, slightly startled by his reaction.

'It's wet! Completely see-through!'

'Indeed. The rain caught me off-guard.' She looked up and blinked quickly as some drops got into her eyes.

Pembroke took off his bomber jacket and handed it over to the woman.

'Please, cover yourself with it!'

'I'm not cold though . . .' The woman frowned but she did put down the bucket and took the jacket nonetheless.

He looked at her finally. He was so confused. Why was he more worried about it than she was? He felt like a fool. They stared at each other for some reason. He was expecting some sort of thanks, but he realized that there wasn't any coming further cementing his foolishness. Perhaps she caught him staring?

'I've gotta go!' he said quickly and excused himself, not even bothering to glance back. He felt his ears redden from alcohol. Yes, alcohol. Must be.

He arrived at the beach where the almighty Axelion was parked.

Metal; a humanoid machine, was kneeling in the sand – with its one eye it watched the horizon. It's now become a landmark in the Crossroads. During daytime, folks would come to admire it; children play with it – use it as a large and unique jungle gym.

Pembrooke didn't mind so long as no one got in. He was willing to trust that the guards were doing their jobs keeping it somewhat safe.

He climbed up into the cockpit. Stale air vented out and let in some fresh rainy fragrance. He didn't mind some of the rain getting in.

He closed the cockpit doors and made himself comfortable. The inside was snug although a little dirty. There were empty bags after snacks lying around, a few loose bullets and even a grenade hanging from the ceiling. For luck.

He contemplated briefly connecting himself to the Axelion, but decided against it ultimately. He's had enough of the world for now. The magic that was there at the start perished rather quickly. It's more of the same – just with more flavours.

He closed his eyes and dozed off. It was an eventful day. He's won his first round. And while Pembrooke didn't really consider it satisfying he at least ended the day on an altruistic note.

Pembrooke had a feeling that he knew that woman from somewhere, though. He tried his hardest to remember, but he kept going back to that . . . another memory.

He listened to the rain battering the Axelion. He was slightly chilly without his jacket, but he quickly began snoring anyway.

Vilivian arrived at the Fox Den, bucket in hand. It was still packed, but it was relatively quiet. A couple of laughs from every other table, many guests eating or drinking alone or just people seeking temporary refuge from the rain.

As she walked towards the bar she noticed a few anxious glances thrown her way. Ever since her showing at the colosseum some people haven't been reacting very well to her presence. Thanks to her experiences during the first round, she's learned to accept her demon side and not allow it to overshadow her humanity, but most of the population didn't know that.

Their affection wasn't her goal, though it did sting a bit, but at least she didn't have to pretend to be more human than she already was.

The customers she walked next to recoiled; perhaps out of apprehension held towards her or the repugnant smell coming from the fish bucket.

She put the bucket on the bar in front of Saki – the Fox Den’s owner and bartender.

‘I’ve brought the fish.’ Vilivian announced.

Saki peered down the bucket and witnessed three fish, two of which resembled a half-decay fish corpse and calling the third one “a fish” was an overstatement of the century.

Despite their sorry state the oni bartender nodded seriously.

‘I can make this work.’ She picked up the bucket and went towards the kitchen.

Vilivian sat down at the barstool and tried to somewhat fix her wet hair.

‘Cute jacket.’

Vilivian looked to the side. Next to her, Chifu was smiling with a mug of beer in one hand and a pipe in the other.

‘Trickster,’ she nodded her head and looked down at her brown jacket. ‘I received it from a stranger. He expressed . . . strange concerns over apparently lacklustre attire.’

‘You wouldn’t want to catch a cold before your fight tomorrow, would you?’

The Crossroads’ Madame laughed happily and drank her beer. From the seat next to her leaned out a teenage oni.

‘G’day, Miss Viliv!’ he said. He wasn’t wearing any top. His torso was almost fully bandaged save for a few spots.

‘Hello, Volley.’ Vilivian smiled warmly. ‘How are your wounds?’

‘Bloody excruciating!’ he bared his fangs in a wide grin.

‘Oh . . .’

‘Don’t fret, Miss Viliv. Auntie gave me some good ointment and now it only hurts my ribs a little when I have a giggle!’ he laughed. ‘Ack!’ he scowled through a smile and returned to his meal.

‘I thought seeing her nephew beaten into a pulp would get Saki to go all soft and bring out her best potions brews in order to bring her baby back into fighting shape.’ Chifu chuckled.

‘I’mh nhot ha bhaby!’ Volley said with a mouthful of food.

‘I think she made it a point that Volley cannot handle her strongest potions. Then again, I am surprised to see you here at this hour, Trickster. Doesn’t that kind of festivity spawn an immense amount of work to the benefactor of the event?’

'You overestimate how organized this place really is. Besides, I have a very efficient Clean Desk policy.' She said smugly.

'Why don't you enlighten us about your Fireplace policy then?' Saki emerged from the kitchen and put a glass of white wine in front of Vilivian. 'Far as I know that's where most of the paperwork ends up.'

'... It's a work in progress.'

'By the way, isn't that Pembroke's jacket?' Saki pointed out.

'I don't know, they didn't introduce themselves. Who is he?'

'That'd be your opponent tomorrow..' Chifu smoked from a pipe. 'Cute kid, if a little jaded.'

'He was rather flushed when we met. He'd turned his eyes away and told me to cover myself with this.' Vilivian looked at Chifu askingly. 'Should I try and repay his kindness?'

'It's been raining, eh?' Chifu smiled. 'He is a teenager, so he's already got his due, but why not?'

'He's twenty-one.' Said Saki.

'So, a teenager that can drink. Big difference.'

'Rather significant.' She let out a sigh. 'I had to ask him to leave my establishment.'

'Gotten rowdy?'

'Hecklers. And he's the type that fights back. I think some fresh air did him good considering he wanted to help out Viliv.'

'Or maybe he just remembered her fight. How do you find your new reputation, Vilivian?'

'Not as constraining.'

'Isn't freedom wonderful? Don't be afraid to make use of it. Some shopkeepers wouldn't dare to stop you in fear of seeing your other half.'

Vilivian frowned.

'... Are you telling me to rob shops in your own town?'

'Sure, just don't get caught. Or else I'll have to punish you.' She drank the beer. 'Oh, don't make that face, Viliv. It's not like I'm greenlighting breaking windows and burning down the restaurants. All I mean is that a simple suggestion that you may transform at any given moment may make people more amiable.'

'Chi!' Saki scolded her.

‘No.’ Vilivian shook her head. ‘I’ve reconciled my natures. I am a demon, but I won’t let that part of me forfeit the law and customs of a civilized world.’

‘Pragmatic.’ Said Chifu with a hint of disappointment in her voice. ‘And ultimately dull and boring.’

‘I don’t require my life to be constantly entertained, Trickster.’

‘But after a thousand years you don’t want it to be bland either, do you? Life’s like a drink, Viliv. There’re myriad recipes, but everyone’s got their favourite one. And everyone’s fixing their drinks by adding in their own personal touches. Change up the ratio of order and chaos a little, sprinkle in some love or add in a touch of adventure. However, there are many who try and experiment and they just can’t get it to taste perfect, because they lack that. The one secret ingredient. And some go through their lives supposedly fulfilled and content yet lacking that something.’

‘What’s your ingredient?’

‘Fun!’ Chifu answered without hesitation.

‘I don’t believe I can make my life revolve around “fun”.’

‘Maybe you shouldn’t though it would be entertaining to watch you pull pranks on people. You’ve centuries ahead of you, you know? As your *friend* I’d be pained to see you constrain yourself by a single-mindedness.’

‘I know what my purpose is, Trickster. I’ll win your tournament and after that . . . I might travel. And I’ll be satisfied by simply adhering to the rules instated wherever I end up.’

‘Of course! Nothing wrong abiding by the laws of the land you walk. However, abiding by them is one thing completely separate from letting your mind be influenced . . . No, *policed* by those laws. Even the greatest dimwit can find purpose through the freedom of their own thoughts. And some worlds . . . want to take away even that.’

‘I find that hard to believe.’

‘Why, Pembroke’s world particularity regarding martial prowess may spawn some comments should you ask him about it. Then again, you wouldn’t want to be so easily influenced; your beliefs may fall in with the lies his world tells tales of whilst the truth is stranger than fiction – at least it would be from your point of view.’

‘What should I do then?’

‘Ah, see. That’s the question you *shouldn’t* ask. You ought to ask “what would you do” or “how would you approach this”. Do not imply your mind to be a grade-schooler’s notebook; anyone can scribble whatever rubbish comes across. Treat it as a canvas. A creation of inspiration collected from the people you desire so much to emulate . . . That being said – if I were in your place I’d ask myself: what would make me happy?’

Vilivian frowned.

‘Bringing back my friend, of course.’

‘And then?’

‘Well . . . Without pondering I can say that . . . this question’s not as easy to answer as I’d think.’

‘Indeed. Let’s drink to that. To the pursuit of happiness!’

Chifu clinked Vilivian’s glass of wine with her own mug of beer. Two women then downed their drinks.

‘What would my drink of life be?’ Volley asked.

‘Grape juice.’ Chifu answered without looking at him.

Saki approached to refill Chifu’s drink and looked sternly at Vilivian.

‘Long-term goals aside, let’s talk right now. I think you should take a shower, Vilivian. You reek of fish.’

Vilivian frowned like a scalded cat.

‘I already bathed twice today.’ She argued. ‘Once in the morning and once post-fight.’

‘Yes, but you reek of fish *right* now.’

Saki’s cold glare sent chills down the Matriarch’s spine. Both Chifu and Volley instinctively turned away from Vilivian’s pleading glances, knowing fully well that the thousand-year-old half-demon was fighting the inevitable.

‘. . . I was out in the rain though . . .’

‘Shower. *Now*.’

Pembrooke woke up in the dimness of his Axelion. He tried to stretch his numb legs; he looked at his wristwatch – he’s been napping for almost an hour though it felt like days.

Energized, he stumbled out of the cockpit onto the sand and relieved himself at the end of the dock. As if in trance he watched the sea reflect the moonlight behind him, his shadow malformed in the water; the ocean fragrance was a fine cure for his headache.

The smell of the marine reminded him of the encounter with the red-haired woman earlier. He remembered remembering her, but he couldn’t remember what exactly he was not remembering. Was she on stands perhaps? He could’ve sworn he’s seen her earlier, maybe in the tavern? A chill

ran through his body and he sneezed. Hard. The kind of sneeze that's as loud as a jet engine and shakes the earth as much as the body.

Pembroke recoiled, the pain in his head worsened for a moment and he *remembered*.

There was a woman – and that woman then changed into a monster. A very scary monster. And then that monster beat the ever-loving crap out of some kid.

There was also a lot happening beforehand, but Pembroke spent most of his time during that fight standing in the line for beer which wasn't even worth the wait. The swivel they served was so watered down it didn't matter if it was the finest ale in the town.

That woman is his next opponent. What was her name? Vena . . . Veli . . . Vili . . . Not important right now. His approach to the battle is a priority.

He sighed, resigned. That sounded like tomorrow's Pembroke's problem, not his.

Fancying himself a drink he left for town.

As he walked, he thought about the tournament. His rich imagination considered the possibilities regarding the wish. He fancied himself a new bike. That would make him happy, wouldn't it?

As he asked himself that the inner voice almost immediately answered with a resounding "No."

That's the problem. Nothing he did or worked towards carried a single prospect of satisfaction or happiness. It's as if he biked fifty kilometres uphill only to find out that the pancake shop he strived to eat at was mediocre at best.

Yes, he made a good workout. Yes, he did eat an ultimately nourishing and tasty meal, but it wasn't fulfilling enough to justify the effort put in.

Not to mention, that the biker he passed at the foot of the mountain somehow managed to get up there faster, enjoyed his meal much more and went down the hill being ultimately satisfied.

It was just so vexing. All the effort he puts in, all the little satisfaction he gets from a job well done is snuffed out by a prick with less brains than a comatose snail who happens to be slightly more talented than he is. It's all so tiresome.

He arrived at the Fox Den. At that point all he had on his mind was a drink. He reached for the door and it opened suddenly.

'You!' Pembroke pointed finger at the familiar red-haired woman. She was wearing a red jacket and blue jeans. Sword was tied behind her back and her hair shined in the dim light.

'Me, indeed.' She tilted her head. 'You're . . .'

‘Pembrooke. Pembrooke Artysup. It’s a pleasure.’

‘We’ve met. I’m Vilivian.’

‘Yeah, we have I . . .’ he flushed at the memory. ‘I gave you my jacket.’

‘Indeed.’ She handed over the folded cloth to him. ‘And now I return it.’

‘Oh. Thank you.’

‘It’s been cleaned and dried by the Bartender.’

He put on his tan jacket and everything seemed right in the world.

‘Right. So, we’re opponents tomorrow, eh?’

‘I’ve been told so by the Trickster. I’ve been on my way to return your jacket to you. You retire to sleep at the beach, correct?’

‘When I don’t feel like rooming at an inn.’ He shrugged. ‘Could’ve come in the morning.’

‘I may . . . have issues when it comes to returning the items lent to me.’ She looked aside and grimaced.

‘Really? Well, I won’t blame you then,’ He chuckled. ‘Sorry for the trouble. Still, it’s awfully considerate of you.’

‘If that’s your impression of me. I’m rather perplexed to actually find you awake at this hour.’

‘I got thirsty. Besides, I could say the same to you.’

‘I don’t need nearly as much sleep as humans do.’

‘Right, because you’re a . . . er . . .’

‘A demon.’

‘I was going to say “a monster”.’

‘They’re synonymous to most, I find.’

‘Sorry! I meant no offense!’ Pembrooke panicked.

‘None taken.’ She smiled slightly.

‘Er, yes, well . . .’ he coughed out. ‘So, what are you doing tonight? I mean, in general. Since you don’t need to sleep. Just out of curiosity.’

‘There’s a meeting for me to attend. I intended to head there after I’d given you back your clothes, so I suppose I’ll go there now.’

‘Right. Right . . .’ Pembroke was surprised to find himself disappointed. ‘Don’t let me keep you then.’

Vilivian stared at him for a few seconds before she spoke up.

‘Actually. Would you mind accompanying me?’

He raised an eyebrow.

‘If you don’t mind missing out on a drink that is.’

‘Not in particular . . . What kind of meeting is that? Is it shady?’

‘I don’t possess enough knowledge to assess what comes across as “shady” in this town. As far as I can see everything’s legal. It’s nothing endangering though, if that’s what you’re asking.’

‘Well,’ he scratched the back of his head. ‘That’s fine. Where to?’

‘The inn.’

The Kit’Inn was a part of the larger building connected to the Colosseum. It had a neatly decorated interior that housed the Crossroads’ travellers as well as a lot of cats.

One could literally trip over one whilst walking in there. Even the receptionist at the desk carried feline ears.

At the second floor of the inn, Vilivian knocked on the door with Pembroke standing behind her.

There was a sound of something being moved. Then something is being thrown. Then glass breaking. Finally, the clicking sound came from the lock and the door opened slightly and from the dimness of the room half a pair of round glasses emerged.

‘Whomst?’ said the woman.

‘Sorceress. It is I – Vilivian of Lilith. I have come as we agreed.’

The door opened wide and the “sorceress” inside welcomed them with a large smile. She was a young woman; close to Vilivian in age, Pembroke thought. She was wearing a purple dress fastened by the belt. Large, round glasses covered her green eyes and her vividly green hair was tied into thick twin tails.

‘Viliv! Good to see you! I’ve been worried you wouldn’t make it. Oh?’ she looked at Pembroke. ‘Who’s this?’

‘He’s—’

‘My name’s Pembroke.’ He answered. ‘I was asked to come here, though I’m not exactly sure why.’ He looked askingly at Vilivian and the other woman followed suit.

‘Apologies. I’d like to give him something, so I’ve brought him here.’

‘Give me something?’

‘Oh, it’s perfectly fine! My name is Wendy Williams.’ She smiled. ‘It’s nice to meet you, Pembroke.’

‘The pleasure’s all mine, Wendy. Sorry to bother you unannounced.’

‘Don’t mention it. Please, come in! And mind the glass.’

She let them into the room. A heavy stench of chemicals lingered in the thick air of the room. It was enlightened by a standing lamp in the corner. Strange variety of tools littered the only desk in the room and somewhere underneath the thick layer of parchments one could find a carpet. Wendy’s bed appeared to function as a storing space. Only a fraction of it remained clear and Pembroke wagered that if Wendy curled up and lied down she’d fit right in.

There was a singular plant on a windowsill. Its colourful leaves led Pembroke to believe that it was victim of Wendy’s magical experiments. As did most thing in the room.

The curtains were clearly set aflame at some point. The beige ceiling had a large, dark stain in the middle and the only chair in the room appeared strangely ordinary.

They closed the door and stepped in avoiding the broken glass vase. Pembroke could’ve sworn it crawled.

‘Please, sit whenever!’ Wendy said frantically. ‘Not on the bed though! There’re combustible rosebuds fermenting under the mattress. And try to avoid putting too much pressure on the floor. I had to rent out the room below due to risk . . . You can lean on the wall if you’d like. They’re safe. I think . . . Oh, there’s the chair!’ she pulled up the aforementioned chair.

‘It’s fine. I’ll stand.’ Said Vilivian.

‘I’ll sit. I feel like whatever you’ll talk about might take a while.’ Pembroke sat down on the chair but almost immediately jolted back up. ‘What did I sit on?’

‘So!’ Wendy clasped her hands. ‘Vilivian. Am I to understand you’re willing to share your knowledge of magic with me?’

Wendy was brimming with excitement. She was the type of gal that got excited about all things scientific and theoretical. On the contrary, Pembroke yawned as he leaned on the wall. He was partly invested in this meeting. Mainly due a fact Vilivian wanted to give him something. For now,

though, he was as useful as pogo stick on a minefield.'

'Be heeded, that I don't know all there is about my world's magic. I'll only relay what I know in exchange for your own knowledge.'

Vilivian put both her hands behind her and stared at Wendy. Her face was like stone.

'Fair. We're here to learn. Where to start . . .' She pondered for a little. 'Well. Firstly, the magic in my world is granted by the influence of certain crystals. The magi are gifted with the ability to use an energy called "mana" in order to cast magic.'

'So, there are those who aren't gifted with it?'

'Theoretically. Crystals not only bring the gift of magic, but also vitalize the lands allowing for agriculture. Lands are otherwise left barren and inhabitable. So, yes, most born in our towns are gifted with the ability to use magic. Unless the crystal is at life's end, but the town usually moves to a new location when that happens.'

Pembroke looked up.

'Wait. What's the lifespan then?'

'On average, about a hundred years?' Wendy scoffed sadly. 'If the fortune favours, that is.'

'But that's barely a few human generations.' Vilivian said mildly distressed.

'You're practically nomads.'

'Yes. It's troubling.' Wendy smiled wryly but cheered up immediately. 'In any case – magic! It's near impossible to channel mana without some help. In my case - I use glyphs.'

Wendy waved her gloved finger in the air. A rainbow trace followed it and she drew something resembling something resembling spikes. She then picked one edge and pulled it with her finger. The magical painting convened at her fingertip and changed its colour to bright orange. She then locked it in her fist and opened it palm up – a small flame burst above it.

Pembroke barely held off himself from applauding.

'Some use staves. Or tomes.'

She closed the flame in her hand and it disappeared. She looked straight into Vilivian's eyes, barely containing her excitement.

'Your turn.'

Vilivian raised her right hand. Pembroke watched as blue light engulfed veins on her hand. She snapped her fingers and a flame appeared above her palm as well.

Wendy's eyes opened wide and she immediately lunged for a notepad on her desk and started making notes.

'Magic is in the blood. It runs through every creature in my world.'

'Fascinating! Then how do you manifest it?'

'It depends.' Vilivian extinguished the fire. 'For most creatures it responds to instinct or emotions like fear and anger. Humans, however, have to train themselves to command by the force of their will.'

'That's a given. One wouldn't want to cause mayhem due to angrily thrown magic!'

'Magic won't answer to the emotions of a human. Not on a scale you imagine at least.'

'Why is that?'

'Humans are . . . resistant to it. Their bodies largely nullify its influence. What a demon learns in a year, a human requires ten. They not only need to adapt themselves to magic, but also bend it to their will.'

'Interesting . . .' Wendy noted that down. 'Then, would you mind if we did some experiments? I have prepared a few trials that should go with any kind of magic . . .'

Wendy reached for something on her desk. Pembroke was about to groan. He was barely keeping himself from dozing off where he stood.

Thankfully, Vilivian was there to stop Wendy's relentless pursuit of knowledge.

'Sorceress, the time for experiments will come later. There's a question I'd like to ask. Are you capable of any restoration magic?'

Wendy turned around towards the Matriarch immediately, fascinated by that question.

'Restoration . . . Personally, no. It's a complex and difficult school of magic to master. Just conjuring up elements is hard work, but skilled healers are far and between. Why the question?'

'I know restoration magic.' Vilivian admitted and before Wendy managed to pick up her jaw and express her excitement she continued. 'But it is an extremely painful process for the recipient.'

'How come?'

'The wound is fully healed. The flesh knits, the blood is cleansed and the innards set back into their proper place and form. And the healed one feels all of this. The stretching of a skin, the flushing of a—'

‘We get the point!’ Pembroke interrupted. Wendy herself was listening with a sickened curiosity, but he wasn’t into the gore dramas.

‘. . .Yes. Most patients die from shock when they’re healed by magic. And using it on myself would be . . .’

‘Akin to performing a surgery on yourself, I understand.’ A chill ran down Pembroke’s spine as she said that. ‘I have no knowledge of restoration magic, unfortunately. I’m sorry. Besides, I don’t know if I’d be able to teach you the magic I use.’

Wendy looked down sadly, but Vilivian’s face remained focused.

‘Can you enchant items, then?’

Wendy looked up.

‘I do . . .?’

‘What if I enchant an item with my own restoration spell and you could perhaps modify it by using your own spells?’

Wendy adjusted her glasses. Her expression changed to more focused and got enchanted into the conversation.

‘An item wouldn’t be able to contain two spells at the same time. I could sense particular vibrations when you cast spells. I’m not sure if the combined strength of two arcane forces wouldn’t be too much.’

‘Ah. Right you are. However, those are two different kinds of magic. Perhaps an exception may be found.’

‘It still depends on how they’d resonate with each other. They’d be enchanted into one object after all.’

‘We’d know if the repercussions were tragic. Some magic escapes into the atmosphere whenever I command it. If there were to be any consequences I’d sense it and I’m sure you would too.’

‘Don’t tell me you think that such a small magnitude of those spells would be enough to deem their union safe?’ Wendy smirked.

‘It doesn’t have to be strong.’ Vilivian raised her chin proudly. ‘The restoration spell I want to enchant in is effortless to any capable mage of my world. It’s the excruciating pain part that requires amendment.’

Wendy put her hand on her chin and thought awhile.

‘There’s still the issue of what exactly can I do to numb the pain. You’ve described it as excruciating, but I don’t know any pain-relieving spells.’

‘Surely, it wasn’t merely boasting about your intelligence back when you introduced yourself to me at the river.’

‘Well, I wasn’t expecting you to be demanding such feats from me! And while, hypothetically speaking, the idea is plausible it is as I said – without means to reduce the pain it won’t mean anything unless we find another trained enchanter.’

Both women pondered, whilst Pembroke became one with the third wheel. What the hell are they talking about? He thought.

This ordeal was strange in the weirdest way possible. His opponent was trying to get him a crutch – and he couldn’t fathom *why*? To mock him? Out of some strange respect? Not only that, but he could notice that every now and then Vilivian would throw glances at him. It flattered him, certainly, but he’s begun getting suspicious. It was as if she was expecting him to pitch in to this madness, but Pembroke wasn’t too keen on playing those games.

And yet . . .

‘What about electricity?’ he blurted out. The women looked at him. Vilivian was somewhat lost, but there was a flame behind Wendy’s glasses.

‘Electricity . . . It does possess some analgesic capabilities . . .’

Wicked smile appeared on Wendy’s face. She immediately pulled up the chair to her desk and started drawing something on a piece of paper. At first, it resembled something akin to electric current, but then she started adding more and more drawings all the while Wendy laughed and mumbled under her breath.

‘The current needs to be strong enough to numb . . . but not strong enough to kill . . . targeting the nerves? Oh, yes. Yes! That would do. Ah. But it’d shatter, wouldn’t it? Mmm . . . how about crystals . . . they’re pure magic and if I realigned these drawings into something more compact . . . Oh, my, yes. Yes. Yes!’

Wendy started cackling as her pencil burned through the paper. Vilivian and Pembroke looked at her worryingly.

‘More of a witch than sorceress, isn’t she?’ Pembroke whispered.

‘Be mindful you don’t repeat my mistake and say that out loud.’ Vilivian said in a pained voice and then she smiled at him. ‘Though I suppose she’d let you let it slide considering you resolved our conundrum.’

‘Might as well contribute.’ He shrugged. ‘Though I can’t say I understand why you’d want me to have such an item. We’re adversaries.’

‘As of tomorrow, I’d like to think. Consider yourself kindly repaid then.’

‘All I did was give you a jacket because I thought you’d be cold! And you want me to have a magical healing thing?’

‘Yes. Is that a problem?’

‘It’s not the kind of repayment I’d have in mind.’

‘What, then?’

‘I, well . . .’

‘EUREKA!’

Chair clattered as Wendy stood up. She held a piece of paper in her hand that showed a drawing so complex that Pembroke didn’t bother even analysing the piece.

‘It’s a rather complex glyph,’ Wendy looked at her masterpiece. ‘But I believe it will lead us to a satisfying result.’

‘How will that work? I know very little about . . . electricity.’

‘Well, I’m not going to go into detail,’ Wendy reached for her bag and pulled out a few crystals. They were finely cut and the size of a small stone. They each possessed a lustrous, bright lavender-like colour. ‘But to put it as simply as possible – I’d like you to enchant these crystals with the restoration spell. Then, I am going to enchant it with my glyphs. They’re constructed so that they will trigger my spells as a response to any outside interference – in this case trying to use the item by using magic . . . Both, you and I, should be able to use it by channelling our magic.’

‘And what of the pain reduction?’ Vilivian asked.

‘Yes. Well, that’s a complicated part . . .’

‘*That’s* the complicated part?’ Pembroke said in disbelief.

‘. . . I believe I could manage to numb the pain by coursing electricity through the nerves. It won’t completely negate the pain, but it should at least make it bearable. There’s also the minor pain that will come with being electrocuted.’

‘How minor?’

‘Ever been struck by lightning?’

‘No.’

‘It’s like that except it’s not as deadly. I don’t know how much elemental energy I should pour into it, so for a test drive I’ll have to “wing it” as they say. Here.’

Wendy handed her over one of the crystals.

'If you'd be so kind as to infuse it with the spell . . .'

Wendy prepared the notebook as Vilivian looked over the small crystal.

She put it in her palm and covered it with the other. She closed her eyes and focused. Blood veins on her arms started glowing with blue light as she chanted.

'*Mend.*' Her voice echoed. A silent cracking could be heard coming from the crystal. After a few seconds she uncovered the now changed crystal. The lustrous colour was gone. It was dim, carrying a strange gradient of dark green and navy blue making the crystal appear lifeless. The longer Pembroke stared the more he felt as if the colours moved.

'Is that it?' Wendy asked unconvinced.

'Yes.' Vilivian handed back the crystal.

'It doesn't appear magical at all. Even less so?'

Vilivian shrugged.

'What you and I consider "magical" may as well be completely different things. Your spells, if you could?'

'Right! Of course.'

Wendy cleared the table and put the crystal in the middle of it. She placed the drawing she painted on earlier next to it and her fingers traced the lines as if she learned the patterns.

She then painted a glyph above the crystal. A violet circle surrounded it and from the insides of the stone a bright light started fighting off the dark colours brought by Vilivian's magic.

Wendy visibly struggled with her spells. She raised her other hand and painted another glyph and the lights coming from the stone intensified. It was like a neon party in Wendy's room right now. The colours reflected from her glasses and the festival of lights made Pembroke grow more and more wary. He'd glance at Vilivian but he'd find her expression as nothing but stone.

The light show ended abruptly. There was only a simmering sound coming from the crystal and Wendy's heavy panting. Her hands trembled above the crystals and her face was pale.

'Is it done?' Vilivian said almost heartlessly.

'Done?' Wendy said weakly. 'It is. Should be. Wasn't easy though. I felt as if your magic tried to push me away from changing the crystal to the point I thought it was going to attack me . . .'

'Of course, it did. It's magic.'

'Well, my magic can't do that! Most of the time . . . Oh, the cultural differences are more and more apparent.' She then smiled content. 'Ah, but the experience will make it worth it, even if it's a dud.'

'Is it?'

'One way to find out, right?' Wendy stood up and reached for her bag and pulled out a large knife. 'Would you kindly stab yourself with that knife?' she handed it over to Vilivian.

Pembrooke frowned.

'Of course,' Vilivian answered.

Pembrooke realized he was the straight man here.

'Hold the freaking phone!' he interrupted before Vilivian had a chance to shove the blade into her stomach. 'Don't you see there's an issue with this!'

Wendy and Vilivian exchanged looks and then both made a silent "ah".

'You're right. I'm sorry, Vilivian.'

'Don't worry, it happens to the best of us.' She started taking off her top. 'The Bartender wouldn't be pleased if I bloodied my clothes again.'

'That's not what I meant!' Pembrooke stopped her quickly. 'The knife! Don't you think that's going a little too far?'

'We need to test, don't we?' Vilivian asked.

'Can't we test it on animals?'

'I thought Vilivian was fine with wounds.' Wendy said. 'After I watched your fight it almost seemed as if you were having fun . . .'

'Far from it.'

'Oh.' Wendy's face's suddenly been overcome with guilt.

'But there was a time in my youth when I enjoyed pain.' Vilivian said with a soured expression.'

'Youth? I thought you were my age!' Wendy said, surprised.

'I'm really not.'

'Then shall we find another test subject?' Pembrooke asked.

'No.' Vilivian shook her head decisively. 'Dawn will startle us sooner should we begin to look for an animal in the darkness. It's the fastest way.'

‘Well . . . Could you at least not do it in the stomach?’ Pembroke asked.

‘Does it matter?’

‘It does to me.’ Pembroke said sternly and looked her in the eyes. A difficult feat. Vilivian’s glare would turn away most predators. She observed him for a while before she finally conceded.

‘Fine.’

She sat down on the chair and uncovered her thighs.

‘That’s still a little—’

‘You complain too much.’ She said irritably and plunged the blade into her leg. Wendy jumped terrified and Pembroke’s eyes widened in shock.

Vilivian gritted her teeth as she reached as deep as she could with the knife. She then with one swift motion tried to pull it out, but it caught on the skin and she slit it apart.

He could hardly watch her do it to herself, but it was difficult for him to look away. He was simply staggered by the length that woman was willing to go.

If Wendy’s face was pale before, now she could serve as a fairly good lighthouse. She covered her mouth and he suspected she must’ve forced herself to stay put. That girl didn’t appear to be very good with blood or injuries of any kind.

Vilivian groaned in pain as she threw the blade aside and reached for the crystal. She merely put it close to the wound when it lit up.

And then shattered.

Pembroke was about to jump in order to tend to her injury, but then Vilivian groaned loudly and jumped in place as electricity coursed through her body. The wound itself started healing.

Both Wendy and Pembroke couldn’t believe their eyes. The flesh knit itself as what blood poured out onto her leg was cleaned and returned back inside. As morbid as the process was, the end result didn’t even leave a scar. Vilivian smiled, satisfied.

‘How are you feeling?’ Wendy was first to break the silence.

‘Good. Marvellous work, Sorceress.’ Vilivian’s lips frown the other way into something resembling a smile.

‘And how was the numbness?’ Wendy had already forgotten all the blood and injuries and returned into the Scholar Mode. She picked up her notepad and started noting the experiences which Vilivian was very happy to share.

‘The jolt may have been a little too strong. I can’t exactly feel most of my body yet, and I’ll need to when I use it mid-combat. My legs recovered faster – my spell must’ve diminished some of that numbness in the process. In general, the initial shock was the most painful, but it was short. I couldn’t feel the mending of my flesh at all.’

‘That’s great. Greater than great. Very great, I’d say. There’s a word for it, isn’t there? Not important. I believe that I can reduce the strength of electricity. The pain from restoration may be more distinguished, but it should allow for more mobility during combat.’

‘Good. How many crystals do you have left?’

‘Three!’ She pulled them out of her bag.

Vilivian proceeded to enchant every single one of them with her Mend spell. Wendy put them evenly on the table and looked them over ravenously.

‘Oh, this is going to be *exciting*! The possibilities!’

‘One for each of us, correct?’ Vilivian stood up. Her legs still seemed a little numb.

‘Yes. Oh, yes! And do you mind if I take some of your blood for analysing?’

Wendy pointed at the bloodied knife lying on the floor.

‘. . . Help yourself. Shall we come by in the morning to get our crystals then?’

‘You can come back in an hour! No, not an hour. Forty minutes. I’ll be done in forty minutes. Give or take.’

‘Are you certain?’ Vilivian frowned. ‘It seemed as if enchanting that one stone took a lot of strength out of you.’

‘Oh, yes! It did! And I might die if I’m not careful. But I’m just too excited! It’s the risk I’m willing to take. Consider it a friend’s favour.’

Wendy grinned at Vilivian and the demoness returned the warm smile.

‘Then . . . I appreciate your sacrifice.’

‘Me too. For whatever it’s worth.’ Pembroke added.

‘Don’t mention it.’ Wendy laughed cheerfully and then turned serious. ‘Now, shoo. I have glyphs to do, magic to cast. I need to focus.’

‘Very well,’ Vilivian nodded and turned to Pembroke. ‘Shall we take a walk then?’

From her expression, Pembroke deduced she didn’t expect anything else but an affirmative answer.

He shrugged and followed her out of the room, leaving Wendy to her own cackling and devices.

A strange smoke moved away from the window.

Crossroads night was deep and old by now. For Pembroke, nights like these were nostalgic, and not always in the positive sense of that word. Too often, he'd walk down the dark streets in the secret hours and felt the night stretching away. Unlike day, it remained the same. The menace lurking in the velvet shadows may have changed its talons, but it would never change its nature.

Pembroke wondered which one was Vilivian as he followed her, hypnotized by the tiny sway of her red braid. Was she the fiend lurking in the shadows or was she the mere visitor to the aeon-old world of darkness?

Their steps were the only sound echoing among the alleys of Crossroads. "A walk" she called it, but the way she led told him there was a destination.

He decided to break the half-silence by asking a question.

'Why are you giving me that stone?'

'To repay your kindness.' She answered without stopping.

'And what's the real reason? What's the *ploy*?'

'*Ploy*?' She stopped and turned around.

'What's use do I have for a stone if I don't possess any magic. I wasn't born in Wendy's world so I can't use her magic to activate it nor was I born with the same kind of magic you do, not to mention I'm a *human* which also complicates things, doesn't it?'

Vilivian smirked.

'You're very attentive.' She complimented him.

'Not like I had a choice but to listen to you.'

'You always had a choice. You chose to stay *and* listen instead of dozing off like any ordinary dullard would I'd wager.'

'You're quite the flatterer. Now, answer my question.'

Her smirk turned into a genuine smile. As if she appreciated the fact that he didn't sway from his pursuit of an answer.

'Magic isn't required to use the enchanted items, at least in my world. As I've said, humans are trained to bend magic to their will. And that includes the objects as well.'

‘So, I’d just have to think very hard about wanting to have that rock heal me?’

‘Most likely. Humans of my world may have difficulties, but you haven’t evolved the same way they did. It stands to reason you wouldn’t have much issue if any.’

‘That does make sense. Though, If I hadn't seen you stab yourself in the leg I probably would’ve remained sceptical.’

‘Well, I’m glad that showing did manage to also alleviate your doubts. Or do you have something else to complain about which, I found, you very much enjoy doing?’

That last quip Vilivian spoke out in a somewhat soured voice even though she persisted through with her smile.

There was some funny retort he could muster up. But he spent enough time with Vilivian by now to know she’s the kind of person that’s fully capable of stabbing themselves with a knife and thus needs to be watched. Preferably from a safe distance.

‘Sorry . . . Where’re we going?’ he uttered.

‘The beach.’ Vilivian answered and turned around.

‘The beach? But that’s where the . . .’

Axelion stood as he were; dormant, watching the horizon. Pembroke watched Vilivian approach it. The woman walked around it, curious, studying its every aspect.

‘A giant, statue-like machine.’ Vilivian said in awe. ‘Trickster told me. It belongs to you. How do you control it?’

She’s literally just checking out my secret weapon, and I’m not in the slightest concerned with that, he thought.

Vilivian appeared truly enchanted by the old technology. She looked like a giddy schoolgirl at her party. He couldn’t find her less charming if he wanted to, though she certainly made that difficult at times.

She walked around it, studying it, but not touching; drilling it into her memory. Pembroke stood a little further away.

‘It’s named Axelion. I control it from the inside. It’s a rather complex piece of technology that requires unique training to pilot.’

‘So wondrous, how far has humankind gone with technology. I can scarcely imagine the way wars changed with these on the battlefields. Not that I’d experienced any proper prior to this, mind you.’

But what I've learned simply doesn't compare to something like this.'

'I don't believe the ways have changed very much through the times.' He crossed his arms. 'Merely the means.'

His expression soured. He didn't really like talking about anything regarding his homeland and when it came to warfare it was pretty much that.

He felt a tiny pebble hitting his shoulder. He looked to the side, but nothing was there.

'I remember the first time I faced crossbowmen. Such speed for such simplicity. I came very close to dying that day and without even transforming. Few inches to the side and I would've met my final death by a silver bolt to my heart.'

'Crossbowmen?' Pembroke scoffed condescendingly. 'Wait until you learn about guns.'

'Gonnes?' she turned around.

'Guns. You'll see tomorrow.'

She smirked slightly and got back to observing Axelion's only eye. Pembroke was once again struck by a tiny pebble. He looked around a little more, but nothing caught his eye.

Distracted, he's spontaneously decided to muster some courage.

'Would you like to eat dinner tonight?' His voice cracked.

'I'd like to eat dinner every night.' Vilivian answered.

'Right, er . . . Same.'

His stomach turned from the embarrassment that quickly turned into irritation once he was attacked with a pebble again.

Angered, he moved towards the direction the pebble came from, but was stopped by Vilivian's question.

'Are you going to use it?'

Expression of her voice was devoid of any tone or emotion. He looked at her back, slightly perplexed, but he answered honestly.

'No, I don't think I will.'

'Why?' she asked immediately.

'Well,' he smiled confidently. 'Since you're giving me a crutch in the shape of the healing item I believe using Axelion in tomorrow's fight would be a little too much. Besides, I didn't use it in my

first fight, so . . .’

‘I on the other hand believe that you should use it.’ she turned around and glared at him. ‘Nobody said it’s going to get easier.’

‘Maybe,’ he said, irritated. He’s been strung along by that woman until now, but telling him how to do his job was a line he wouldn’t let her cross. ‘But that’s not up for you to decide.’

‘No, it isn’t.’ she started approaching him and her each step made him more inclined to reach for his sidearm. ‘But as a soldier you should take all options into consideration.’

‘I’m not a soldier.’ He scowled.

‘You were trained as one, though, weren’t you?’

‘I’m not one.’

‘Then, what are you, Male?’ she stopped a few inches short of his face. ‘You’re no Soldier. You’re no Warrior, either. What are you?’ she repeated.

‘Who said I have to be anything? For all I care I just might remain strider forever.’

‘You feign ignorance, but your blood says otherwise. It reeks of hesitation despite your otherwise insurmountable confidence.’

‘How do you even—’

He was hit with another pebble. At this point, Pembroke snapped.

‘That’s it!’ he shouted out and pulled out his sidearm. Vilivian took a step back. ‘Who the hell is chucking those freaking rocks at me?!’

Suddenly, a pale spectre appeared in front of them.

‘It’s me.’

‘A GHOST!’

A gunshot resounded throughout the town.

Vilivian was in pain, crouching on the ground and holding her ears. Pembroke watched as the bullet he fired into the spectre stopped at his chest and unceremoniously fell to the ground.

‘Oh. Ow.’ The spectre’s expression was seething with sarcasm.

‘Huh.’ Pembroke sheathed his weapon, slightly surprised. ‘Frankly, I thought it’d go through you.’

‘Depends on my mood, really.’

'Funny that.'

'Innit?'

'... What ... was ... that?'

Vilivian asked meekly as she slowly stood up, still agonized.

'That, Viliv, was a *gun*. A main lead in our performance tomorrow' Pembroke patted his sidearm cockishly.

'Ah, the two of you are contestants in tomorrow's second round! Delighted to make your acquaintances. My name is Armel.' he introduced himself cheerfully.

The spectre put one arm behind him and bowed his head slightly. His pale everything could hardly be seen through the pale everything else. Armel was a ghost quite literally through and through.

'I'm Pembroke.'

'Vilivian of Lilith.' She returned the bow. 'You're of regal descent, I take it?'

Armel let out a short laugh.

'It's the crown, isn't it?' he pointed at his head. 'I was a prince once, indeed.'

'Once?'

'Well, I am dead now, aren't I?'

'Rather content for a dead man, aren't you?' Pembroke scoffed. 'Have you been here the whole time?'

'Throughout your conversation and longer. Including Pembroke's pitiful attempts at romance.'

'Bog off. Why the hell were you throwing rocks at me?'

Armel turned away slightly abashed.

'... Because I'm jealous of happy couples that come here.'

'Hypocrite!'

'I beg to differ! Unlike you, my woes go beyond awful pick-up lines!'

'What? Was the soup too salty, Your Highness?' Pembroke said mockingly. 'Or did one of your concubines run away?'

'Don't call me that, please.' Armel frowned.

‘How’d you die, Spectre,’ Vilivian asked. ‘If you don’t mind my asking.’

‘Not at all.’ He said and turned around. He pointed at his back.

‘Goodness,’ she said. ‘Those wounds . . .’

‘Bullet wounds.’ Pembroke clarified. ‘There’s one . . . five . . .’

‘Seventeen.’ She counted.

‘Someone must’ve really wanted you dead, eh?’

‘I’m quite tenacious, too.’ Armel turned back.

‘So, what’s the woman problem you’re having, Your Highness?’ Pembroke smirked.

The dead prince gave him a cold glare.

‘It’s certainly far more elaborate than your attempts at “romance”, lad.’

‘You made attempts?’ Vilivian looked at Pembroke.

‘That’s . . .’

‘Well, an “attempt”. Singular. I wager he barely mustered up the courage to ask—’

‘Vilivian, shouldn’t we go to Wendy’s?’ Pembroke interrupted as his cheeks flushed.

‘Have forty minutes passed already?’

‘Yes!’ he said desperately. ‘We wouldn’t want to keep her waiting, would we?’

‘No . . . No, we wouldn’t.’ Vilivian gave them both a very calculated look.

‘Now, then, let’s go and . . .’

‘Spectre, how would you like to accompany us for a while?’

‘*Why?!*’ Pembroke exclaimed.

‘I don’t mind,’ Armel said, slightly amused by Pembroke’s reaction. ‘Is there anything specific you’d like of me?’

‘Yes, I’d like to speak to you later. For now, we ought to make our way back to the Sorceress.’

‘Oh, joyous night.’ Armel laughed. ‘We can talk on the way there.’

‘How about we don’t?’ Pembroke grumbled.

Vilivian listened to the men's bickering on the way back to the inn. Armel and Pembroke made a surprisingly animated duo despite one being an aloof loner and the other being, well, dead.

The once a prince would constantly try to bring up Pembroke's folly and give him wayward advice regarding romance, whilst Pembroke tried to get the prince to open up about his own trouble.

She wasn't exactly listening to them. She was rather troubled by the fact that she couldn't sense the Spectre, but he made an appearance of a decent sort despite being a prince, but that's what they're really good at, aren't they? Appearing.

When they arrived at Wendy's door, Vilivian was about to knock but she stopped herself. She sensed two people inside. One was obviously Wendy; she's gotten accustomed to her smell. But the other one . . . It was tainted.

'Vilivian?'

'Is something wrong?'

'We're about to see.' She answered them and knocked on the door. Wendy's voice answered from the inside.

'Come in.'

Vilivian entered and the boys followed behind her.

Inside, Wendy was sitting by the desk, a bottle of grape wine was sitting next to her and the glass. Standing in the middle of the room, as if waiting for an audience, was Forte.

Red-skinned gentleman in a fine white dress shirt and black pants almost danced as he noticed Vilivian coming in.

'Miss Vilivian!' Forte applauded. His heterochromatic eyes showed youthful enthusiasm and his wide smile could charm almost anyone.

And yet, when Vilivian glanced at Wendy, she could easily notice Sorceress' exhaustion.

'Wordsmith,' she said dryly. 'I did not expect to find you here.'

'Quite the happenstance I must say, wouldn't you, Miss Williams? I was visiting another friend at the inn when I happened to overhear a voice of struggle here. I knocked and when there was no answer I entered fearing some harm would've come to Miss Williams!'

'Struggle?'

Wendy looked down in shame. Her face was pale and her legs and hands were trembling.

'I used too much magic and I couldn't move my body.' She confessed. 'I fell off the chair and tried to crawl onto the bed, but . . .'

'Thankfully, I was here otherwise you might've found her unconscious on the floor.'

'Aren't you the hero?' said Pembroke wryly.

Forte looked at him and then at Armel and smiled.

'Miss Vilivian! Are these per chance friends of yours? I'm delighted to see you've managed to form relationships that go beyond the prey-hunter dynamic.' He took off his hat and bowed. 'Forte is my name; I'm a researcher, traveller and a wordsmith, as Miss Vilivian put it. Delighted to make your acquaintance.'

'Name's Pembroke. Pleasure's all mine.'

Armel stayed silent.

'I'm more than a demon, Wordsmith, I'll have you know.' Said Vilivian.

'You make a good case, that much I'll admit. Your showing on the colosseum, however, left a lot to ponder still. Just what part of you is speaking right now?'

'Both.'

'And your eyes did not ease up one bit. Your guard is still up and those with keen eyes can tell that there's something . . . savage about you.'

'You won't be shocked if I kill you right here and now, then?' she allowed herself a slight smirk.

'Vilivian . . .!' Wendy exclaimed, shocked.

'You wouldn't, would you?' said Armel, uncertainly.

Pembroke just laughed.

'Spare me not death, but the empty threats. I fully know you wouldn't kill an innocent man.'

'Innocent?' Pembroke interjected before Vilivian could answer. 'In Crossroads? We ought to lock you up based solely on rarity value alone.'

'What do you want, Wordsmith?' Vilivian asked. 'Tell me, before you give me an actual reason to spite you.'

'After I helped Miss Williams sit up and treated her to some of the wine I had on hand,' he pointed at the bottle lying on the table. Wendy turned away in disgust from it.

'You just happened to have a bottle of wine on your person?'

Forte made a very offended expression.

'There's a great deal of people who know me and rely on me. The bottle of the finest *pinot noir* was a gift from one such person.'

'I understand that this bottle is one of a kind, then?'

'As priceless as it is difficult to make,' said Armel. 'Few vineyards can cultivate the grapes for it, and fewer are capable of developing the complex taste the pinot noir is highly regarded for.'

'A fellow connoisseur! I don't believe we've met! May I have your name?' Forte asked, grinning.

'Names are for friends.' Armel said coldly.

Vilivian could barely notice Forte's lip twitching.

'Dead men tell no tales, indeed. In any case, Miss Williams informed me of the crystal she's been enchanting and their restorative capabilities. I, of course, found great interest in them as a fellow researcher.'

'You want one, don't you?'

'You owe me, after all.'

'Indeed. Wendy, are you able to . . .?'

'No,' she shook her head. 'Those three are my last! I could order them, but . . .'

'I reckon you want it today?'

'My sister is taking part in the semi-final, Miss Vilivian.'

Vilivian sighed.

'Considering your sister's skill, I doubt she'll have any difficulties with the Speedster, but fine. Take it, it's yours.' She nodded at the table.

Everyone, including Forte, looked at her surprised.

'Are you sure, Vilivian?' Wendy asked.

'What the hell?' Pembroke bolted forward angrily and stood between her and Forte. 'You don't owe that pusher anything!'

'I do, actually.' She ignored Pembroke's glare. 'But that equals my debt being repaid.' She said urgently.

'I'm not one to slander my own words, but I must say I expected more resistance from you. Glad to see you still manage to carry yourself with some sense of rationality.'

'Aren't you giving it up too easily?' Pembroke argued.

'I'd rather not remain in his debt any longer. I'd rather give up a healing item now than face some impossible demand later. Besides, he'll likely ask his sister to steal it away should I withhold it.'

'Do go on, I love eavesdropping!' Forte said, indignant.

'Shut up! You're the most at fault here!' Pembroke snapped at him.

'Ah, Mr Pembroke, your words wound my very soul.'

'Colour me surprised, I didn't know you had it in you.'

'Oof, nothing like a satirical quip from a person who covets his lacking intelligence through sarcasm!'

Pembroke glared daggers at him before turning back to Vilivian.

'It'll be hardly fair if I have means to heal myself and you don't, you know?'

Vilivian raised her eyebrow.

'There is some integrity to you after all.'

'What is that supposed to mean?'

'I could always give up my crystal . . .' Wendy proposed, but both Vilivian and Pembroke rejected that idea immediately.

'Out of question.'

'HELL NO!'

'Sorry.' Wendy said meekly.

'Both you and the Sorceress need the stones more than I do. I'll survive.'

'You know,' Pembroke hissed. 'I've a feeling you've been underestimating me this whole time. Ever since we talked at the beach . . . No, ever since you first offered me the crystal.'

'I never underestimated you.'

'And yet I have a feeling you think you're stronger than me.'

'Of that, I am guilty. I am stronger than you. By a lot.'

Silence befell the room. Vilivian did not elaborate as this was no boast nor a threat. Simply a statement. Forte chuckled in the background as Pembroke grimaced. Armel and Wendy watched the tension rise.

‘To be completely honest, I don’t care much how you intend to resolve this conundrum though I’m convinced the result will be at least somewhat comical.’ Said Forte and grabbed one of the crystals from the table. ‘That said, I did not expect you to have a playful side. My sister painted you as someone who doesn’t play with their food.’ He glanced at Pembroke.

‘Ah, you mean the scuffle the Blackblood and I participated in when we met?’ Vilivian shrugged. ‘I admit, the way people of Crossroads belittle their mortality is astounding.’

‘You’ve enjoyed it.’

‘As much as you could enjoy swatting flies.’

‘Which for you are most encounters.’ He shook his head and turned to Wendy. ‘My thanks for your hard work, Miss Williams. Please, consider the wine a gift for your efforts.’

Wendy gave the bottle of wine a glance of disdain.

‘Thank you . . .’

‘Miss Vilivian. Gentlemen.’ He bowed. ‘So long.’

Forte whistled his way out of the room, juggling the crystal in his hand. Wendy and Armel followed him out with their gazes, whilst Pembroke stared at the floor with his arms crossed. Vilivian simply stared forward. She hoped that the crystal would prove useful to Forte’s sister. Meeting her in the final would be the only positive consequence of this ordeal.

‘Of all the bloody brands,’ Wendy broke the silence by cursing the bottle. ‘He had to pick that one.’

‘Will you be getting rid of it?’ Armel asked.

‘It is rather expensive, isn’t it? Eh, maybe I’ll use it for potions or give it to Saki.’ She sighed and picked up the remaining crystals from the table. She handed one to Pembroke.

‘This one’s yours . . .’

He looked over the dimmed stone and then asked Vilivian.

‘Why are you so adamant on giving it to me?’

‘What answer are you expecting?’

‘A truthful one.’

‘I don’t have one like that.’

'You don't?'

She shook her head.

'I'm positive that I'm not sure that I have an answer that will satisfy your query.'

He looked at her confused. She remained stoic, as always. He sighed resigned and hid the crystal in his pocket.

'I need a drink.'

And then he left. They heard him walking down the hallway.

' . . . This one's for you, Viliv.' Wendy handed over her crystal.

'Your. Not mine.' Vilivian said.

'You'll need it for tomorrow's fight, won't you?' Wendy smiled.

'But your research . . .'

'Won't go anywhere. It's not like we can't make more once I get more crystals, right?'

'Yes, but it's rightfully yours. You don't have to compensate me for my debts.'

'Then, I'm giving it to you as a gift. From a friend.' She smiled.

Vilivian looked at Wendy's tired expression then at the crystal and returned the smile.

'Thank you, Wendy.'

The Sorceress giggled happily. *'You're welcome.'*

'This may not be my place to ask, Vilivian,' Armel started carefully. *'But what exactly do you make of Pembroke?'*

'Mediocrity.' She answered bluntly.

'You're harsh . . .' said Wendy.

'I'm generous.'

'He wouldn't take kindly to that comment judging by his reaction to what you said earlier.' Armel pointed out. He may have bickered with Pembroke, but he couldn't help but express worry over the soldier's reaction.

'It's a fact. He's the one who's overcomplicating this.'

‘He may be overcomplicating because he doesn’t like the truth.’

‘Yes. But nothing has to stay true forever.’

‘If you say so . . . By the way, didn’t you want something from me?’

‘Hm? Ah, yes.’ She stretched. ‘I do fancy a drink, however. Mind joining me in the Fox Den, Spectre?’

‘Well, I can technically drink . . . I don’t mind.’

‘And you, Wendy? We’d love to have you.’

‘I am tired, but . . . Well, I can have a cup or two.’

‘Let’s go then.’

They would catch up to Pembroke rather quickly and despite the boy’s grumblings he didn’t mind accompanying him to the Fox Den with some conversation, though he didn’t exchange a word with Vilivian. On the way they discovered that all but Pembroke had a mutual acquaintance in Aude – a vixen friend of Armel.

Fox Den in the middle of the night was like any other bar in the multiverse. It was like this almost everywhere.

Night time bars were solemn, calm and slow – perfect for the people who want to just be without interruption. It was too easy to get into an argument or a brawl earlier in the day, but now there were few people – all of them brooding or drinking wistfully with an exception of that one man who ate the ceiling once and now everyone’s too scared to get rid of him.

The group sat at the counter and Saki counted on her fingers.

‘Alright, to get the orders right. That’s a pint of lager for Pembroke, glass of rum for Armel . . .’

‘Make it double.’

‘I’ll just charge you a whole bottle.’

‘Aye, fair enough.’

‘. . . hot chocolate for Wendy . . .’

‘Oh! With extra whipped cream and marshmallows, please!’ Wendy asked excitedly.

‘. . . and a glass of *pinot noir* for Vilivian.’

‘Please.’

‘You know, I could give you that bottle . . .’ Wendy said.

‘I refuse to acknowledge any gift coming from that man.’ Said Vilivian, soured.

‘So, you *are* upset.’ Pembroke gave half a mocking smile.

‘Yes. That’s part of the reason I’m drinking now.’

The drinks were put in front of them. They looked at their drinks. They drank their drinks.

‘. . . You know what gets me?’ Wendy started, after a while. ‘The fact that the first thing he did after helping me up was putting down that bottle, as if it were a boon of some deity and then had the audacity to ask me about the crystals. Researcher. Pah!’ she sipped her chocolate. The whipped cream formed a moustache on her mouth.

‘. . . What gets me,’ said Armel. ‘Is how pretentious he was the whole time.’

‘The way he speaks is also annoying.’ Added Pembroke.

Everyone nodded. They drank their drinks.

‘So, Princeboy,’ said Pembroke. ‘Who’s the gal?’

‘Subtle as a brick.’ Armel sighed. ‘You might know her . . .’

‘It’s probably Aude.’ Said Saki.

‘It’s likely Aude.’ Wendy added.

‘Must be the Vixen.’ Vilivian settled.

Armel groaned as Pembroke chuckled happily.

‘There’s the subtlety you wanted so much. I take it you’re breaking up?’

‘We’re hardly a couple.’ Armel admitted. “‘Partners” is more like . . . It’s complex. Frankly, I’m shocked it took me this long to realize the feelings I have for her . . .’

They drank their drinks. Saki knew her customers better than anyone so she silently refilled them, including Wendy’s hot chocolate and the whipped cream.

‘I’d worry about the health of any relationship involving Aude. And I mean the literal, physical health.’

‘He isn’t really risking much considering he’s dead.’ Said Vilivian.

‘Well, each to their own, I suppose . . .’ Wendy whistled.

‘You people are a little unfair. Listen, I know that Aude may be . . .’

‘Unnecessarily violent?’ Saki observed.

‘A sociopath?’ Wendy deduced.

‘Mad.’ Vilivian stated.

‘All of the above?’ Pembroke finished.

‘You’re . . .’ Armel sighed loudly. ‘All correct.’

They drank their drinks. Armel turned to Wendy.

‘So, Wendy. Let’s say you’re a woman.’

Pembroke’s beer stopped midway to his lips. Saki almost dropped a glass she was cleaning.

Wendy looked at him, uncertain.

‘. . . I *am* a woman, Armel, but fine. It shouldn’t be too hard.’

‘*Another* woman. And someone told you that they loved you. How would you react?’

‘Before or after they questioned my sex?’

‘I was setting up a scenario. You know what I mean!’

‘That depends. Have they just blurted it out? Have I known them for a long time? I lack some context. Why? Are you scared things won’t proceed naturally?’

‘I am, since we’ve had an argument. When we . . . *if* we manage to make up, I’d like to push things forward, but I’m not sure how to consider Aude’s . . . unpredictability.’

‘It will certainly take time.’

‘And I’ve nothing but that, but we’ve been practically joined at the hip ever since we met!’

‘In every sense except literal, I’d wager.’ Pembroke snorted.

‘I would never think of her that way! I’d look to her for support and guidance, and . . .’

‘And what support and guidance did you find in the sway of her tail?’ Vilivian asked.

‘That’s not what I— I wouldn’t—’ Armel’s ghastly visage was mottled with red. ‘What about you, Vilivian? What would you do if someone were to profess their passion for you?’

‘Most men that did tried to deceive me. The one man whose feelings were genuine hesitated in the most important moment and watched his companions be slaughtered by my hand before I killed him as well.’

They listened in shocked curiosity.

‘Love is ethereal.’ She drank her wine. ‘But don’t take my thoughts at face-value. Demons like me can’t feel love beyond familial camaraderie.’

‘You can’t?’ Wendy asked. ‘Then how are you . . .’

‘Do you really want to know?’

‘. . . Yes.’ she answered, uncertainly.

‘No. You don’t. This once, I’ll spare you the burden of knowledge.’

‘Burden of knowledge . . . Funny. I came here seeking exactly that. Means to save my home and at the same time I was running away from it. I’m scared that one day I might find out that there’s no such means.’

They looked at their drinks. They drank their drinks. Armel immediately downed the glass of rum and refilled it from the bottle.

‘The last memory I have of home is of it being in a civil war.’ The ghost stared at his drink wistfully. ‘How many years have passed since it ended . . .? What has become of that nation, I wonder sometimes . . .’

‘My home’s a stone cave deep underground I spent a millennium in.’ Vilivian said. ‘You certainly have much more freedom of guessing.’

‘Yeah. Well, we most likely have lost and once the new order established itself they moved on to the things proper nations do, like preparing to wage another war.’ He scoffed. ‘What of you, Pembroke? What’s your home like?’

‘Quiet.’ He answered. ‘Content. Nothing ever happens aside from vandalism and occasional mariticide.’

‘Mariticide?’

Pembroke laughed gravely. ‘It’s a cheaper alternative to a divorce.’

‘Sounds almost dystopian.’ Wendy commented.

‘And yet it isn’t. Everything works properly. Attend education. Attend mandatory military service. Finish education. Serve the nation. Sometimes fight for the nation. It’s a cycle that works. I hate it, but it works. Not everyone’s a farmer, but everyone’s a soldier.’

‘So, you say.’ Vilivian said. ‘Yet, you don’t behave like one.’

‘Oh? And how would a soldier behave then, Lady Vilivian? Enlighten us, please!’ Pembroke raved.

‘Thorough, unburdened by morality but proud to serve..’

‘Proud to serve, she says . . .! Proud of fucking what? Do you want to know what being a soldier is *really* like?!’

The chair cluttered as Pembroke stood back up and drunkenly stumbled towards Vilivian and glared at her. She looked back at him

‘Do tell.’

‘Ever been on a farm outside the town? They’ve got animals there – cows, to be specific. And you know how it is, sometimes a cow will take a steaming pile of shit in the middle of the field and do you know who has to clean it up? Not the owner, not even the bloody farmhands, but disposable schmucks trained and dedicated to flip the dung over the fence. *That’s* what being a soldier is like. What use is my pride for?’

‘You don’t need to be proud of the flag you serve, Pembroke.’ Armel said. ‘Be proud of the strength you can achieve by yourself – of the obstacles you can overcome . . .’

‘Shut it. I received the harshest training my nation can offer. I am one of the most skilled to pass the boot camp. And I still know that pretending to be a “good soldier” is nothing short of lying to myself.’

‘Like you are right now?’ Vilivian asked. ‘Your insecurities regarding your abilities are apparent.’

‘What do *you* know? Why do you care? Was that thing,’ he pulled out a crystal and showed it to them. ‘Supposed to be a pity gift from you to me?’

‘You’ll die without it.’

‘Is that a threat?’

‘Prediction, Male. You may have your training, but without the tools that don’t at least match up to my abilities you remain just a human. The crystal will spare you a single mistake.’

‘For all of that talk of overconfidence you’re awfully full of it, aren’t you?’

‘I have experience to back it up. Do you?’

‘I am in a semi-final, am I not?’

‘And what is that supposed to indicate?’

‘. . . That “just a human” is going to emerge victorious against you tomorrow.’ He said quietly.

Pembrooke scowled and left the Fox Den. Wendy and Armel, who had no idea how to include themselves in that argument, exchanged looks. The prince especially bearing a very unsatisfied grimace.

‘Vilivian,’ he started. ‘I don’t think there is anything in particular you wanted with me.’

‘You had a strangely friendly dynamic with him back on the beach,’ she confessed. ‘I was curious to see how it would develop.’

‘I tend to get along with other people.’ He said. ‘But much less so when they treat me as an unaware part of an experiment.’

‘I’m sorry.’

He shook his head, resigned.

‘You’re not the most socially adept person, are you?’

‘No,’ she gave a half-smile.

‘Who am I to judge? I can hardly make up my mind about a girl I love. Oh, well.’ He stood up. ‘No hard feelings so long as you don’t do it again. I take it you agitated Pembrooke in order to make him bring out his best in your fight?’

‘I simply spoke the truth. He’s the one who’s incapable of facing it.’

‘Sure.’ He smiled smugly. ‘Well, I’ll be taking my leave. Good luck in your fight.’

‘Thank you.’

‘See you around, Wendy.’

‘Good bye, Armel.’ She smiled back and after he left she turned towards Vilivian. ‘I should probably get back too, Vilivian. It’s been . . . a very long night.’

Vilivian smiled warmly at the sorceress. ‘It most certainly has, Wendy. Your work will not go underappreciated.’

‘No, please, don’t mention it. As much as I want to see my work be put in practice I hope none of you come to any grave harm.’

‘Will you come to watch?’

‘Of course!’ she said happily. ‘After spending time with both you and Pembrooke I’d be a fool not to root for either of you. Make sure you give it your best, alright?’

‘Naturally. Thank you, Wendy.’

Wendy smiled, bowed and left.

Vilivian was left alone with her drink and Saki. Their attention was suddenly brought to the very familiar jingle of bells coming from the stairs leading up to the VIP area of the Fox Den.

‘Wendy, Armel, Pembroke . . .’ Chifu approached them and sat down next to Vilivian. ‘You keep making friends, Viliv, but you won’t call me by my given name. What gives, she pouted.’

‘Apologies, Trickster,’ Vilivian turned to her drink. ‘I’ll make sure to compensate you eventually.’

‘I didn’t expect you to be awake at this hour, Chifu.’ Said Saki.

‘Oh, I woke up with a hangover so I thought I’d get some medicine from my bestie!’

‘I’d like to get some sleep sometimes too, you know?’

‘I know.’

Saki sighed.

‘The usual, then?’ She approached the tap. ‘And you Viliv? A refill?’

‘If you’d be so kind, Saki. Thank you.’

‘Anytime.’ Saki smiled smugly and looked at Chifu who pouted at them both.

‘That is just rude is what that is!’

Saki put the drinks in front of them. In one swing Chifu downed half her pint while Vilivian gently sipped her wine.

‘Ah. So, Viliv. Mind enlightening us what was the purpose of this whole charade you put up with Pembroke?’

Vilivian gave her a single glance, but nothing beyond that.

‘You know, at first I thought there was some infatuation on your part. A handsome man through a simple act of kindness enkindles the cold, cold heart of a demon . . .’

‘I’d sooner lay with a woman.’ Vilivian said emotionlessly.

‘. . . Then you take him to Wendy’s. “Bold”, I thought to myself back then, but you started talking about magical rocks and I kind of lost interest. But then you kept . . . pushing him. Trying to bring out a reaction – not that difficult, mind you – I just didn’t paint you as someone who would willingly spark a conflict. So, truthfully speaking, Viliv – why did you anger him?’

‘For fun.’ Vilivian drank her wine.

Chifu and Saki looked at her surprised.

'Oh. My. Me.' Chifu said. 'I'll tear up. Our little demon's all grown up now!'

'You did inspire me, Trickster.'

'You hear that, Saki?'

'Let's hope she won't take up your drinking habits.' Saki mumbled and left for the kitchen.

'The first time I encountered that Male I didn't know who he was. Aside from the random act of altruism and the stench of alcohol I could sense his self-doubt and diffidence. I took him as just another average human of the Crossroads. Plenty of people like him in this place. The second time, I knew that he was my opponent. And I was . . . intrigued. How could someone so mediocre pass on to the next round? I was told he's a soldier, of course, but his adversary was an immortal, which means that the technology and skills he boasted were, to some extent, truthful. Led by curiosity, I offered him the healing crystal expecting him to either accept it- as a soldier should use every tool, or reject it due to his pride as a warrior. He took it, but treated it as an offering of pity from me.'

'And what's the conclusion you draw from this?'

'That his first victory weakened him. He's not used to feeling empowered, and any slight or doubt made towards his ability invokes anger within him because deep down he believes it. He's lying to himself.'

'Sounds about right.' Chifu drank.

'You knew?'

'Plenty of people doubt themselves. Plenty of people get on a success high. Pembroke is, well, just an average guy with pretty good skills. Your expectations of him may simply be too high.'

'They may be. But I did provoke him deliberately. I want him to fight to his fullest strength tomorrow.'

'Why is that?' Chifu asked. 'You realize that him not holding anything back may result in your loss?'

'I do, but I can't help it. I want to have fun.'

Chifu raised her eyebrows. Vilivian smiled ravenously.

'You were right. Emulating civilized society will be . . . boring. I realized that as I sat down with Wendy and the Spectre. I could pretend to be a human, hide away my demonic nature and abilities, but they didn't pretend to be someone they aren't. Wendy openly experiments in her own room at the inn and even rented the room below her just to be safe. She's willing to knock on Death's door in order to pursue her scientific research . . . and the Spectre is probably the only person capable of out drinking you. How long will I last, pretending to be something I'm not?' She

giggled. 'Not to mention . . . when I fought Volley I realized that I really like a *good fight*.'

' . . . Careful, Viliv. Your Matriarch is showing.' Chifu said.

'I'm glad. I don't want people to mistake me for a simple human.'

'Good show tomorrow, then?'

'If that Male manages to live up to his potential, yes. Definitely.'

'Will he?'

'One way or another, Trickster, I will have my fun. And you will have yours.'

Vilivian smiled mischievously.

'Well then,' Chifu raised her glass. 'To good fun.'

Crowds have gathered at the Colosseum shoving in the seemingly unending lines. The semi-finals attracted many more spectators than the first rounds despite it being seemingly the hottest day of the month.

Pembroke was sweltering in his black and white modular slim suit awaiting his turn in Colosseum by the bathrooms in Fighters' Area. It provided little durability, but the manoeuvrability provided by the attached air-pack in the back was too valuable to pass on.

He had second thoughts on leaving Axelion behind, however. He was rather drunk when he declared himself self-sufficient. Still, he believed he had something to prove – and that was that he was a little more than just a pilot of a giant fighting robot.

He looked over the equipment. Pembroke had his knife sharpened at the shop and he checked his handgun twice. Other than that, he only had the healing crystal. He considered throwing it away in fit of rage last night, but some notion deep in his mind prevented him from doing so. Common sense, most likely.

He felt really bad about shouting at Vilivian like that, but it's not like she wasn't at fault either. Her perception of some things was very old-fashioned. She needed to be enlightened about some things and . . .

He shook his head and took a deep breath. No point. It's now or never in a few minutes. All he could do was to prepare himself mentally.

Chifu smiled content as the second semi-final was a few minutes away. She watched over the Colosseum from her balcony, alone.

She got rather excited yesterday night and that excitement persisted through to the current moment, as rare as it happens. Vilivian's little epiphany might just be the spice this tournament needs.

'Humph.'

She heard and turned her head towards the sound. Volley was climbing the wall of her balcony. He had a bag tied around his neck and in his hands, he was holding a folding chair and Vilivian's keepsake.

'G'day, Miss God Eater. Today's a scorcher, innit?'

'Why are you here?'

'Duh, to watch the fight. Miss Viliv asked to watch over her keepsake here, see?' he showed the sheathed Excalibur. He then unfolded the chair and put it next to Chifu's throne.

'You're joking.'

'Course not. Here,' he reached in the bag and pulled out a cold can of beer. 'My Auntie said to give this to you.'

Chifu took the beer.

'I'll allow it. What are these?' she pointed at the box Volley opened.

'Animal crackers.'

'... Can I have some?'

'Fine. But the elephant-shaped ones are mine.'

'Is there a fox one?'

'Welcome back, Crossroads!'

X's voice exploded throughout the arena. The filled stands cheered in excitement as the screens showed her floating above the colosseum.

'Guys, gals and pals, it is nigh time for us to settle for the second finalist of the Crossroads Tournament! Both fighters gave us a grand showing yesterday, but who will manage to emerge victorious?! Please, welcome – Vilivian of Lilith!'

Jeers mixed in with the ovations. Obnoxiously energetic music accompanied Vilivian as she exited onto the arena as calm as ever. She was clothed in a red blouse and black pants and kept her left arm behind her back.

Once stopped in the middle of the arena Miss X continued to speak.

‘Her opponent is considered an underdog, but he’s known to bring an upset! Please, welcome – Pembroke Artysup!’

Pembroke exhaled and put on his sunglasses. He made sure his watch was tightly fit and entered the arena.

The sun scorched the arena and Pembroke was already getting high on the atmosphere amongst the ovations, the loud music and the heat.

He made it to the middle where Vilivian was waiting. The argument was still fresh; Pembroke feared that she may try and press on his psyche. Any word coming from her lips could become a means to weaken his morale.

‘Hot day, isn’t it?’ she smiled softly as she watched a butterfly fly by.

‘Ah. Yeah.’ He answered, uncertainly.

Miss X’s voice resounded yet again.

‘What a weather, am I right?’ her laughter echoed. ‘Let’s heat up the atmosphere even more by making the arena a little more fitting!’

A sudden and powerful gust of wind kicked up around them. Dust rose up, confusing them and blocking off view. Pembroke covered his head with his arms and after several seconds of violent winds he witnessed the arena change.

Golden sand surrounded him, including the footing. He could barely make out the stands, peeking from in-between the dunes. Vilivian was as perplexed as he was, but she did not allow that expression to linger for long.

She chased away some of her hair in the front. ‘Shall we?’

‘Are the fighters ready?!’ Miss X exclaimed loudly.

Pembroke put his hand on his handgun as Vilivian clenched her fists and took a stance.

Melee? Yeah. *No.*

‘Begin!’

Before Vilivian could take one step in his direction he pulled out his gun and shot her shoulder. The bullet went in and blood dripped into the sand. She groaned and collapsed on one knee, and Pembroke hesitated. A quick thought said; is that it? Which was immediately replaced by “hell no”, but before he could double-tap he noticed Vilivian smirk smugly.

‘Ah. That surprised me.’

Her words, and that smirk, somehow maddened him immensely.

‘*Ward.*’ She chanted and stood up – quickly and effortlessly.

Pembroke moved back as he fired three more bullets, but only one managed to graze her shoulder until the translucent magical shield was put up in front of her.

She ran towards him with her arm extended and the shield covering most of her front. He lowered his weapon and shot at her leg *just* as she was jumping and proceeding to dropkick him in the chest.

They both collapsed with his handgun falling out of his hand and sunglasses off his head. He gathered himself as quickly as he could and reached for it, but Vilivian was already swinging at him.

He reached for the combat knife strapped to his hip and ducked down avoiding her swing. He immediately stabbed to counter, but his arm was grabbed and that’s where he realized Vilivian’s inhuman strength.

She raised his arm effortlessly despite his opposition and with her other fist she struck his ribs. The audience yelled out in shock.

Pembroke coughed out, stunned in grave pain as he collapsed onto the sand along with the knife. He looked up at Vilivian who merely glared at him from above. Her shoulder wound was dripping with blood, but she didn’t seem to mind.

‘Get up.’ She said stone-faced as the spectators jeered at her.

He tried to, truly, but as he took breath to gather strength a sharp pain coursed through his chest and he fell back again.

‘I must’ve fractured a rib or two. Pardon me,’ she said in a scarily sweet voice. ‘I tend to forget how fragile humans really are.’

He grimaced. She had that expectant look on her face and he had no choice. He reached for his pocket and took out the healing crystal. He put the crystal near to where he was struck and focused.

Heal me, he thought. Heal me and let me kill this bitch before she kills me.

The crystal shined then shattered. Pembroke felt a painful current run through his body.

He could feel his insides put themselves back together. His ribs returned to their form, the blood getting cleansed and the pain that came with it. He would scream if it weren't even more painful, so he gritted his teeth and focused on staying conscious.

It passed eventually and all he felt was slight numbness in the chest and voltage jolting him every few seconds.

He stood up, Vilivian standing calmly a few feet away. It was incredible how quick he got better. The healing spell was truly something to behold.

'Again?' she asked smugly. She glanced over at the knife to his right and at the gun to his left. He's had about enough of her toying with him.

He leaned forward and pressed a button on his modular suit and the sudden burst propelled him forward knee first into Vilivian's head.

The Matriarch collapsed shocked, but still conscious whilst Pembroke managed to stick the landing perfectly. He rushed to recover his gun, sand not making it any easier and when he reached it he turned immediately and fired upon Vilivian.

The woman had already created a barrier with her one hand that blocked his shots. With the other hand she raised it into a fist, glowing blue.

'*Burst.*' She chanted and the ground beneath Pembroke trembled.

'Fuckin' magics!' he cursed as the sand around him exploded violently and pushed him back. Course and rough on his eyes he could barely notice Vilivian approaching him yet again.

He tried to aim, but she grabbed the handgun and wrestled it away as she headbutted him. Pembroke staggered backwards, his nose bleeding, he wheezed in pain.

Vilivian stood with a gun in her hand. She rotated it around in her hand, studying it like the most diligent scholar.

'Technology is incredible,' she said in awe. 'Such simple concept; aim and fire. And you can't even see the projectile. If it were made of silver I might've died.'

She aimed it at him and pulled the trigger.

Strange, thought Pembroke. He's been so used to the sound of gunfire he's learned to ignore it most of the time. And yet, that single gunshot echoed in his mind, hollowing out everything else.

He looked down and saw blood pour out the side of his stomach.

'Ah.' He finally heard himself gasp as he grabbed his wound and fell sitting down on the sand. His head bobbing up and down as he realized his own mortality.

Miss X floated above them, showing them on screens as the audience was made spectacularly silent.

'Well,' Vilivian said, disappointed as she snapped the handgun in two and threw the pieces away. 'It seems rather efficient on you, however.'

'Don't compare average humans to monsters like you.' He uttered.

'You think you're average?'

'Shut up!' he snapped and winced. He was struggling for breath. 'You've made your point yet? You beat me. I was wrong. I lost. I couldn't do anything.'

'You've already had everything you needed to defeat me,' she crooked her head observing his wound. 'You simply chose to not do it.'

'What use would that thing be?' he cried. 'Against witches? Ghosts? *You?*' he coughed violently and then said in a weak voice. 'What kind of training or equipment was supposed to prepare me for the supernatural? For things that were simply born better?'

Vilivian pressed her lips, vexed.

'Don't blame your own incompetence on birth rights or the unknown. I am over a thousand years old. Not all my victories were decisive and I have suffered losses as well. But I got stronger. I trained and learned.'

'My world was at peace – I had no reason to put in *any* effort!'

'Then why fight in this tournament?'

'Because . . . I wanted to prove to myself that I am more than I thought!'

He coughed, but Vilivian remained impassive.

'Whether I should consider your fallacy a consequence of your inflated ego or sheer stupidity is hard to say.' She approached and picked up the knife he dropped earlier. 'You *could've* been more but you were content with a single victory. You saw yourself invulnerable enough to stop trying. Here, Male.' she stabbed the knife into the sand in front of him. 'Kill yourself with it and prove that you at least possess the bravery of a soldier you were trained to be. Or surrender. At this point that's what I'd expect from you.'

He looked at his reflection in the blade. Damn it, he thought. That's not how it was supposed to go. A quick, maybe fun tournament. Maybe a prize; some means for him to realize that his life isn't pointless. That there is more to it. And what did he find? Death.

With a trembling hand, he grabbed the handle. He never thought to end up this way. He looked up at Vilivian. Anger numbed the pain as he slowly stood up, groaning.

He's lost a lot of blood and Vilivian looked in surprise at his endurance. It was as if he sustained himself on hatred alone.

'Is that your last breath?' she asked.

'If I surrender now, I'll just prove myself wrong.' He pointed a knife at her. 'That way, I can at least go out in blazes of damned glory.'

Vilivian scoffed.

'You can't even do it yourself, so you need me to kill you for you? Pathetic. Why not prove me right and show me that there is some semblance of warrior spirit within you?'

'You're *still* on about that?' he smiled wryly. 'I didn't even bring the fucking thing to the arena. And with this wound . . .'

Vilivian threw something at him. He managed to grab it in his bloodied hand and he could feel the healing crystal tremble in reaction to his blood.

She smiled at his flabbergasted expression.

'You . . .'

'Don't need it.'

He glared at her mocking grin and then he put the crystal next to his bullet wound.

'I hate you.' He stated.

'I know.'

He writhed in pain and fell on his knees as the electric current stunned him. He felt slight discomfort as his insides twisted back to their proper form and the bullet got expelled from his body.

Not even a scar remained and aside from a slight numbness he was feeling good. The pain subsided and his breathing stabilized.

'It doesn't change the fact that Axelion isn't here, you know?' he said, happy that he managed to avoid death for now, but still aware that Vilivian may change the fact relatively effortlessly.

'Oh!' Vilivian exclaimed rather loudly. 'I'm certain that some dramatic convenience would be nothing but a trivial matter for someone who treats spatial magic as a hobby!'

She made a quick glance at God Eater's balcony; someone chuckled from that direction.

A powerful wind picked up into a sandstorm around them. Pembroke got near-sighted very quickly as the sand had gotten seemingly everywhere. A sudden burst of wind from behind him dispersed the sand and when he turned around he saw Axelion.

Twelve-metre-tall machine, slightly covered in sand; the knight kneeling before Pembroke, as ever as it could be to fight – awaiting orders.

He turned to Vilivian who pushed away some of her hair.

‘You’ll regret it, you know?’ For the first time during this fight he exuded confidence.

‘Show me, then. And in exchange,’ she clenched her fists. The veins on her body lit up with purple. ‘I’ll show you.’

The audience cheered on loudly as Miss X commented colourfully.

‘What is happening?! Contestant Vilivian willingly helped her adversary! And what is that machine and where could it have POSSIBLY come from?!’

Pembroke climbed onto Axelion’s cockpit in the back as Vilivian’s body changed.

Her clothes were torn apart as her torso and legs grew in size. Skin turned hard, into a dark colour as her limbs grew in length and fingers turned into claws. From her back a tail started emerging – long, segmented and flexible its point was sharp.

Anything resembling humanity disappeared – even her face. The eyes, lips and nose were gone and her head turned white and morphed to resemble a calf skull.

Inside Axelion, Pembroke immediately connected himself to the machine. The mecha came to life as its senses became Pembroke and vice versa.

+++ Reactor Outputs NORMAL +++

+++ Ammunition Systems NORMAL +++

+++ Missile Systems NORMAL +++

+++ Limbic Systems NORMAL +++

+++ Sensors NORMAL +++

+++ Welcome Back INSERT YOUR NAME HERE +++

‘Alright, Axelion. We’ve got ourselves a demon to kill!’ Pembroke high-fived the grenade hanging from the ceiling. For luck.

+++ Acknowledged +++

The Axelion stood up; the noise of the engine drowned the sounds of the colosseum as the mighty goliath stood up ready for a fight. They watched Vilivian finish her transformation; the purple light within her glowed for a little before dying out. Her hollow eye sockets observing him.

‘Let’s dance.’

The autocannons mounted on its head took aim and fired before Vilivian managed to move. The projectiles pushed her back, but didn’t manage to even put a dent in her skin.

She charged toward him brushing off the projectiles that managed to hit her and once she was close enough she jumped.

Axelion’s right arm moved quickly, but with very mechanical motion and Vilivian was swatted out of the air like a fly. She collapsed into a dune and was partially covered by sand.

Mecha’s right arm equipped itself with a beam saber and the mechanical knight charged forward. Vilivian dug herself out of sand and with her enhanced agility and speed dodging the strike wasn’t difficult. She jumped up on the Axelion’s arm, wrapping her extended tail around it and climbing atop towards the head. The autocannons took aim and fired at her, but Vilivian persisted through. Once she reached the head she smashed in the eye.

+++ WARNING! Damage to Main Sensor Detected +++

‘I can see that!’

She then tried to rip out the autocannons and though they still managed to open fire at Vilivian which caused her to recoil; she jumped behind them onto Axelion’s neck and tore them out from there.

+++ WARNING! Damage To External Cannons Detected +++

‘I *fucking* know! Grab her!’

Axelion’s free hand managed to pluck Vilivian and threw her into the sand at its feet just after she tore the cannons out. The saber came down to pierce her, but Vilivian moved aside and tried climbing the arm once more, but Axelion moved back and instead kicked her.

+++ External Cannons Not Detected. Would You Like To Send Report? +++

‘Do not send the fucking report!’

Vilivian was sent flying, but neither the kick nor landing on sand didn’t cause her any damage either.

Though Axelion lost two weapons he was glad to retain the main eye’s functionality. Relying on auxiliary sensors, while possible, was difficult especially with something so fast moving.

Pembrooke had another beam saber fire up in Axelion's other arm and he charged her. The heat coming from exhausts in the back burned the sand into glass as Axelion took swings at Vilivian. She ducked under and climbed on its leg from behind.

'Again?! Fly up!'

The thrusters pointed downwards as Vilivian climbed the leg. She saw flame appearing in one of the exhausts and barely jumped away towards the middle where the door to the cockpit was. Axelion launched into the air and Pembrooke decided to let gravity do the work.

Axelion rose through the air and Pembrooke started hearing pounding.

'What—'

Another loud bang and a dent appeared in the door to the cockpit.

'Shit!'

Axelion sped up its Ascend. Vilivian could barely hold on.

'Pleasefalloffpleasefalloffpleasefalloff!!'

They were slightly above the stands when Vilivian fell off and dove to the sand below. She helplessly flailed in the air and landed in the dune kicking up the dust.

Axelion landed as well, blowing away the desert.

'Where is she?' Pembrooke asked.

+++ Unidentified Lifeform Detected Approximately FIVE Meters Below This Unit +++

'Below? What is she—'

The Axelion started sinking into the ground. The sand gave out beneath it and started falling into the ravine from which Vilivian emerged. She quickly climbed the back of Axelion and started attacking the thrusters. Pembrooke surrendered his sabers and desperately commanded the giant to grab her, but the Matriarch deftly avoided capture whilst removing mecha's flight ability all the while it sunk deeper into the underground.

+++ WARNING! Thrusters ONE and TWO Capability At Minimum. +++

+++ WARNING! BOTTOM LIMBS Functionality Obstructed +++

+++ Would You Like To Troubleshoot For Help? +++

'Fuck!'

He looked at Vilivian. She placed herself a safe distance from his hands. Her blood veins started glowing with purple light. He could see her heart light up like a star.

‘What’s she doing?’

+++ DATA NOT FOUND +++

Vilivian opened her mouth. The insides were dark as the abyss. A purple light appeared within.

‘She’s using magic!’

+++ DATA NOT FOUND +++

‘Fire the rockets!’

+++ PREPARING MISS—

ERASE. Vilivian’s voice echoed in Pembroke’s head.

Energy gathered in Vilivian’s body was unleashed through her mouth. Magic at its purest took the form of a pink beam as it was launched at the Axelion with a singular purpose – to remove everything it meets.

The Axelion was cut in half separating its torso from legs. Pembroke was just above when the beam struck and it continued going towards the stands – the spectators tried running away, but the beam dispersed ceremonially just as it was about to hit.

Axelion’s torso collapsed onto the sand with Pembroke still inside. He cried in pain as he was thrown around the walls inside.

‘A giant, fucking, robot . . . Fuck!’ He noticed Vilivian slowly approaching him. Her tail waved from one side to another. She relished in it, he just knew. That monstrous expression didn’t show anything but he knew she was being smug.

But then, a glimmer of hope.

+++ MISSILES PREPARED +++

+++ TARGET LOCKED +++

+++ FIRE? +++

‘Yes! YES!’ he shouted.

+++ FIRING MISSILES +++

From the back of his torso Axelion launched four rockets into the air. They quickly set course onto Vilivian and the Matriarch didn’t even react when they struck her.

The explosion would've levelled the buildings, but on this makeshift desert all it did was create a temporary sandstorm.

Pembroke wasn't ready to throw in the towel just yet. He's come too far. He grabbed the rifle and a spare magazine and took off the grenade that was hanging and hid it in his pocket – for luck.

He had to kick the hatch open. The wind immediately got into his mouth. Why was it so freaking hard to see anything?

He slowly walked up to where Vilivian was standing; his rifle up, squinting eyes to see as much as he could without being bothered. And then he saw her. Oh, what a beautiful view it was.

She was kneeling. With a large wound on her stomach, that showed her pink flesh beneath the coal skin. Her tail was gone as well as her right arm was completely gone, a bleeding pink spot was there instead. The left one had an elbow become a piece of meat barely connecting two parts of her arm. Her mouth was open wide with her tongue sticking out.

The tag, on her left arm, was slightly dirtied, but was left otherwise undamaged.

'I told you you would regret it.'

INDEED, Vilivian's weak voice echoed in his mind. SEEMS I WAS . . . CARELESS.

'It's over. I'm not going to make the same mistake as you did. I won't kill you though. That will make us even.'

He heard her chuckle.

IS THAT SO? CLAIM MY TAG THEN. YOU'VE EARNED IT.

'You could just surrender.'

YOU DIDN'T. WHY SHOULD I? COME NOW, I CAN BARELY MOVE.

He looked at her barely attached arm then looked at her unmoving expression. He aimed his rifle and fired. He shot off the piece of meat and the lower arm fell to the ground. 'There. Now, I can take the tag.'

CLEVER.

'Well, I hope you will remember this lesson.'

LESSON?

He approached her, close enough to snag away the tag and spoke softly near where he thought her ears would be.

'Don't tell me what to do. Because I just might do it.'

It felt cathartic. For a moment.

THERE IT IS.

‘What is?’

PRIDE.

Tail emerged from beneath the sand and stabbed him in the right shoulder. She’s buried it! That *bitch!*

He wailed in pain holding his shoulder. He then watched his terror as the bloodied tip of the tail drips his blood onto her tongue. It wiped his blood clean and when it retracted back inside her mouth all of her visible veins, outside or inside lit up.

A red flash occurred in her hollow eyes. Her flesh started moving, growing and then suddenly burst as her arms grew back. The wound on her stomach healed impeccably fast and she stood up – fit as a fiddle.

He grabbed his rifle despite the wound and reached for the grenade. He pulled the pin and threw the grenade at the feet of the Matriarch as he made his distance.

He fired off bullets as the explosion consumed Vilivian who covered herself with her arms. All forty-five rounds went into the cloud of smoke and sand. He exchanged the magazine as quickly as he could with the wound in his arm and just in time as he saw silhouette emerging from the cloud. He aimed his weapon.

And hesitated.

Vilivian emerged – in her human form. Naked. Her emerald eyes glaring with determination and her fiery red hair flowing loose in the wind. He couldn’t take a very good look as she immediately struck him in the abdomen. His eyes open wide as he dropped his weapon and fell to his knees.

‘Damn . . . it.’

Pembroke fainted, finally.

‘Sleep, Warrior.’ She said and took off his wristwatch and not long after Miss X announced her victory.

A post semi-final Fox Den was filled to the brim, though this time it felt even more so as people actively avoided being in Vilivian’s vicinity.

Pembroke was considered an underdog and was rather well known in the town, whilst all people knew about Vilivian is that she sometimes is a monster. Her cruelty towards her opponent in the

semi-final also hadn't gone unnoticed and resulted in spawning several unkind rumours about her.

Vilivian didn't mind. It was to be expected. She fully embraced her demonic nature and decided to live both as a human and a Matriarch. She was rather happy about that resolution – the only thing between her and the wish was the final – and she just couldn't wait for the next day.

'Congratulations on victory, Viliv.' Saki gave her wine. 'This one's on the house.'

'Thank you, Saki.' Vilivian smiled and tasted her sweet and mellow strawberry-flavoured drink. She was clothed in the red blouse and black pants – courtesy of Saki, yet again.

Uncouth conversations could be heard from other tables. Words like "brutal", "savage" and "bloodthirsty" seemed to epitomise her name the most.

'Sorry about that.' Said Saki.

'It's fine. It's natural to fear.'

'And if that fear turns to anger?'

'That would be very entertaining, indeed.' Vilivian smirked.

'Ah,' Saki shook her head. 'What has become of that well-mannered lass who sought no conflict?'

'Oh, I'm still here, don't worry.' Vilivian gave her a comforting smile. 'I simply know my limits a little better.'

'Mhm. You know, I could put you in a waitress uniform if you'd like. That may disperse some of those rumours.'

'You don't have to bother, really. And I can help you anytime, should you ask.'

'I might take you up on that offer sometime.'

'But not the dress, please. I don't really . . . feel comfortable wearing that.'

'But you do feel comfortable being naked in front of thousands of people?'

'Well—'

'Did you have to turn back human? I'm pretty sure you could've flicked his head and won.'

'Yes, but . . . When I drink blood as a demon I get into a frenzy. Going back human allows me to better control my urges. Otherwise he might've ended up dead. I didn't want that.'

'You shot him!'

'I *encouraged* him! Otherwise he'd wallow in his self-pity until the end of times.'

‘Well . . . For what it’s worth I think he got better thanks to that fight. I saw him at the beach screaming profanities at the ocean. He’s more upset with the fact he forgot about the tail than that he lost.’

‘He’s a young male with great potential. It’d be a shame if the human race lost him.

‘So . . . Only one more round left. Are you ready?’

‘I cannot wait.’

‘What will you do if you win? I mean, after you make your wish? I remember you being rather stuck up on that.’

‘I just might return to my home world satisfied with a job well done and a promise kept. I might travel. Why, staying here doesn’t seem that bad of an option. So much freedom . . . so many consequences to deal with. Or maybe I’ll do all of it. Being a timeless creature is an advantage in this situation.’

‘That does sound like good fun.’

‘Doesn’t it?’

She drank her drink.

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