

[Vilivian]: Round 3: The Allegory Between Instances of Aptitude and Practice

[Original doc](#)

"No creature found on Britannia is as vile and monstrous as a Matriarch – a devil-spawned demon borne of gluttony, and lust given physical form. These vile shapeshifters take on forms of fair maidens while they lie in wait for their victims and change into grotesque monsters while they prowl. Fortunate few are killed immediately but damned are the souls of men spared to be taken away into servitude as means of sustenance or reproduction. Despite their sex, their strength rivals two dozen hardened battalions and possess endurance of a Goliath. They are heartless, without virtue, conscience, and scruple. Matriarch experiences an absolute ecstasy as she inflicts suffering and death. They are wicked and filthy monsters, existing contrary to nature and it takes several a holy knight – equipped with silver blades, indomitable wills, and zealous purpose to face down that immoral breed of chaos."

Dust kicked up as, with a heavy thump, Piano closed the encyclopaedia. *Fiends, Demons and Devils: Pious Guide to Extermination* was the long title of one of the very few books that possessed information on Matriarchs. Not one, however, had any information regarding their weaknesses and mentioned only their affinity to silver.

Volumes were dated and inaccurate – transcribed by the members of piety recollecting the stories they'd hear from the survivors of Matriarchs' onslaught. There was little wisdom compared to the amount of sheer bafflement at the sex of the demons, right next to the common religious gibberish that made Piano roll her eyes every two sentences.

Piano had utmost confidence in her own abilities. She was a fantastic duellist and was great at improvising, but none of her talents were capable of mending broken ribs. Vilivian will not play into feints and other tricks. She'll punch every opportunity she sees and Piano saw how durable that woman is. Even with her ki she'll need to land several good hits to wound the Matriarch. Vilivian needs only one good hit.

Piano sighed and put away the book on the shelf. *Strange*, she thought as she looked around. The library seemed desolate though even in the late afternoon it was still occupied by several people, but the reading tables were emptied, with some books remaining open.

She received her answer once she sensed a familiar energy approaching her. She turned to face Vilivian walk up with solemn expression. Clothed in red and black, the long braid swaying slightly and her sword hanging on her back.

‘Blackblood.’ Vilivian nodded slightly. Her emerald eyes seemed to drill into Piano’s gold and purple.

‘Vilivian,’ Piano reciprocated with a nod of her own. ‘Rare to find you in here.’

‘Indeed? I find myself spending most of my free time in here, though, I suppose it is curious to find a literate monster.’

Piano could only look away in slight embarrassment. It was not the assumption she wanted to make, but it was difficult to disagree with the masses.

After her second round against Pembroke, Vilivian’s reputation took a large dive. She toyed with the man. She effectively defeated him thrice; twice was he brought back from the brink of death thanks to the magical stones they brought. It was hard to find method in that madness and thus she was dubbed as such. People were afraid.

Piano empathized with Vilivian to an extent. There was almost no history documented on Matriarchs. So little was known about them – only guesswork and spite from survivors as few as they were. Matriarch’s life seemed to be only about fear.

Vilivian passed her and reached for the book Piano just put away.

‘Studying us?’ Matriarch asked.

‘I tried to.’ Piano admitted.

‘It is a deathly profession – to study Matriarchs. We have no history. No civilizations, no cities built.’

‘You have traditions.’ Piano argued. ‘Otherwise, you wouldn’t call me by that moniker.’

Vilivian browsed the same pages Piano did.

‘Perhaps. But my understanding is different from others’. Even among the Matriarchs there seems to be lack of common history.’

‘Your name implies some form of society.’

‘They are short-lived and redundant after the brood reaches maturity.’

‘None tried to unite?’

‘Unity! Do you know what we call a gathering of clans?’

Piano shrugged.

‘A massacre. We fight each other because the blood demands it. The only reason that mothers aren’t killed by the children is out of respect.’

Vilivian put away the book.

‘You won’t find victory in the past, Blackblood. There’s only present. Only me.’

‘Is that supposed to be an advice of some sort?’

‘In a way,’ She thought a while. ‘A little more silver couldn’t hurt you.’

Vilivian smiled at her. Piano was taken aback by how composed the Matriarch was. In all their other interactions, Vilivian spoke as if their duel was a prophecy long-time coming; an event to decide the fate of the universe. Now, she was almost tranquil. Even her ki seemed to be . . . settled.

‘You’re different today,’ Piano said finally. ‘Very . . . glad.’

‘I am very glad indeed. To find you trying to fight your own battles by yourself is but one of the reasons.’

‘. . . What are you trying to say?’

‘Do not pretend as if Quan’s performance today wasn’t subpar compared to his previous showing.’

‘It’s his fault he didn’t take himself into consideration before our fight.’

‘I don’t care for the games your brother plays with other contestants. I appreciate the fact that I’ll face you instead of the speedster, but right now I’m a bundle of suppressed instincts held together by the realization that a single day is insignificant in a life of a Matriarch.’ She bared her teeth and smiled; for a second, Piano could see a ravenous glint in her eyes. ‘Not fighting you right now is not as easy as it would be to render your brother deceased. Do make certain he realizes I’ll suffer him no longer, Blackblood.’

With a final smile, Vilivian excused herself to another section of library while Piano exited the building in a hurried walk.

Outside, Piano stopped to calm her quickened heartbeat. She did not realize how stuffy it was in the library until she took a heap of fresh air.

Sun was setting and the people were leaving to bars and homes in preparation for the final day of the tournament.

Piano wasn't expecting Vilivian to openly threaten her brother like that. It was to be expected. The Matriarch suffered no fools indeed, something Piano learned first-hand the first time they met, and if Forte managed to prove himself cumbersome enough Piano felt justified about forewarning her brother. She must protect him.

But before that she had to fully prepare for the fight with Vilivian. There was plenty of options to defeat her in her human form, but once she transforms all the advantages, that Piano may have, are made obsolete.

Silver. The best tool for killing magical beasts in Vilivian's world. Piano possessed a set of silver blades, but would the Matriarch feel anything more than a slight prickle?

A proper weapon was required. She made her way to the smithy. Its chimney puffed smoke and she could hear a voice coming from the inside.

Inside, the resident blacksmith – Nephros, blue-haired and clad in black, quietly worked on an arrangement of metal components welding them together. On a chair next to him, with a basket full of walnuts at his legs, an oni youth – Volley – was cracking nuts and eating them whilst conversing with Nephros.

'... So, this sword, eh? Miss Viliv been asking me to hold it sometimes when she's busy and that thing is like, *super* heavy. In two hands, it feels as if I were carrying several barrels for my auntie and more. And there ain't no power coming from it, it's just so heavy you get blisters by carrying it around and when I tried to tie it behind my back like Miss Viliv does I had to constantly fight off the gravity from pulling me backwards and when I asked her about it she said that there's nothing special about this sword and that it's really just a long piece of metal with very sharp edges and I'm like, well, yeah, clunky things like that don't have destiny written all over them, y'know and I just— Miss Piano!'

Volley bared his fangs, but unlike Vilivian there was nothing but childish happiness emitting from it. He still had bandages wrapped around his chest, but his strength found no issue breaking the nuts.

Nephros looked up from the table and glared at her. His weary eyes told her story of his unsuccessful attempts to rid himself of the talkative guest and he looked at her wondering whether she's here to bother him or to make an order.

She had no intention of holding him any longer than she had to. He couldn't be older than eighteen, but in cynicism and world weariness he was about fifty.

'Are you here to take him home or to make an order?' Nephros said sternly. 'I'll settle for one or the other, *please*.'

'Come on, Nephy, that's now how you greet a customer!' Volley said and extended his hand towards Piano. 'A nut?' he offered.

‘No, thank you. I need something made.’ She said to the blacksmith.

Nephros let out a sigh of relief and looked at Volley but the oni boy spoke out first.

‘I’m not leaving, yet.’ Volley shoved a nut into his mouth.

That was the end of it. Nephros let out an exasperated groan and looked at Piano, trying to look as accommodating as he possibly could.

‘How can I help?’

‘I need a silver blade. And it needs to be light to use.’

Nephros groaned again and hid his eyes in his one non-crabby hand, and Volley chuckled.

‘Not you alone, Miss Piano.’ Said oni.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Ever since Vilivian’s fight with Pembroke people have been lining up orders for anything silver. I’ll tell you what I told all of them. I can’t make the blades out silver that will be good for combat. The material’s simply too bad; you’ll find more luck trying to bludgeon her with a rock.’

‘Are people that scared of her?’ Piano asked, slightly surprised. She was fully aware the effect Vilivian had on people, but she wouldn’t think it would lead them to arm.

Volley looked down at his nuts.

‘Thinks have gone beyond fear.’ Nephros’s expression turned sour. ‘It’s borderline anger. I put out few blades before I caught on to it and stopped. I won’t be responsible for their deaths.’

‘People like underdogs, Miss Piano.’ Said Volley in a sad voice. ‘Pembroke was kind of liked by the spectators. Just a guy who knows how to do stuff – has no inhuman powers and such so people wanted him to succeed, but Miss Viliv . . .’

‘Went too far.’ Nephros finished.

Volley couldn’t find words refute this and looked pleadingly at Piano. She opened her mouth to answer, but she couldn’t. It’s not that she wanted Vilivian burnt at the stake. What she felt towards the Matriarch was contrary to everyone else’s opinion, but she couldn’t openly condemn their anger. Her ability to evoke those feelings was what drove her to the blacksmith in the first place.

She ignored Volley and focused her eyes on Nephros; trying to avoid oni’s puppy eyes as much as possible.

‘I still need that blade.’

‘And I will make an exception. But, as a professional, I refuse to give you a blade made of pure silver. I don’t care that it works in other worlds – the metals I have don’t work that way.’

‘What can you do, then?’

‘Carbon steel plated in silver. Maintenance-heavy if you want that silver to be effective, but considering your many talents, you’ll do fine. The price, however, . . .’

‘Doesn’t matter.’

‘Any other specifics?’

‘Yes. Forty inches at most. Light, double-edged and capable of both thrusting and slashing.’

‘Got it. Now leave,’ he pointed his crab-hand at Volley and snipped. ‘You, too. I need to be alone for this.’

‘Fine, fine!’ Volley showed him the tongue and put some of the remaining walnuts in his pockets for the road.

They left Nephros to his work. Piano’s mind ran through strategies, but she couldn’t put anything together as the teenager’s presence was so unusually timid it was almost frightening.

She didn’t mind his company as she knew it was short lived. Then again, she felt as if he was expecting her to ask him about his rather obvious worries, but it was difficult for Piano to even pretend to be empathetic. Vilivian brewed her beer and now had to drink it.

They reached a plaza in a business district – right between the Golden Fox Gate and long street leading straight to the Cross Colosseum. Plaza’s landmark was the slaughterhouse. It was, in large part, a windowless building, save for a few small windows near the flat roof.

They looked in the direction of the mob gathered alongside slaughterhouse’s bricked wall. The mob listened to a heckler – a relatively short man standing on a plywood beer crate. His dark and greasy hair poked out from underneath his black hat and the red blush across his unshaved face told story of where the contents of the crate disappeared to.

‘Gather and listen, my friends!’ the heckler cried. His voice, while uneven, was resolute in message. ‘The last day of the tournaments draws near! And with it, the God Eater’s elaborate joke closes in on its final reckoning! The Matriarch!! A wolf in human’s clothing . . . Brought in here by the God Eater as a courtesy to the unwashed beast of the unscoured depths! I know you hurt for unlike that thing you have a heart! You may feign ignorance, but I know better. You’re afraid . . . I hear you utter prayers; I saw you turn your purses inside out seeking solace in trinkets and offerings, but she won’t save us! She would see us tear each other apart for her entertainment! No! We must stand together! Turn our fear into anger! Drive the fiend back to its lair!’

Most of the listeners were amused by the madman's spouts, but Piano was terrified the few people that listened intently. Their faces might have betrayed no deep interest, but their eyes reflected his jealousy.

She looked at Volley. His breathing was short and rapid. He clenched and unclenched his fists and his lip trembled. She wasn't surprised that the youth had trouble holding back his anger.

'In this trying time, we must rally behind the ones capable of vanquishing such evils! And who, but the monster's equal? The other side of the bracket! Yes, the Crimson Dancer! The shining star of the tournament! Kind, graceful and beautiful! She's the one we need to follow. Grant her our support! We must prove a point that things like Matriarchs have no place in our town!'

Piano cringed hard. She instinctively took a step back and was about to run in the opposite direction. She noticed the speaker glancing in her direction and her heart stopped for a bit but was saved by the crossguard entering the scene.

'That's enough of this!'

The mob split as the beast-woman walked in and crossed her arms in front of the madman. She was almost reaching his head despite him standing on a box.

'You know the rules - no stirring up shit during the tournament!' Her beastly eyes drilled into him, but the heckler remained undeterred.

'What rule am I breaking, officer?'

'Sowing of discord among the populace and public disturbance, firstly and secondly.'

'I am merely conveying the truth that everyone is aware of but too afraid to act upon! If my words cause them to act on their just hearts, then I pray they'll be able to overcome whatever obstacles they face!'

'That's fantastic,' the beast-woman sounded exhausted. 'Now, get off the box and stop the show or I'll bring you in.'

'Crossroads is a place of freedom and understanding, first and foremost. You have no right to arrest me!'

'Perhaps not, but I can still bring you in under article 54, section 1 that stands for "Pissing Off An Officer That Is About To Go Off Duty And Is Too Tired To Deal With The Legislature." Now, relinquish the box and I won't have to put you in one for the night.'

The madman mumbled, but he conceded and gave back the crate and drunkenly stumbled out of the area. The guard scattered the on-lookers with one more shout and left as well. The mob returned to their daily lives.

Piano and Volley got out of the view. Well, Piano did. Volley just kind of followed her.

'This is mad.' She stated.

'Innit?' Volley agreed. 'Day's barely ending and there's people like him already. It's like someone's had a vendetta against her since day one . . .'

Piano couldn't agree more. Too little time passed since Vilivian's fight ended. Even if there a movement against her – it turned into an audible spite a little too fast. And she had an idea who was behind it.

'Glad to see the guards doing their work, though, I suppose.' Volley said.

'Quite. I feel like you were about to do something incredibly stupid there.'

'I wanted to steal his box. Without the height advantage no one would hear him.'

'Nigh impossible to argue with this reasoning.'

They continued to walk together for a little while. She felt a slight comfort seeing Volley a little cheerier. At some point, they separated. Volley returned to the Fox Den and Piano made her way to the room she shared with her brother in the inn.

Did Piano feel anger? Yes, naturally, albeit seldom. She couldn't quite say if she were ever angry with her brother. Upset or slightly inconvenienced by his methods? At most.

She was aware that he focused on his meeting with the God Eater during their stay in Crossroads but knew little else about his actions. Piano thought herself a woman of integrity willing to fight on equal terms so long as they remain as such.

The thought of being unknowingly assisted from behind the scenes maddened her somewhat.

She entered the room and saw her brother sitting on his bed. He had unusually matted hair and was wearing only his dress shirt. He appeared as if he had just woken up and opened the window to let some air in.

' . . . Victories mount as fame blooms like a petal,' he stood up, smiling. 'Fantastic work out there, Sister.'

'Brother. You look . . .'

she raised eyebrow.

'Unkempt?' he laughed at his appearance. 'I've had a long night. After your fight I needed a little nap. I just came to.'

'I take it you didn't see the second semi-final then?'

'There was no point.'

‘Vilivian won.’

‘As was expected. Miss Vilivian would have to play her hand extremely poorly to come out that scuffle defeated.’ He frowned. ‘Is something wrong?’

Piano sighed and closed the door. She paced around the room before she finally stopped and turned to him.

‘People are afraid of her.’

‘They were before.’

‘Not to that extreme. People are actively avoiding her, exiting the rooms she’s in, whispering behind her back . . . There were few like that before, but now there’s even an angry mob gathering! The progress is not natural. Fear turned into anger way too quickly.’

‘That does seem extreme.’ Forte remained nonchalant.

‘So?’

‘So, what?’

‘You didn’t have anything to do with it?’

Forte made surprised expression.

‘The brew of her errs is for her taste only! Why would I bother with that she-beast?’

‘You interfered with Quan.’

He glanced to the side for a split second.

‘Come now, we talked a little but that’s about it!’

‘I wasn’t born yesterday, Forte.’ She said exasperated. ‘For how long?’

‘. . . Larger part of the night. I, truly, had nothing to do with that hatred towards Miss Vilivian, though. I’ve been asleep ever since your fight ended.’

‘And . . . do you intend on doing anything to her?’

‘Now, the magic won’t work if I do tell you.’ He smiled confidently, but Piano was slightly panicking.

‘I’d urge you to reconsider, Brother. I talked to Vilivian . . .’

‘That must’ve been detrimental to your intelligence quotient.’ He said apologetically.

‘She warned me . . . To warn you that if you try interfering, she’ll . . . she won’t take it in stride.’

'I can fend for myself, Sister.' He patted her on her shoulder. She grasped it with pained expression.

'I don't think she cares for that.'

'And then you'll find an opening . . .'

'Just this once,' she interrupted. 'Just this once let me fight by myself. I can handle her.'

Piano herself wasn't certain of that, but she'd anything if that meant keeping her brother away from harm.

Forte frowned and thought a while. He smiled finally and said:

'I was just looking out for you.'

'And I appreciate that, truly. But you go great lengths to help me. I don't want you to go too far.'

'You don't have to convince me that hard, Sister. Very well. I shall leave Vilivian in your capable hands.'

'*Promise.*' She insisted as she didn't let go of his hand.

He smiled and opened his mouth. He then closed it quickly.

'Before I do that,' he reached for his dress shirt pocket and pulled out a stone – crystal, devoid of any glimmer or light. 'This is for you.'

She recognized it instantly.

'Isn't it . . .?'

'Miss Williams' fine craftsmanship, yes. A rejuvenation crystal, though I'm yet to see it action . . .'

'I saw,' Piano took it in her hand. 'Vilivian made Pembroke use two of those. They proved fruitless in the end . . . How did you get this?'

'Vilivian owed me a favour.'

She gritted her teeth.

'So, you did provoke her after all!' she pushed his hand away.

'That was before she threatened us!'

'She threatened *you!* And she wouldn't have if you just trusted me to win!'

‘My trust in you is unmatched, Piano! But even something as incorporeal as luck requires certain modicum of skill involved. All I wish is to slightly sway the scales your way.’

‘And if you sway too far, you’ll fall and die!’ she shook her head. Her expression was mix of fear and defiance. She hated these thoughts, but she couldn’t run from that very simple truth. ‘I want to protect you. My *wish* is to be able to protect you! But I can’t do it if you carelessly put yourself in those kinds of dangers!’

‘We only have each other, Piano. *Quis curat ipsos curantis?* Who shall care for the caretaker? I shall.’

‘And what if that’s not enough? What if I’m too weak, and you come to my aid and you get pointlessly hurt because of me?’

‘You are not weak!’ He reassured her as he put his hands on her shoulders, but she stepped back immediately.

‘That . . . I must see to myself.’

Piano turned around and left the room. As she went down the stairs, she cursed herself for running away like that, but she knew that if she had stayed and continued to argue with him, she’d eventually concede.

She looked at the darkening sky and sighed. She had to defeat Vilivian to prove to herself – and to Forte – that she’s reliable enough to protect them both.

Question remained, however, how?

Forte stood astounded for a second before he slicked back his hair and fixed his dress shirt.

‘Now, that’s comedy.’

‘You *listened?*’ Forte turned around towards the window. His voice carried a heavy hint of disdain.

A piece of porcelain pottery flew in with dark wings emerging from underneath the lid. It landed on the floor and the smoke emerged taking form of a character old and emaciated. Blue-skinned with knives for ears, bloody sclera, and red irises. His torso was stuck to the smoke emerging from the porcelain pottery.

The demon stroked his white beard with perverted satisfaction.

‘It’s what I do.’

‘Our business concluded the moment I paid you for the information.’

'Then you best hope she doesn't give that stone back. You've paid a lot.'

Forte sat back down on his bed.

'My sister's no fool. And Vilivian would have mocked her if she did. What do you want?'

'Come now, a rupture in your seemingly steadfast relationship? A day before the final? Textbook dramaturgy that would sell like hotcakes given the right crowd.'

'Am I being blackmailed?' Forte gave a hearty laugh. 'I'm not sure what to feel! Intimidated? Amused?'

'Laugh it up, deviling. I know the right people.'

'Who? *Vilivian*? She has nothing to pay you with and will most likely throw up in disgust before you as much as utter a word. Yes! Disgusted! That's what I feel like.'

Camio's wicked smile persisted.

'Now, now. We wouldn't want Piano to cry her heart out once they find her darling brother's body with a shattered ribcage tomorrow morning, would we?'

Forte grimaced, but what disgusted him even more was the fact that Camio had the audacity to threaten him like that.

He approached the desk and opened a drawer. Underneath the clothes, in-between golden scarf, and black vest a pouch of coins. He grabbed it and threw it Camio's way.

'Take it and leave us alone.'

Camio cackled as he caught the pouch and started counting coins. He was a demon forced to live in a piece of teaware for all eternity. Lifetime of humiliation turned the demon into an ill-tempered and spiteful wretch, but the old hand knows how to make a living. He works as an informant who likes to charge Forte ludicrously large amount of money and though Forte doesn't hold Camio in high regard he understands that this shapeshifting teapot is a valuable "ally" to have in Crossroads. At least, for times he feels like it.

'See? Nothing wrong with showing a little respect for the elderly every now and then.'

'You sicken me.' Forte said.

'Flatterer. Bet you say that to all yer informants, eh?'

Forte generally found people who deal with subtlety to be far more dangerous than people who exercise their physical prowess.

Vilivian, for instance, was simple. She's strong and has no way how the world works. If you piss her off, all you must do is run in the opposite direction. People like Camio were guile; possessed wisdom and could probably think in italics. Such people needed to be watched.

Preferably from distance.

Forte decided to pull out his notebook. Camio was certainly one of the smarter residents seeing as he was yet to reveal his full name.

'If you're done, leave.'

'So, are you going to interfere?' demon asked instead.

Forte leaned forward and spoke quietly. 'Can you keep a secret?'

'Of course.' Camio assured him.

'So, can I.' Forte smiled at the demon's grimace. 'Point is – you don't need to know. Now, leave,' he opened his notebook at the page where Vilivian's name was written. Directly interfering? That depends. He'll do as he always does. Listen and watch. 'I have some catching up to do.'

Vilivian entered the Fox Den, the now so very familiar bar to her and one of very few places she felt safe, though it seemed as if she'd have to try to find herself in any real danger.

As she made her way to the counter most patrons quickly got up from their seats, their drinks unfinished and left the bar in a hurry, toppling against each other and the furniture leaving the establishment mostly deserted save for those who know better.

Saki shook her head in disappointment as Vilivian approached with a frown on her face.

'I keep scaring off your customers.' She said with remorse as she watched Saki clean glasses.

'They'll come crawling back once they tire of the hog swill they serve at the other bars. Besides, it makes space for more civilized clientele. It's a nice change of pace, especially during tournament season. What about you, though?'

'I'm alright.' Vilivian sat down and rested her arms on the counter.

'There's nothing wrong with feeling hurt, you know.'

'I'm a Matriarch. As far as I know humanity has hated me since the dawn of time.'

'Crossroads is more than just humanity, Viliv. Anyone that saw or heard about your fight with Pembroke has it out for you and most of them are in it through herd mentality. It can be very overbearing.'

'I'm a thousand years old, Saki.'

'A thousand spent in a cave without interaction with any society, Viliv. Civilizations, and people, can turn hateful for the pettiest of reasons. You might have had your "good fun", but from the outside you were sadistic and monstrous.'

'The same people spiting me are the same people that cheered when I was bleeding out during my fight with Volley. Problem seems rooted elsewhere.' Vilivian tried to justify herself.

'Hypocrisy, thy name is Crossroads . . .'

'If it really is such an issue why the Crossguard isn't doing anything to prevent these rumours?'

'Not exactly dissentious enough for the guard to get involved. Either that, or Chifu's holding them back. That woman would see this whole town burning if it meant getting a kick out of it. That doesn't change the fact that you should look out for your reputation . . .'

'My reputation is apparently a consequence of actions I made even before the tournament started. I'll deal with them myself.'

'I've no doubt you will. But know, that it's natural to get mad. Get even. Don't pretend to be something you're not.'

'I know that.'

'Good, because—'

Saki was interrupted by the sound of shattering glass. They turned around to see that someone threw a brick through the window. They heard footsteps running away.

'Oh, *hell* no!' Saki's face twisted into rage making Vilivian's hairs stand up. She threw the rug away and gave chase. 'Watch the counter, will you?'

She quickly ran out of the shop. Her heavy steps shook the remaining glass.

At the same time, from upstairs, a faint jingle and Chifu walked down, sleepy and yawning. She looked towards the exit with annoyed grimace.

'Just my luck.'

'Hello, Trickster.' Vilivian bowed her head very slightly.

'Viliv!' Chifu's expression lightened up instantly. She briskly walked over to the counter and sat next to Vilivian. 'Fantastic fight today. How are you holding up?'

'Good.'

'Bully. Mind working the tap and pouring me a pint? It might be a while before Saki catches up. That guy's pretty fast despite his height.' She turned on her seat and leaned her back on the counter.

'You know of him?' Vilivian stood up and walked around the counter.

She's acquired certain degree of experience working as a waitress for Saki – though she had a feeling that the oni gaslighted her into wearing a rather revealing waitress uniform. Vilivian noticed that other waiters had much less frills and didn't have their legs as exposed. Nonetheless, the Matriarch welcomed the experience, though it was strange that there were much fewer problematic customers whenever she was taking a shift.

She filled a pint with Chifu's favourite as the Trickster continued to speak.

'Vito is an obnoxious contrarian with drinking problem and strange fixation on knives and revolvers.'

'Is he the one that started these rumours about me?'

'Please. He's just a loudmouth. The first word people would use to describe him is "idiot" if the word "gross" didn't stick out its greasy hand.'

'Saki won't encounter any issues apprehending him, then?'

Vilivian put the pint on the bar and Chifu turned around, grabbing it, and taking a deep sip.

'Aside from spewing spit and vomit on her clothes? None. Be as it may, the angry mob is very empowering. Besides, not that Saki should bother. For all your supposed responsibility she's the one dealing with the consequences.'

'If she hadn't gone, I would have.'

'You ought to be glad she did. I don't think chasing a random man through the streets of Crossroads would do any good to your reputation.'

'There's no pleasing you, is there?'

'*Au contraire.*' She raised her glass. 'Don't take it wrong way. It's just that listening to you and then watching you gives off the impression of you being rather hypocritical.'

'The point, Trickster.' Vilivian gritted her teeth.

'Take your wish. Does it remain the same?'

'Of course.'

'You want to resurrect your friend. Why?'

‘So that I may keep my promise. I want to give him another chance in life. I want to give him a chance to once more see the world he used to cherish and so much.’

‘Very selfish of you, isn’t it?’

‘How is that selfish?’

‘Oh, Vilivian, darling. What’s the world against the cruel passage of time?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You and I know how painful living for centuries can be. But unlike humans, gods and Matriarchs are solitary creatures. We’re used to this. But your friend? He was the only human to ever drink from the Grail. The only human to acquire eternal youth.’

‘Humans covet immortality when it’s offered to them. Why would he shun away a gift the most of his kind sacrificed so much for?’

‘Was he like the most of his kind, though?’

‘No.’

‘He met you when he was in his early twenties. He’s known you and visited you for about . . .’

‘I can’t recall—’

‘One hundred and eighty-seven years. He lived through a dozen of human generations, Vilivian. He saw his friends and family expire as the youth never abandoned him. We may have learned to cope but he was never meant for immortality. When he gave up that blade, he resigned himself to death. Do you truly want to torment him with prospect of another eternity?’

‘He won’t be alone.’

‘Don’t you think it’s too late for that? He’s been dead for centuries.’

‘I made the promise—’

‘Yes, you did. Do you think he went along with it because he expected to survive? Or because he hoped it would encourage you to leave that cave instead of waiting for him like a hopeless housewife?’

Vilivian opened her mouth to retort, but she stopped short of cursing Chifu. A seed of doubt took hold in her mind, and she began to slowly realize her own stupidity until a wash of wrath took over.

‘We’re done here.’ She said deadpan.

‘I figured we would.’

Vilivian walked out of the Fox Den leaving Chifu to her pint.

Trickster hummed a melody as she drank her beer with satisfaction.

Piano walked the dozing-off streets of Crossroads. Like a phantom, she inconspicuously avoided anyone who would stumble upon her and if anyone called out to her, she'd disappear from plain sight. She clutched the rejuvenation stone in her hand. She didn't want to use it, but she knew she needed it. It allowed her one single mistake.

What about the second and the third?

She took a deep breath and tried analysing their match-up once more.

Vilivian could shatter a concrete wall without putting much thought into it. Piano could do the same, though not without help of her reinforcement abilities. She would rather avoid fisticuffs even if it meant using her sword to fight. She thought that ordering that silver blade would put her mind at ease, but she could shake doubt off her mind. There was an advantage to be found, depending on how the arena would change. Vilivian spent most of her life in secluded cave unlike Piano who travelled with her brother and fought in a variety of different environments. But the Matriarch had magic and her heightened senses to combat any attempts at subterfuge . . .

Piano was agitated. Her head hurt and it was clear she was still reeling after today's fight. It was time for a break.

She stepped into the first bar she noticed and almost immediately regretted her decision.

The plaster seemed to be coming off the walls and the grey tiled floor was dirtied with muddy footsteps. There was no free table and nearly all seats by the counter were taken. And the worst part?

They all noticed Piano as she entered. Two dozen mouths went silent as they watched her cheeks blush. The only sound remaining being music coming from a beat-up radio standing atop of a refrigerator behind the bar.

It was a different kind of pressure. It wasn't like they were expecting a performance. More like call to arms.

She slowly approached the bartender, ignoring the spectators.

' . . . Excuse me, may I have some cocoa, please?' she asked shyly.

Silver-haired bartender took a mug from a rack behind him.

'Would you like it cold or hot?'

‘Cold, please.’

He nodded and she watched him prepare it. Firstly, he put in the cocoa mix in the mug, poured in some milk, whisked it, and handed it over. It’s not like she expected to be made with cream milk, chocolate flakes and a straw, but she expected there be *some* effort.

‘Err, how much do I . . .?’

‘For you, lass? Not a dime. It’s on the house.’

Piano was getting stressed.

‘I can’t accept it.’

‘It’s fine, don’t mention—’ The bartender tried to insist but Piano leaned forward with the mug clutched in her two hands.

‘*Please*, let me pay.’ She begged which could be paraphrased as “Let me be normal.”, but that gathered even more cheers from other patrons that saw that as a showcase of Piano’s humility. That wasn’t her goal, but for now she decided to ignore the unwarranted attention.

She felt like sitting by the counter would gather too much of it, so she looked around the tables. It was surreal to see that poor excuse of a restaurant to be this filled. Was it the alcohol? Or the food? If the cocoa was anything to go by, the fish and chips, advertised above the entrance, must be raw and uncooked.

Piano took her cocoa and looked around the free tables. There were none, of course. Each had one or two customers eyeing her.

Except one.

Piano took a deep breath and with a beverage in her hands she sat down opposite of the lone blonde girl, slowly sipping on a tea. The girl looked at Piano with disdain.

‘*Must you?*’ Angelique asked.

Piano mouthed a silent “Please” as the stares intensified. Angelique looked back to her drink without a word. Both ladies sipped silently as the usual murmur and life returned to the tavern. Seemed like everybody knew the value of a solitary drink.

Cocoa was delicious, despite its simplicity, and calming, but the situation wasn’t exactly relaxing. Piano just had the luck to run into the opponent she defeated in the first round of the tournament. Angelique was aloof and cold towards her, even more so. She was wearing a thick, black hoodie, hiding her arms.

It was all very awkward. Piano was used to those, and she’d think nothing of them, but it was slightly unsettling how detached Angelique was.

‘. . . I never knew there was bar like this in Crossroads.’ She said after she took a sip.

‘As is the case with most folk.’ Angelique didn’t look up from her beverage. ‘But ever since people realized where Vilivian spends most of her time they’ve been looking for someplace else.’

‘Are you here because of her as well?’

‘No.’ Angelique smiled wryly and drank from her cup. ‘I can simply appreciate a little irony.’

‘Irony?’

Angelique rolled her eyes.

‘This bar’s name is “Losers’ Bracket”.’ She explained.

‘Oooh . . . How did you find her fight?’

‘A one-sided beatdown. I’ve seen better.’

‘That’s all?’

Angelique squinted sceptical.

‘What is more to say?’

‘Seems everyone has a few sentences to say about what happened to Pembroke . . .’

‘You really know how to make me feel special. Thing is I don’t care, Piano. I’m not really stocking up on pity these days. Why’d you pay any heed to these rumours? Say, are you scared she’ll do to your arms what you did to mine?’

Piano bit her lip.

‘I’m sorry.’

‘I know.’ Angelique shrugged. ‘Then, are you?’

‘I’m not scared. She unsettles people and—’

‘She did that before and that didn’t stop them from gawking while she was in her maid uniform.’

‘Maid uniform?’

‘If anything, I’d bet your brother had something to do with riling them up so much. You know, given she’s your next opponent.’

Piano quickly snapped away from trying to imagine Vilivian in a maid outfit performing maid duties.

‘My brother wouldn’t do—’ She hesitated. ‘My brother had nothing to do with it.’

‘You’d trust him on that?’

‘Yes. You and my brother have started on a very wrong foot, I get that, but he doesn’t deserve—’

‘Yes, he *fucking* does.’ The now empty cup of tea shattered underneath her force. Despite her new arms, Angelique still had a hard time grasping their strength. ‘Some things are ought to stay hidden. Ought to be . . . forgotten,’ Angelique shivered as sad grimace flashed her face before it turned back to anger. ‘What right does he have to glimpse into my past? What selfishness drives him to do that?!’

‘It wasn’t selfishness.’

‘What then?’

‘I cannot say.’

‘Why not?’

‘I just can’t!’

Piano almost shouted. Customers turned to watch but Angelique scared them off with a glare. She then turned back to Piano and spoke quietly.

‘I pity you. You’re an earnest person who means well, most of the time, but you’re blindsided by your sentiment. It’s a shame you’re the one competing. I’d pay double to see Vilivian make him suffer.’

Piano could hardly hold back anger anymore. That hostility towards her brother was exhausting. She could understand and she wished people looked at him from her perspective. She wanted to make amends to Angelique, but so long as their feelings on Forte conflicted there wasn’t much for her to do.

She stood up leaving her cold cocoa half-empty.

‘I don’t believe there’s anything else for us to discuss.’

‘There never was.’

Piano left frustrated even more so than before. So much for a relaxing mug of cocoa. She thought of simply going back to her room and retiring for the day, but she didn’t want to confront Forte. Few people followed her out, but she quickly lost them moving through alleyways and taking quick turns.

It's all so tiresome, she thought. She stood in a dark alleyway watching the residents turning in for the night as the sun was almost set.

Her victories and talents. They all seemed so hollow, now. The anger and grief directed at her brother ricocheted and struck her instead. Between Angelique and Vilivian, how many people should she feel responsible for? How many wounds has her bias cause? She always considered hers and Forte's abilities as means of preservation; to be an invasive but necessary process toward a greater cause, but what worth were they, really?

Was the way she utilized the talents she stole truly the extension of their potential? Or was she merely imitating those who perfected them with their honed wisdom? Could she truly shine better than her victims who were bolstered by their experience? How much of what Forte learns truly serves the greater good if there are people who spite him afterwards? Is it worth it?

'How are you doing?'

She turned back to see a familiar youth standing behind her in an alley.

Her today's adversary – Quan – was standing with a cheery grin on his face. He waved happily. He was wearing baggy pants that were torn at knees and just a sleeveless puffer jacket on his torso.

'Hello, Quan, I'm . . . Doing okay, how are you? Your wounds . . .'

'Healed. People here know their stuff.'

'And they even gave you a new jacket . . .'

 She looked him over.

'Gave? Sure, let's go with that.' He chuckled. 'So, what you're up to, Piano? Looking for trouble or hiding from trouble? I could use some of that latter.'

'No, I'm just . . . resting.' She admitted and leaned on the wall.

'Wack. Let me get some of that, too.' He said coolly and leaned on an opposite wall. Something squished and he crossed his arms and stood upright instead. 'So, get this, Piano. Couple alleys away there's this bar named "Losers' Bracket" and I thought to myself "Perfect", because I like some of that good irony. I go in, order some milk, drink it up, and it turns out you can't take it on tab and that's just a downright downgrade from the Fox Den, ain't it?'

'So, you ran away from paying.'

'No. Of course not. Well, not exactly . . . Okay, I didn't want to pay, but not because I'm a penny pincher that won't pay for a glass of milk it's just don't have any money and I wanted some milk.' He frowned. 'You alright, Piano? You don't look too good.'

'I'm fine.' She lied and then immediately came clean. 'I'm not. I'm scared. Or anxious. Or both.'

Quan nodded seriously and put his hands in his pockets.

'Yeah, I'd be too if I were fighting Vilivian tomorrow. I'm glad I lost the semi-final.'

She looked at him in shock.

'You are?'

'Have you seen her fights, Piano? I would get my shit ROCKED if I got through. No joke, she'd kill me with her glare five seconds into the match, you know?'

'... It's weird.'

'My self-preservation instinct?'

'You lost your chance at wish. I've hurt you and you gained nothing in return.'

'What are you talking about? I got these awesome scars!' he unzipped his jacket and showed his scars. Piano winced. 'It would've looked much cooler if I had few more on the front, but you know, it's all good.'

'Is that really not a concern to you?' Piano turned away until Quan closed his jacket.

'I'm a fast healer, Piano. Besides, you don't join a tournament without expecting to get hurt even a little.'

'You still wouldn't fight Vilivian.'

'The odds aren't really in my favour even if I played the hit'n'run game. Chicks like her have experience and the only thing attracted to me are rats. I wouldn't have to worry about good night's sleep, though it'd be pushing it if I said it would help my chances.'

Piano looked down in shame.

'I'm sorry about that. You may have stood a better chance if you were rested. My brother may have cheated you out of victory.'

'Played, certainly, but hardly cheated! I'm not a saint myself, Piano, I'd say he got me fair and square all things considered.'

'Others don't seem to view that way.'

'Nah, I wouldn't think so. He's going to get himself killed if you don't watch out for him, though.'

'And how should I do that?' she asked seriously.

Quan shrugged. 'I dunno. Beat Vilivian before your brother does something stupid? You have to relax, Piano.'

'I can't relax!' she exclaimed frustrated. 'I can't take a walk; I can't drink at any bar. Everyone's treating me like some sort of idol! It's too much!'

'Well,' Quan said after a while. 'There is a spot . . .'

Sun drowned in the dark clouds setting in the horizon. Day was coming to an end and the residential area of the town had bustled, with people preparing to rest before the final day of the tournament. Vilivian walked these streets without any care for the citizens' dismay towards her. She was lost in her thoughts, hardly paying attention to where she was as her legs were simply given command to "walk away".

The keepsake was strung on her back, but no one would be stupid enough to try Vilivian's patience as they even moved to sides when she walked.

Compassion and consideration were never her strong suits. She was a Matriarch. The very perversion of those emotions.

She wallowed in her immortality blind to the fact that she wanted to impose the very same thing to the person she held the dearest. If such feeling was real.

Ever since coming to Crossroads she changed; with her speech patterns trivialized and her demeanour softened she thought that her humanity would be accepted. Alas, the truth was the opposite.

Was the hate she received justified? Was the change in her character merely a play; was the ability to mimic human behaviour and habits that is attributed to Matriarchs the reason she found herself content in this place? Was she truly changing, embracing her human nature or was she merely biding her time, much like her violent sisters, to spring a trap and devour her victims in a brutal fashion so distinctive to her kind?

She considered herself above every other member of her race. She outlived most if not all and her honour and duty made her believe to be much more than just a vile monster, but wouldn't her violent habits overrule such notions? Things like honour, mercy found had place during a bloodbath; and though being spared by her Friend showed that there may be the place for that, was it really a good course of action? What guarantee was there that she wouldn't become an unshackled beast, left free to prey on the innocent?

Despite her calmness, Vilivian had to strain herself to ignore such abundance of people. Their fears and anxieties, passions and desires reflected on her and fuelled her instincts. And no matter how hard she tried she couldn't stop herself from getting giddy from sensing Piano's blood.

Why did she start calling her Blackblood? It was a moniker for a naïve tale the passive Matriarchs told themselves off about a representative of their kind that would lead them from hiding into the conquest of the wide world.

Was it because she wanted to remain respectful to the symbolism of her race? Or was it a desperate attempt to clutch onto her true nature.

Was the wish to bring back Arthur truly what she desired? Or was she merely paying heed to the “Honourable Matriarch” she envisioned herself as? Would she cause him gladness, or would she sentence him to the life in the world he doesn’t recognize anymore?

Wouldn’t it be better for her to get rid of her beastly instinct and fully commit to the humanity she so desperately tries to imitate?

She stopped in the gate atop of the stairs going down towards the docks. A very familiar spot, she turned her head to the mural painted on the wall nearby.

An artistic talent was showcased wonderfully in the picture of a village at the night-time. It was that very image that caused her memories to resurface - the memories and regret of possessing such volatile nature which was later proved and exploited by the Blackblood’s twin brother.

She looked closer at the mural. It was as beautiful as it was, and still retained the shape of a man dented into it. She noticed a figure sitting down by it.

‘Volley?’ she said in surprise as she approached the boy – the very author of this image.

The oni looked up with a spent expression on his face. He mustered a smile and looked at her. There was a crate sitting next to him.

‘Oh. Good afternoon, Miss Vilivian!’ as he raised his head, she noticed it was bruised.

‘It’s evening. Stars above, Child, what happened to you?’

‘Ah, this? Yeah, there was some guy slandering you in the plaza. I stole this box, he was standing on it to look taller than he is, and then, uh, well . . .’

‘*He* did this to you?’ Vilivian gasped out bitterly.

‘What? No! He chased me, but I couldn’t see the bloody staircase and I fell down several flights . . . Well, at least I lost him. Are you okay, Miss Viliv?’

She sat down next to him.

‘I feel awful.’ She answered.

‘Aye, that was a stupid question. I’m sorry, Miss Vilivian.’

‘It doesn’t bother me, Volley. My reputation is the least of my concerns.’

‘I’ll come cheer you on tomorrow, OK, Miss Vilivian? I’ll be yelling the loudest out of them, no matter how much they try to outperform me!’

‘Thank you.’ She smiled faintly but it quickly disappeared.

‘Miss Viliv?’ Volley’s voice was quiet, full of concern.

Vilivian frowned.

‘I don’t know what to do, Volley. Should I attain victory tomorrow, I will be able to ask Trickster of any wish I desire.’

‘You want to bring back your friend back to life, right? Or has something changed . . .?’

‘I’m scared.’ She admitted. ‘I thought that humans cherished their lives to the point they would risk attaining immortality. That’s how most of the challengers I faced acted. They had families, kingdoms, friends . . . but they would come seeking what I understand is perceived as a fairy tale in my world. But he lived his life fully and I understand that the reason he left me his sword was because he was content with leaving the mortal plane. I’m scared that if I bring him back, he’ll turn it away. He’ll shun me for bringing him back to the world there is nothing waiting for him anymore.’

Volley put his hands between his knees and curled up as he listened.

‘It’s difficult to keep suppressing my instinct. To keep being civil and calm. I am content being friends with you, your aunt and Wendy. To just pass time amongst people who aren’t afraid of me. But the only time I feel like myself is when I’m fighting. When I’m being a Matriarch . . . I’m scared of realizing that those feelings may be fake – an aftereffect of some instinct that compels me to camouflage myself as a human.’ She took a deep breath. ‘I keep wondering if that side of me was gone. If I were to stop being a Matriarch and was just . . . Vilivian. Then, I think I could finally realize what I *really* am.’

It was first time since she’s met him that Vilivian saw Volley carry such a judgemental look on his face.

‘Don’t you have a promise to keep?’

Her eyes widened in surprise.

‘Miss Vilivian that I got to know keeps her word. She is trustworthy and proud of her heritage. I don’t understand why you would think that ridding yourself of that part of you would do you any good.’

‘Because I can’t live among humans otherwise. Volley, Matriarchs are—’

‘You know what, Miss Viliv? I keep hearing about how terrible Matriarchs are. How vicious and bloodthirsty of a species are you, but honestly, not once have I seen you prove those rumours right. You can be ruthless, yes, but you were never cruel! I find you constantly composed!’

‘I restrain myself. The day I met you I nearly lost control—’

'You got angry! So, what? I get angry all the time! When there's beans in my food, when I tug my shirt on a door handle, how stupid the people cheered on you dying during our fight were. And the same people are now flocking to ignorance because it smells familiar!' His expression turned spiteful for a moment, but then relaxed as he looked at her. 'If you became a human, Miss Vilivian, then you wouldn't be yourself, but somebody completely different. It's just,' he made a pained expression. 'There's nothing wrong with being who you are, right?'

She turned her gaze away from him and pondered.

'I never took other people into consideration. I'm inclined to lose some parts of myself if it means I'll never have to hurt anyone needlessly.' She scoffed weakly. 'I'm not even sure if that's what I really feel like.'

'You do!' Volley stood up. 'And I believe that. But you must believe in yourself, Miss Viliv! You can change! What's all that time for if you're not going to put it to good use? You don't need a wish to become a better person; all you have to do is to try. And if your friend is really as great as you described him then I'm sure he'll be fine being alive again.'

'He'll be alone.' She lamented.

'What? Do you intend to drop dead the moment you make a wish? There'll be a whole world for the both of you explore! A new time! Doesn't that sound like a grand adventure?'

'Well . . .'

He grabbed her hands and helped her stand up.

'You need to relax, Miss Viliv. All that stress and overthinking isn't going to help you in tomorrow's fight. Better get to it with clear head, I know what I'm saying, let me tell you. Follow me. I know where you can rest without any interruption or hindrance from those zealous buggers.'

The night had already set by the time Piano got into the hot spring that was the part of the inn she stayed at. It was a small, enclosed area, partitioned off by tall wooden fences. Water poured from in-between the grey stones surrounding the bath. Moon illuminated the open-air bath as the breeze rustled the trees planted around.

Piano shivered and submerged herself in the water up to her neck. Her hair was tied into up and a towel rested on her head. She felt her anxiety evaporate as she was soothed by the warmth. Following Quan's recommendation paid off even, though his interest was to raid the inn's pantry while she bothered the staff to let her use the baths.

Nonetheless, it was a nice change of pace. Here, she could relax before the final fight. Gather her thoughts and go into tomorrow with a clear head. She breathed a sigh of relief.

Then the door slid open and Vilivian entered the area. Were Piano completely indecent she would've climbed up the fence and ran away. Instead, she nodded her head slightly, trying to hide her nervousness albeit pointlessly.

'Vilivian.'

'Blackblood.' The Matriarch answered with a nod of her own. Her hair was relatively bunched up atop her head, but it looked to be soon coming down once she got into water.

She was holding a towel in her right hand and calmly entered the spring, moving next to Piano whilst throwing the towel on the side. After few seconds in her red hair let loose and fallen gently into the water. She relaxed almost immediately. Piano wondered if it was due to the spring or because nobody bothered Vilivian about the dress code here.

Vilivian closed her eyes and breathed out.

They sat in complete silence, interrupted only by the buzz of waking nature's night life.

Piano took that opportunity to look over her opponent. Such small but well-toned build, no visible scars despite her age and despite being naked and relaxed she could sense she still had her guard up. To some extent, that flattered Piano.

'Nervous?' Vilivian asked suddenly.

Piano turned her head. Her neighbour opened her eyes and looked at her. Piano turned away again, shyly.

'It's not like I have to tell you.'

'I was being courteous.'

'How dignified.'

'It is written all over your face, by the way.'

'I'm anxious.' She snapped. 'Fearful, maybe. Today's been strangely long.'

Vilivian closed her eyes again and leaned back her head.

'You're concerned and uncertain. A little agitated but that may be because of me. Not fearful, though. It's different from how you were yesterday. Resolute. Determined. What changed?'

'Why is that your concern now?'

'I've been looking forward to our fight for quite a while, Blackblood. I would rather face you at your best. Besides, if you're here with your concerns that means you haven't talked with your brother about them. This may be your only chance to address your troubles.'

‘You threatened my brother.’

‘Everybody gets one. As you well know.’

Piano nodded begrudgingly. In the first encounter with Vilivian they were both attacked by a few alley goons right after the Matriarch gave them a very clear warning. Apparently, the Crossguard realized that cause of death of those who ignore it should be considered as a “suicide”.

‘It’s because of you.’ Piano confessed.

‘Me?’ Vilivian raised her head and looked, surprised.

‘I was determined before and after my fight with Quan. I radiated confidence. But after I saw you fight, I started having doubts. I started researching your people. Your habits, weaknesses, abilities. As you saw, results were less than satisfactory.’

‘What did I do?’

‘It’s just . . . All worked out way too good for you, you know?’ Piano smiled wryly and looked at her. ‘All the setbacks you encountered were basically self-inflicted; you hardly struggled when fighting Volley and Pembroke. Your victories were ultimately decisive and even if I managed to gain an upper hand at some point there’s still that blasted transformation of yours that seems to throw all the enemy advantages to the side.’

‘I—’

‘I was confident. I was resolved to meet your expectations, but then,’ Piano took a deep breath. She was getting unnecessarily heated. ‘You threatened my brother. And that made me realize my wish. I want to protect him. My only family. But different kinds of doubts raised in my mind. Would I be able to stop you if you focused on him? What would I do if I were in danger, and he came to my rescue and got hurt in the process? How can I be certain that whatever he may plan on doing doesn’t backfire terribly? You have a powerful resolve, Vilivian, and I don’t know if I can match it with my skills.’

Vilivian waited for a moment. She looked up into the sky and finally said:

‘I’m one thousand one hundred sixty-two years old. I spent all those years in seclusion of sanctuary, protecting the artefact from those who would want to obtain it. I fought and killed warlords, kings, knights, rogues, and mages. I had no means of retreating, and no means of surrender as my pride would not allow it. Every fight could’ve been my last and I had to learn, to adapt. My exposure to the outside world was limited to those encounters. At one point, I went centuries without transforming because no one could stand to challenge me. Until I was about five hundred years old when I suffered my first defeat. Would you like to know how I lost?’

Piano nodded.

'I made a mistake.' Vilivian smiled and even chuckled. 'He feinted a low cut but struck low and had me carved up neck down, off with my shoulder completely.' She drew a line with her finger on her body. 'I would've bled out had he not fed me his own blood allowing me to heal myself. Which means that the only reason I'm here is because I got lucky. Lucky, that the person who nearly killed me saw as more than the monster I am.' She grimaced, and for a second Piano thought Vilivian was going to start crying. 'I went centuries undefeated. And then the man that had beaten me perished himself.' She lowered her head. 'Nobody is impervious.'

'The man that bested you . . . Is he why . . .?'

'That was the initial idea. Now, I fear he may reject me if I brought him back. And that would mean returning to the prison I spent millennium in.'

'Why must you?'

'Because what else should I do? Suicide? Or trying to integrate into society as a human?'

'Would that be so difficult?' Piano asked.

'All it takes is one moment of intense stress. A slight lapse in my ability is enough for my instincts to take over. Then it's just . . . red.'

'It can't be easy.'

'It isn't. Your brother took an advantage of that.'

Piano bit her lip and looked away in shame. Noise stopped and the air was filled with the metallic clang of sudden silence. Two women just sat there as if they weren't going to tear each other apart tomorrow. They both hated how their minds worked. One of them should probably leave the room and slam the door as a sign of disapproving argument, but she was too shy to do that, and they just sat there giving the situation one more chance to be resolved on somewhat peaceful terms.

'I know you don't believe it now, but you already possess all the skills you need to prove that you can protect your brother.'

Piano smiled cheekily.

'Is that supposed to be up-lifting?'

Vilivian frowned slightly distraught.

'I find empathy to not be my strongest suit.'

'I appreciate the thought. You know, I'm a good learner . . . I pride myself in a fact that I possess a lot of talents, but I don't know if they'll be of any use.'

‘Back up your gifts with your experience. Talent is good motivator, but without practice they will get you only so far.’

‘Speaking from your own circumstances?’

‘I killed many talented people.’

‘Say, what qualities of a Blackblood do I have? Aside from my blood being what it is?’

‘I don’t know.’ Vilivian answered deadpan.

‘You *don*’t?’

Matriarch shrugged.

‘At first it may have been my instinct. As I said, the name has different meaning depending on the clan. Mine believed Blackblood to be the fate-defying leader of great prowess, whose blood burned with rage and vice.’ Vilivian looked at her with awe. ‘It’s a title of respect.’

Piano nodded.

‘I respect you, too, Vilivian.’

‘I appreciate it.’

They sat in silence for some time. Then, in silence, each of them left without uttering as much as a word of good luck – for they realized that skill, not luck, will bring about the culmination of their duel.

Or so they presume.

The skies above Crossroads were grey with rain clouds. Despite that, the gates of Cross Colosseum were swarmed with people carrying raincoats and umbrellas.

The attendance was the tournament’s highest. Nearly all of Crossroads intended to watch the final fight between Piano and Vilivian be it on stands or on one of the jumbotrons placed outside the arena.

Just as ubiquitous as the attendance was the spectators’ favour towards Piano. There were those who admired Vilivian and intended to cheer for her although they were in relative minority.

Wearing a red jacket and a black hat, Vito was in the front of the queue to the beer stand inside the arena. He rubbed his hands as he approached the seller.

‘Give me twelve of those, boss.’ he ordered.

The seller poured twelve cups, each containing less than half a litre of beer and put them in a carrier. Vito paid and already reached and downed one of the cups.

The beer was expensive, awful, and watered down, but that’s why he bought twelve cups and HE WAS going to get his fix. He finished, belched, and threw the empty cup away.

‘Starting out strong, eh?’

‘Fuck!’ he yelled out in surprise.

Vito turned towards tall, red-skinned stranger in a black coat. He was wearing black-rimmed glasses and had a friendly smile on his face.

‘Who’re you?’

‘Apologies for the scare, good man! I go by Bandoneon. Might I have your name?’

‘What’s it to you?’ Vito asked suspiciously.

‘I’m a writer! Traveling journalist! Take your pick, friend.’ Bandoneon pulled out a small journal and a pen. ‘Am I to understand that you’re responsible for the movement supporting the efforts of contestant Piano?’

‘Aye!’ Vito unzipped his jacket and showed his shirt with Piano’s visage on it. ‘That’d be me!’

‘My, my! I have heard great things about you, friend! Are you alone in your endeavour?’

‘Nay!’ He spun around showing the people, mainly pointing at the queue to the beer stand. ‘We’re all here because we support Lady Piano! Two dozen good lads and ladies and some things I don’t entirely understand, but I don’t judge, you know. Any fan of Piano’s is a friend of mine and all that stuff.’

‘Such following! Such heart! May I have your name, then?’

‘Eh . . .’ Vito said uncertain. The journalist was cheerful. Too cheerful. The kind of cheerfulness that was kind of vague that sober men should learn to dread. But Vito wasn’t sober.

‘Friend, I believe you’re making history! You’ll be the star of my article! Please, friend, do it for me!’ Bandoneon insisted.

Vito hesitated but eventually gave up. ‘Aight, mate. Name’s Vito. Remember that name!’

‘Oh, I most definitely shall!’ Bandoneon chuckled as he wrote Vito’s name in his notebook. ‘And what, if I may ask, are your thoughts on contestant Vilivian?’

‘Wretch and a loser. Not worth facing off against Lady Piano!’

‘Such passion! You’re assured of her victory, but what will you do otherwise?’

‘Won’t happen. Not with our cheering. Not with our support. Piano’s too powerful, see?’

‘Well, but there’s always that chance, isn’t there?’

‘Listen, Brandon . . .’

‘Bandoneon.’

‘Lady Piano’s the most graceful there is. She’s the Empress of Eloquence, the Mistress of Morality, the Princess of Passion, the Duchess of Domination, the—’

‘I get it.’

‘Ain’t no way in hell she loses to that she-beast Vilivian, you get it? There’s just too big of a difference in class. Too grand of a gap in their levels. Lady Piano can do everything and Vilivian can do . . . much less. We’re going to support Lady Piano in any way we can. And I mean any way.’ He patted his holster.

‘Goodness! And how will you handle the Crossguard? The God Eater herself?’

Vito grimaced heavily.

‘Pah! It’s clear that the God Eater’s losing a grip on her town. Why else would she invite something like Vilivian to her tournament? She’s padding the tournament with rubbish and the good people, like Pembroke, suffer as a consequence! She’s a monster, both of ‘em! Hear, hear!’ Vito shouted suddenly. He walked up to an empty crate lying nearby and stood up on it.

He called people to hither around him and they did – few dozens of them, more than Bandoneon expected and much more than Vito expected. Nonetheless, he took a cup in his hand, as if readying a toast, and spoke:

‘Ruin is upon us, comrades! And only the flame of passion carried by Lady Piano can save us from the darkness spread by the plague-bearing demonic fiend that goes by Vilivian!’ he spit on the floor. ‘She may have the strength and endurance, but it’s our support that will bring glory to Lady Piano! We shall proudly gaze from the stands of the arena; we will be watchful for any foul play the demon may put into practice! We shall show the God Eater and her lackeys, fattened by decadence and luxury, that we – the people – are the hope and the future of Crossroads!’ he downed the cup in one go. ‘Walk with me! Let’s show the true spirit of Truth! Freedom! Justice! Hurrah!’

The crowd cheered twice as loud, and the few dozen went towards the stands. Vito stepped of the box and looked at Bandoneon who was slowly clapping, with a flabbergasted expression. Vito showed him thumbs up and followed his fellow compatriots.

‘This is amazing.’

Forte stopped clapping and let out a hearty chuckle of disbelief. It was obvious to him from the very beginning that knowing how to operate a doorknob was enough to be considered savvy in Crossroads, but this was incredible. He didn’t have to resort to any tricks or convincing. These idiots talked themselves into their crusade against Vilivian by themselves and fuelled it with alcohol.

He checked his notebook. He didn’t even have to write Vito’s name. That cretin’s face was an open book, albeit banned in several countries. His hatred and zealotry stemmed from his disdain for the Crossroads’ deity more than towards Vilivian’s demonic nature.

No matter. It was less work for him. He now regretted not waking up early enough to wish his sister good luck.

She was already asleep by the time he returned from Fox Den day prior. And this morning, she was already gone along with some of their money.

Nonetheless, he was confident he could enjoy himself today. Everybody deserves a day of, right? He smiled in spirit as he walked towards the stands.

Nephros yawned. He was sitting in front of the table in his smithy as Piano walked in.

‘Is it ready?’ she asked. Nephros pointed his crab hand at the blade resting in a black scabbard on the white cloth on the table.

‘See for yourself. A *colichemarde*. Blade is thirty-two inches carbon steel plated in silver brought from Vilivian’s home world. Steel, oval grip, wrapped with wood should make for easy handling even if it gets wet, bloody, or otherwise. The pommel and guard are steel, simple as.’

Piano put a sack of coins on the table and unsheathed the rapier. The blade was fully white, but no light reflected from it.

‘So, pure . . . It’s silver?’

‘Yes. Might be some strange variant due to all the weird stuff in her world. I thought using it would make it easier to cut through that demonic hide of hers.’ He started counting the coins. ‘I also wanted to use absite – a unique ore that exists in her world. Apparently, it’s used in smithing and construction in her world, but the bloody thing’s one of the very few things prohibited to import.’

‘Why is that?’

“‘Hazardous to the environment and the people.” Which is funny considering half the population is just that. When I asked Vilivian if she knew she just told me that the unpredictability and instability of raw magic is too dangerous to handle and . . .’ he waved hand. ‘Bleh.’

Piano slashed the air few times. She looked at the blade uncertain.

‘Do you mind if I sharpen it?’

‘I already did, but . . . it’s all yours.’

‘Thank you.’ Piano instead picked up a file and sharpened her rapier. She went at it for few minutes before she looked at it.

‘You done?’ Nephros asked.

‘Not quite.’ She reached to her pocket and took out a silk handkerchief. She very precisely made sure to sharpen the edges by *almost* cutting it in half. Nephros looked up curiously when she was done.

Piano slashed the air once more and was still not satisfied. She looked around the shop and then went to the corner. She started picking up cobweb.

‘Now, you’re just pretentious.’ he commented.

She rubbed the webs on the blade. She did so for a full minute before she was done.

She swung twice in the air.

‘Come now, there’s no way it’s going to/ /better.’

/cut any/

He went silent.

She swung again.

‘What/ /the/ /damn?’/

/in/ /god/

She smiled satisfied.

‘Now, it’s sharp.’ She put it back in the scabbard and fastened it to her right side. ‘Is the money sufficient?’

Nephros blinked twice.

'Yeah. It is.' He quickly returned to his usual deadpan self.

'Then I'll be off.'

She exited the smithy and took a deep breath. She looked up to the sky.

'It's going to rain.'

She turned her towards the arena and headed there. She couldn't be more equipped than she was now. Armed with new-found confidence, perhaps spawned by Vilivian's words day prior, or maybe due to the fact that she couldn't avoid the inevitable anymore.

A devil-blade for Vilivian's human half, and the silver blade for the monstrous one. It was almost poetic. In addition, she's equipped with a set of six silver knives hidden throughout her body. Just in case.

And, of course, the rejuvenation stone she got from her brother. Hopefully, she won't have to use it, but she wanted it more as a "good luck" charm more than anything.

The approach to the arena was much denser with people, but it's not like the whole town was eager to watch two women fight each other. It was certainly the attraction of the year – but there were still those who didn't care much for it. Piano still saw families and small groups of people hanging out and treating the day as usual.

Still, she was astonished to see so many people in front of the arena cheering on her as she approached the entrance. The Crossguard had to hold back some of the spectators.

On that note, Piano noticed that despite much larger attendance the number of guards stayed the same as day before if not decreased.

She shook her head. No more distractions. No more doubt. She entered the dark corridor, waiting to be announced.

'Hello, Crossroads!'

The Colosseum erupted in loud cheer following X's call. The announcer was wearing a cute, pink raincoat as she flew above the arena.

The stands were brimming with people wearing raincoats. Some spectators spelled out Piano's name with coloured plates. There were few eager fans of Vilivian and naturally the God Eater in her own private sector. Dully swirling her wine, waiting for the fight to begin.

‘This is the day we’ve all been waiting for, oh, so patiently! And finally, after two days of awesome fights and incredible stakes we are at the penultimate stage of the Cross Tournament! You all know what’s coming after the next two announcements. The weather may be damp, but we’re all burning hot with anticipation for the final encounter of the tournament! The Silent Shadow against the Matriarch! Devil versus Demon! Ladies and Gentlemen, please welcome our contestants – Piano and Vilivian!’

They entered the arena from two opposite sides. There were cheers and jeers, the latter directed towards Vilivian, but they were quickly subdued by the sheer fanbase of Piano’s.

They met at the middle and as she did in the first round, Vilivian pierced the sheath of her keepsake into the ground.

‘You took it with you today?’ Piano asked.

‘I couldn’t find Volley all morning,’ Vilivian looked at the stands. ‘I hope I hadn’t slighted him somehow.’

X’s voice resounded.

‘What is going to be their wish? What is it that they’re fighting for?! We’re all about to learn and you know what? Today’s arena doesn’t change! No more deserts! No more sewers! Today, our contestants will rely on their own abilities and resourcefulness!’

An open fight with Vilivian wasn’t exactly what Piano envisioned in today’s fight. She had hoped for some nice advantage coming from the change of environment. Nonetheless, she was confident in her own ability to improvise.

‘And now, without further ado, let us begin the final of the Cross Tournament! Begin!’

X’s voice quieted down and all that remained was the hubbub in the stands. Women stared at each other.

‘You appear to be more confident than yesterday.’ Vilivian noticed.

‘Indeed,’ Piano admitted. ‘Perhaps it’s the talk we had yesterday. Or maybe it was just a stage-fright, as seldom as they happen. You look awfully pleased as well.’

‘I reckon I should start enjoying the moments more. No point worrying about the future until it happens, right?’

‘Indeed.’

Both women smiled warmly.

Vilivian brushed some of her hair to the side and clenched her fists.

‘Shall we begin?’

‘May I?’

‘After you.’

Piano readied her fists as well. She put her left foot behind. She then put her right even further behind. On the third step, Piano turned around fully and sprinted towards the exit to the town.

The Colosseum went silent in astonishment as they saw Piano leave. Only the God Eater herself was barely holding in the laughter.

And it was Vilivian’s laughter that broke that silence. She grabbed the keepsake and tied it to her back.

‘You’re wise beyond your years, Blackblood!’

With a brisk walk she followed Piano out of the arena.

The arena remained stupefied.

‘Ladies?’ X said in a confused voice. ‘What about the tournament?’

Piano exited the colosseum and quickly scouted her surroundings. She felt Vilivian’s ki approaching dangerously fast.

It was the gate of the Golden Fox that brought her attention. It was on the other end of the long street, but she had an inkling – an idea to gain an advantage over Vilivian and it was on that plaza.

She ran up to the beer stand and jumped up on its frail roof. From there she climbed onto the roof of the taller building.

The tiles were wet and angled; she had to focus to not fall. She turned around and saw Vilivian emerging outside. The Matriarch looked up and smiled slyly.

Piano wasted no time in moving through from one end of the roof to the other. She stepped carefully as Vilivian observed and followed from below.

She leaped to another building. A tile slid off, and Piano barely held on.

‘Bloody heels!’ she cursed as she gathered up and continued moving swiftly. She had to sacrifice speed to maintain the safety should she fall off.

‘My sisters would often tell tales of the thrilling chases they experienced while hunting their prey.’ Vilivian spoke loudly from below as Piano continued moving. ‘I wonder how many of them died in an ambush. Would they fall to you? *Will I?*’

There was a chant in those last syllables and Piano noticed blue light enveloping the tiles in front of her. They exploded violently, throwing debris in her face, but in one swift motion she dexterously avoided the attack and leaped to the next roof. Her moves were cat-like, except she didn't spray urine at every other wall.

It's exactly an ambush, Piano thought. More of a change of scenery.

She finally reached her destination and took a turn to the roof of a bakery that went parallel to the slaughterhouse the heckler was standing under the day before.

She jumped off onto the street and backed away towards the door inside; she watched the turn, expecting Vilivian to appear suddenly. And as her back touched the metal door to the building, the Matriarch appeared, destroying the corner of the bakery, and picking up a brick she immediately threw at Piano.

She ducked and elbowed open the metal door and ran inside as the brick shattered above her head.

Vilivian entered the slaughterhouse after her opponent. As she passed the threshold her senses were immediately overtaken by the intense smell of blood and death. She walked forward, but the building was in complete darkness – it was out of use for today. There were few windows near the high ceiling, but they didn't illuminate much, nor did the open door.

'Clever,' she said. 'Trying to disorient my senses while also staying hidden. I understand there's no means of convincing you to come out into the view?'

'The first rule of subterfuge,' Piano's voice echoed. 'Is to shy away from the light.'

'Then I'll bring the light to you.' Vilivian's arms lit up with blue light. A flame appeared above her palms. She threw the first towards one edge of the large rectangular room and the second to the other.

Flames sparked something a lot as they travelled and when they exploded so did a now visible machinery. The flesh of the carrion lit up; the dust exploded. Floor, crates, and tools susceptible to flames burned relentlessly and now most of the building was visible to Vilivian.

She readied another flame but was struck into the shoulder with a blade. Her veins ached as silver dug into the magic, but Vilivian pulled it out quickly and tossed the fireball towards the direction the knife was thrown from.

High above, the flame illuminated Piano's silhouette that dodged the flame that struck the office at the end of a long metal walkway that went along the wall near the ceiling.

'I see you.' Vilivian said and noticed the metal staircase leading up to her.

She climbed as fire spread on the ground floor. She didn't take her eyes off from her.

Piano didn't just stand waiting. She tossed two more knives Vilivian's way, both of which the Matriarch scarcely evaded. Annoyed, she tore out a piece of railing and tossed it as a makeshift spear. Piano ducked, backing away towards the office. Vilivian continued to climb and readied another fireball she tossed towards the office. The bricks collapsed and flames spread inside. Piano stopped and turned around.

Vilivian climbed onto the bridge and with malicious intent she started approaching Piano.

'No more running.'

'I'll take a five.' Piano grabbed the left hilt with her right hand.

On the approach, Vilivian raised her left arm and chanted:

'Shatter.'

Wall next to Piano exploded, sudden daylight distracting her, and allowing Vilivian to close the gap. Just barely, Piano managed to slash upwards straight out of her scabbard. Vilivian evaded as the blood splattered and ate through metal and masonry. She grabbed Piano's sword hand and launched her fist at her, but it was caught by Piano's other hand.

Piano immediately pulled Matriarch onto herself and headbutted her; Vilivian was concussed and shocked to find so much strength in that strike.

She let go of the Blackblood and was put on backfoot, retreating towards the staircase as Piano slashed at her with her short weapon.

'Perhaps it's about time to use that blade of yours!'

'It's not mine to wield!'

Vilivian's arms lit up. Flame appeared in her right hand which she threw from below, whilst her left pulled the bricks from the wall onto Piano. She blocked the fireball with her blade; the explosion was tiny, burning her clothes ever so slightly, but the falling debris caused her to lose balance. Seeing the approaching Matriarch forced her to slash on a cumbersome angle.

But they were both stopped dead in tracks as the walkway swayed and creaked. It was supported by steel beams, but the floor they were placed on was burning down – the whole bridge was on a time limit.

They both realized this.

'Break!' Vilivian chanted immediately and the ceiling would've fallen on Piano had she not dashed blade-first ready to thrust.

Vilivian tried to duck underneath the coming blade but Piano read her like a book. She feigned a strike and instead Vilivian was met with a knee to the face.

She grabbed Vilivian's braid and pushed her onto the railing and stabbed her face. Matriarch barely managed to stop the blade with her hands. She wrestled Piano, trying to turn her blade against her.

Piano reinforced her strength with ki, but Vilivian still just barely managed to turn the blade against the aggressor. It was halfway turned towards Piano's neck when the walkway trembled heavily. They both lost balance. Vilivian collapsed on all fours letting go of the blade. Piano held onto it but was pushed back against the wall.

The support wouldn't hold out much longer. It was Piano's cue. She ran towards the hole in the wall Vilivian made and escaped.

Vilivian tried to follow her, but the beams collapsed, and she fell along with them into the flames.

Piano jumped into a lush greenery of bushes in a small alley between the slaughterhouse and a tailor shop. She looked up. Dark smoke was leaving from the holes Vilivian made with her magic. The skies were dark, she noticed and a slight drizzle seemed to be coming down.

Piano sheathed her crimson ninjato and breathed out. She didn't realize she was getting suffocated towards the end there. She moved around the building and returned to the plaza.

Cheers erupted when she came into view. On the main street and in the little alleys, in the windows of houses and shops people were watching and cheering for her. They were not in the slightest concerned with the burning building right in front of them.

She turned around in the middle of a plaza and looked at the slaughterhouse. Were the flames capable of defeating a Matriarch?

'The Matriarch's fallen! Long live Lady Piano!' she heard a familiar drunken voice. 'Hip-hip—'

Suddenly, the wall broke down and along with smoke and flames exited Vilivian.

The cheers quieted down, and Piano smiled slightly. *I wouldn't think so*, she thought.

Aside from a few scorches on her clothes, Vilivian was seemingly without any serious injury.

'I saw you fall into flames. How are you so pristine?'

Vilivian spread her arms slightly and they lit up with blue light. A translucent barrier surrounded her.

'It will falter against any above-average attack, but it's effective against flames.' The barrier disappeared. 'Were you hoping for an easy win?'

'Victory is a victory, though it would be a little anticlimactic should you perish in a self-inflicted fire. Were you at least satisfied with our little skirmish?'

'It was a sufficient enough warm-up, but I am hungry for more. Shall we continue, or will you run again?'

'I merely wanted to gain an upper hand by luring you into an environment you had no experience fighting within. You've proven yourself more than capable of turning the tide, even if for a rather chaotic outcome.'

'I didn't mean it to explode if that's what you mean.'

'I believe it. In any case, I don't suppose you'll allow me to escape again?'

'A correct assessment.'

'You won't mind if I get serious, then?'

'By all means.' She took a stance.

Piano unsheathed her ninjato and held it low in her right hand.

In but blink of an eye she approached Vilivian, catching her off guard and by feigning an upward slash threw her blade high into the air.

Matriarch was unsure whether to follow the blade's owner and she instead chanted a barrier while Piano reached for her rapier and immediately slashed at the arcane shield.

The silver and magic clashed, a loud metallic sound erupted in the plaza and the spell was broken. Vilivian watched in astonishment as then, Piano performed a somersault and kicked the now falling ninjato straight into Vilivian's shoulder.

She screamed as the blade sank and burned her from inside; pain comparable to the scorching of a silver and before she could fully register what happened, Piano was already near her to pull out the blade and went behind her to slash the back of her knees with it.

Vilivian fell forward as Piano returned to the front and sheathed her blades. The crowd cheered as the Matriarch was on her knees, panting in pain and holding onto her wounded shoulder. Piano allowed herself a smirk of pride of a job well done.

She glanced at Vilivian's tag. The scarf on her left shoulder. She could snatch it and win so easily, but she was elated with the realisation that Vilivian can be felled. Piano *can protect* herself and her brother. *That* was her true talent. And Vilivian's martial arts? They were soon to become hers as well.

'Serious enough for you?'

Vilivian laughed through pain as she let go of the shoulder and barely stood up. Her struggle was accompanied by the jeers and calls for Piano to kill her.

Piano couldn't help but feel slight shame and guilt over the behaviour of the spectators. She doesn't like being in the centre of attention herself but putting her on the spot like that disgusted her to an extent. Perhaps she should've ended it right then and there.

'Seems your talents took me by surprise.' Vilivian said. Her wound was dark, and purple blood had stained her red blouse. 'Truly, I didn't expect those kinds of feats.'

'I'm rather surprised. If I knew direct confrontation would end like that, I wouldn't insist on the change of scenery.'

'So much for that mutual respect. Now, let's try that again, shall we? I won't be caught off guard again.' Vilivian's face turned deadpan, and her eyes seemed to drill into Piano to the very core.

The Devil-blooded woman turned serious as well. Losing focus against Vilivian was what she was afraid of before – she can't allow herself to simply get lost in premature jubilation.

She dashed and with her crimson blade at the ready.

'*Rise!*' Vilivian used her right arm to cast a spell and from ground emerged a wall that blocked off, but frontal assault was never Piano's plan. She bounced off to the left and intended to strike Vilivian's right shoulder from behind, but the Matriarch seemed to have expected this and Piano was welcomed by Vilivian's Elbow.

She collapsed on the ground in pain, losing her blade. She felt Vilivian's grip tighten around her neck as she was picked up with minimal effort and turned around. Piano tried to free herself from the grasp to no avail and was consequently ran into the wall of the bakery they were passing earlier. Her ki reinforcement and adrenaline made the pain bearable once Vilivian used her body to repurpose the mason-work. She then used the Vilivian Knee to push her in further.

'Thing about speed, Blackblood.' Vilivian said as she held her opponent in the air. 'Is that past a certain point it becomes very predictable.'

Piano flicked her sleeve and a knife appeared in her hand. She stabbed Vilivian's forearm. Matriarch had to let her go and Piano kicked her away mid-air and managed to land on her feet. Vilivian pulled out the knife from her arm and tossed it away. She took guard.

Piano pulled another knife from her other sleeve and charged the Matriarch and the two women engaged in a very scrappy melee.

Piano evaded and slashed, though made of silver, her knife didn't seem to make nearly as much impact as her ninjato did. Vilivian grunted in pain, but she toughened out all of Piano's strikes. Her knife was eventually knocked out and it turned into full-on fisticuffs. She would evade most of Matriarch's attacks, proceed with counters and land a good hit or several. She used her martial arts to their full extent, but Vilivian was so pent up on magical adrenaline she was basically a punching

bag that hits back.

Forte watched the fight anxiously in the crowd gathered on the plaza. The rain intensified as two women exchanged blows, but he wasn't at all happy with how it proceeded.

It was very clear who was winning in those trades. Piano might've appeared deadpan and focused, and her moves struck precisely and powerfully, but she was having trouble matching Vilivian's endurance. She needed to retreat, and take a breather, but Vilivian closed the gap each time she tried to do just that. She was like an annoying hamster. Hamster that hit like a sledgehammer.

Piano was trapped and forced to fight on until her endurance gives. He kept hoping she would start running but she *kept pushing*. *Why didn't you just take the bloody tag, Sister?! What talent could that woman possibly have that is worth all this pain?*

He noticed Vito standing near the front in his stupid hat. All these zealots were strangely quiet ever since they found out Vilivian's doing fine work being Piano's equal. They all stood frozen and just watched the beating.

He approached the drunkard.

'You,' he grabbed Vito by the shoulder.

'Huh?' disgusting smell erupted from his mouth. 'Oh, it's you, Brandon.'

'Brandon? Right, whatever. Say, don't you think that the Matriarch's having an advantage?' Forte asked even though it caused him no end of frustration.

'Eh, yeah, well, she's got the momentum, but I bet Lady Piano will get it back any moment now . . .'

'Well, it's better safe than sorry, right? Didn't you say you were going to make sure she wins, and all that?'

'Yeah, but that was on the colosseum you know. Here it's just . . . too intimate, you know what I mean?'

'I don't.' Forte hissed and then his heart sunk when he saw his sister fall to the ground by receiving Vilivian's left hook to the temple and was consequently kicked in the ribs. He watched in terror as the crowd moved back away from her body.

Rage started overtaking his body and mind.

Cowards. The lot of them are nothing, but cowards! Of course, they are! What did I expect from a bunch of drunkards! They boast, they sing, they HATE, but they will not act on it, no. The reason they're not cheering for Vilivian now is because it would be too embarrassing, wouldn't it? I despise

them. This can't stand. This WILL NOT stand!

Piano held onto her head. A slight concussion. Nothing a good headshake won't fix.

Oh, she needed a plan. She didn't want to use her silver sword – not yet – she couldn't risk losing it like she did with her other blade.

Her martial arts were impeccable, but Vilivian was a literal wall. Low sweeps? She'll jump on you and pummel you down. High kicks? She'll grab the leg and break it in two. Haymakers? She's seen it so many times she could write an essay. Anything melee that remotely worked were defensive moves or random acrobatics. Vilivian learned as she fought and wasn't afraid of taking a heavy hit. She was—

Piano's thought process was interrupted by a heavy kick to the ribs. She was prepared for it, but she had hoped to at least finish the thought.

'Get up.' Said Vilivian harshly.

Piano felt more embarrassed than she was in pain now, but she liked to think it was Vilivian's way of showing affection. A motivation of sort. For all she knows, she might've just bludgeoned her head in with her boot.

'Is kicking down the fallen all you can do?!' Someone shouted from the crowd.

Both Vilivian and Piano turned towards the source. Piano felt something unpleasant swell in her chest. The murmur started arising amongst the spectators. It became louder with each second.

'Monster!' someone shouted.

'Back to England with you!'

Vilivian listened in confusion when the first voice spoke again.

'Vane! Cassius! Arthur! Do you think they will forgive something as monstrous as you? You're not a human, you're a vile beast!'

'How do you know these names?' Vilivian asked coldly as she scouted the crowd for the source of voice.

The crowd got agitated, instantly coming to defence of their member.

'What's it to you, bitch?!'

'Stay off, and keel over already, demon!'

'Kinslayer!' shouted the first voice, once again.

Piano noticed Vilivian clenching her fists.

'I know your *scent*.' Vilivian was livid.

I do, too, Piano's fears were realized. She couldn't let him get hurt. She needed to get Vilivian's attention.

She lunged quickly for Matriarch's tag while she was distracted, but her right arm was intercepted and Vilivian fell on her with her hand on her throat.

'Is that how you intended to win, Blackblood?' Vilivian's voice carried nothing but spite. 'By breaking my mind?'

Vilivian's iron grip was incredible, but at least the pressure was off Forte. All she needed to do now is to . . . get . . . free . . .

Vilivian wouldn't budge – not to kicks or punches or anything. She crushed her chest slowly choking her with cold and ruthless expression. She could not reach her blade, nor could she cut herself to burn her. Her vision blurred as life slowly ebbed away.

And then they heard the gunshot howl.

Piano breathed out as Vilivian collapsed on her back – purple blood oozing from hole in her chest. The Matriarch touched it in disbelief, as if hoping it's just an illusion.

Piano turned around and saw her Forte in a raincoat, holding a revolver.

'Oi, that's my gun!' shouted the man Piano saw giving speech the day before.

Forte's hand trembled and dropped the handgun, as if he himself couldn't believe what he had just done. They looked at each other and with terrified expression, Forte escaped through the crowd.

'Is that how I perish . . .?'

Piano turned stood up and looked at Vilivian. She was kneeling, watching her own blood on her hands.

'Vilivian, listen . . .' Piano was interrupted.

'That's exactly what happens, Monster!'

The man in red jacket picked up his handgun and raised it to the sky.

'Wait, you don't understand—'

'We understand everything perfectly, Lady Piano!' his perverted zeal sent shivers down her spine. 'We may have faltered, but we retrieved our vigour! We shall not be intimidated neither by the Matriarch nor by the God Eater! Finish her now, Champion! Send her back to rotting hell that

spewed her out!’

The large crowd joined in the call for murder. It was a horror. So much hatred and spite, without a reason. It couldn’t be real – it was too unnatural. It must’ve been a ploy. A trick? It couldn’t be her brother’s but who’s then? They all wanted blood – and Piano was sure they didn’t even know why. She wanted to stop them, but she found herself speechless. Too scared, too shy.

Vilivian listened as her already bleeding heart broke. Though not in any immediate danger her mind was reeling in fear – her instinct slowly taking over, and she couldn’t rein them in.

Her thoughts rushed from one point to another; the yesterday’s conversations, the today’s events, and all that the people of Crossroads talked about her started taking its toll.

A fiend. A monster. Called as such by the people she thought admirable. Their ability to persevere, their ingenuity; the compassion Vilivian envied and could only dream of conferring to someone. She wanted to be on equal terms with them.

She feared hurting them. She feared taking away a life without a reason. Her promises. Her friends. She dreaded losing those things, because they were the closest, she ever was to being humane. But those fears were redundant. Volley, Saki, Arthur, Wendy . . . Whether they indulged her pitiful fantasies or sought solace from her anger and angst didn’t matter anymore.

She was full of anger. And if you’re full of anger, there’s no more room left for fear.

Vilivian placed her hands on ground. Her blood sinking into the cold, wet stone. Rain battered her back, and her wound dripped with purple.

‘You’re all scum.’ Vilivian’s quiet voice escaped; her seething rage quieting the rowdy crowd down. Piano took step backward, grabbing the hilt of her sword. ‘Your veins are more mud than blood. Decadent in your pretentious mediocrity you refuse to acknowledge your innate weaknesses. You assume your high perch, dictating and fearmongering as if you know what I’m like – why my kind are like! You are cowards, willing to lie, deceive and kill when it’s convenient. You claim I exist to bring naught but murder, but I am more. And You. Will. Learn.’

Her arms lit up with blue light and the cobblestones in the plaza did as well. Somebody shouted “Run!” and the ground started collapsing. It consumed whole plaza into the depths, along with part of the warehouse and other nearby buildings including the bakery, two houses and a donut shop.

And of course, people.

Piano turned around the moment she saw Vilivian's arms light up. She turned on a heel and started running as earth was consumed along the way. She jumped to grab the roof and climbed, just barely making it on top as the building she was on top of collapsed as well. She jumped to another building, further down the street whose part also collapsed.

With ground finally certain underneath her feet she looked over the scene. The giant hole in what was once a plaza was being filled with rainwater and sewage. There was chaos, there was blood there was almost certainly death.

' . . . Fetch me the rope . . . !'

' . . . Use the soap I say . . . !'

' . . . Guards! Guards! Where's the bloody guard . . . !'

She couldn't see Vilivian anywhere nor could she sense her. Did the Matriarch die? If she had, she would have known about it, right?

It was a complete pandemonium. She saw Volley climbing down the hole to look for people. Couple of mages and witches came out to tend to the wounded and help with bringing out the victims.

Piano noticed a silhouette of a man deep in the crater. His lower body was crushed by debris. The broken sewer pipe was slowly flooding him down. She thought him dead, but she could still sense his ki albeit very faintly.

She jumped onto the street and then into the crater. Dark dirt was unstable, and she had to squeeze in-between two large pieces of concrete to get to him. She dropped even lower, and her feet submerged in the water.

She approached the man – he was unconscious. Piano moved the concrete block aside and saw the man's bruised and bleeding legs. She pulled him up and put him on her back and at the same time someone shouted and threw a rope.

With a lot of effort and a lot of reinforcing she managed to climb the rope with the man weighing her down. She was sweating and struggling near the top with her hands and body trembling she was panicking about dropping the man.

At the very top three residents grabbed him off her shoulders and pulled him away while Saki helped appeared and pulled her up.

'You alright?' the oni asked.

'Where's Vilivian?'

'Wasn't she down there?'

'I can't sense her!'

‘Well, she’s somewhere, then, otherwise you’d have her tails attached to you! Blast it, Chifu, where are you? And where are the damned guards?!’

Saki went to reinforce the rescue missions, while Piano looked to the other end of the chasm. If Vilivian’s alive she needs to find her. Before she finds Forte.

Forte discarded his raincoat and glasses and jogged frantically through the streets. He was running for two minutes but he tired rather quickly was eventually brought down to a brisk walk.

His body trembled with excitement and adrenaline. Despite rain, his agitated blood warmed him up. He breathed in and out trying to put together the events that had occurred.

‘I shot her.’ He mumbled. ‘I shot her!’

He was willing anything to save his sister and he did. There was nothing to regret except for missing the head. The tremors he felt a few minutes ago must’ve been Vilivian’s doing.

He walked, he took turns into alleyways, sometimes he looped but every twelve seconds or so he looked behind his shoulder.

‘Oi, mate. Over here.’

He turned towards the alleyway. A familiar and disgusting sight awaited him there; Camio, in his form of a porcelain spider called out to him.

Forte looked around before he entered the narrow alleyway. ‘What do you want?’ he asked. ‘I’m slightly peeved and in a hurry.’

‘Calm down,’ said Camio emerging from his porcelain pot. ‘Thing is that I’ve been paid to keep you out of harm’s way.’

‘You were? Why you?’

‘I know this town just as well if not better than the God Eater herself, lad. Every nook and cranny; black markets, clubs, smuggling dens . . . I know where she can find you, and where she can’t. Be honest, do you think there’s anyone willing to melee with that thing?’

‘She is chasing me then?’

‘She sure as shit ain’t dead. And you *did* get the warning.’

‘You still haven’t told me who is it that employed you.’

‘A little bird that goes by “Not Your Bloody Business”. I’m a professional, guv. Not exactly willing to spill the beans on who pays my bills.’

‘You’re being strangely conscientious.’

‘I take an offense to that.’

‘What of my sister?’

‘Last time I saw her she was saving some schmuck from the chasm Vilivian made. She’s probably looking for her right now. Probably scared of what Vilivian might do to you should she catch you. She was looking pretty pissed right before she turned everything to shitter.’

Forte smiled smugly.

‘Well, I always wondered what her breakdown would be like. Had few theories on it.’

‘I am open to ideas.’

Forte froze up. His brain spanned all manner of wild and incoherent fantasies as he tried to provide a rational reason on why Vilivian was standing behind him. It all came down to Camio’s insufferable smirk.

‘You stalled me. You *betrayed* me.’ He said to the lesser demon.

‘Technically, I betrayed my employer. I’m so glad I took the payment upfront.’

‘Why?’

‘Remember when you called me disgusting?’

Forte grimaced into anger.

‘Are you *that* petty?’

‘I’m worse. Truth being, I just really don’t like you. Welcome to the real world, kid.’

‘You—’

‘Enough.’ Vilivian spoke out. ‘Leave, Demon. Your sole existence is an affront to your kind.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’ Camio said quickly and hid inside his pot. He then emerged wings and flew away.

Forte finally turned away to Vilivian. She was much closer than she expected. A few meters at most.

The Matriarch was standing upright, with cold, but focused expression. Her red blouse was dirtied by earth and soaked with rain and her own blood. There were scrapes in her black pants and her braid was dishevelled and wet. The sword remained fixated to her back.

He looked over the shoulder. If he ran quickly enough . . .

He fixed his shirt and took a deep breath.

'Say, are you giving me a chance to escape?'

'An illusion of one, at most.' Vilivian spoke softly.

'I remember wounding you,' he looked at her chest.

'I healed it.'

'I recall the process being rather excruciating without any anaesthesia.'

'I endured it.'

Her calmness agitated him. He expected her to be furious, quippy and ready to murder him on the spot, which she probably is but she doesn't feel like it.

She was glaring at him, like a predator stalks their prey. Well, I hope you choke on it.

'I hope you at least understand why I did it.'

'I do.'

'No way for us to settle it peacefully, then?'

'No.'

'And yet, you don't seem as wrathful, contrary to the evidence in the plaza.'

'I'm past the age of temper tantrums dictating my actions and feelings. I came, however, to an epiphany that I am a monster. And nothing will change that.'

'You ceded to some tavern banter?' Forte scoffed. 'I thought you better than that, Miss Vilivian.'

'You haven't, but that aside, I simply realized that there's no point pretending to be something I'm not. I'll do what I want. And I still have a promise to keep.'

'A promise, forsooth! To teach me the ultimate lesson! I am to die in the name of your principles?'

'No.'

'No?'

'I killed a lot of people, Male. Mainly in defence. I have never had any significant connection to my victims. Until now, however. Revenge is a novel concept to me.'

She cocked her head and gave him a sadistic grin.

Oh, dear. What have I unleashed onto the world?

'Now, then. What happens now?'

'That depends on you.' She said. 'Will you run? Use one of your tricks? Talk?'

He scratched his chin.

'Myriad choices equal myriad outcomes. Without delay, I say, it would be impudent of me to be *disillusioned* with the promise of safety *and* health, alas I can't help but to *conceal* my true intentions for as you see—'

He then turned around and started running in the opposite direction. He sprinted, as fast as Forte could sprint which wasn't very fast, but it did cause Vilivian to give a hearty laugh.

She then reached out her arm and grabbed air. She tightened her grip and the spell broke.

"Forte" that was running away dissolved into particles while the real one appeared in her hand, held by the throat. He tried to swing his legs at her and punched her arm, but she didn't budge.

'All at once. You really are an entertainer!' Vilivian laughed cheerfully and threw him out onto the street. He landed in the puddle of rain, his body aching from impact.

'You carry yourself expertly when it comes to illusions. But your scent is unmistakeable.'

She walked up and straddled him. She grabbed his hair and held it against the puddle. With her other hand she ripped open his shirt and vest revealing his crimson chest. She caressed it before cracking her fingers and raising her hand high.

'Killing you would be cathartic, but ultimately wasteful. And ripping your tongue, while satisfying is pointless if you're going to die anyway.'

Forte looked to the side, hoping for the rescue. If this were a story, a thunder would strike Vilivian down. Piano would come just in time to save him. But this wasn't that kind of story.

She pierced his skin with her nails and buried her fingers in it. He groaned as she pushed deeper, and his blood burned her fingers.

'I will make sure that every word— no, *every breath* you take; every time you grasp for life will cause you the same pain you caused when you shot me. It will be a very slow nightmare.' In the instant she pierced his lung she pulled out as he twitched in agony. She looked at her burned fingers and smiled in blissful contentment.

She stood up, as he lied half-unconscious in the intensifying rain. His life slowly expiring.

Vilivian felt weight on her back. She had trouble standing and she glanced over at the keepsake tied to her back. Once, the blade's weight would concern her, but now she frowned in disdain and untied the useless piece of metal. It fell on the ground; a thud muffled by the rain.

'Vilivian!' she heard shouting. About fifteen meters, she saw Piano standing in shock and disbelief. She looked at Forte and then at Vilivian. Matriarch smiled as she met Piano's glare. Heavy rain splashing on top of their heads.

'What did you do?' Piano shouted out.

'I always considered my seemingly endless lifespan a curse, Blackblood. Let's just say that this once,' she looked at Forte over her shoulder and smiled as he let out a slight groan with each attempt to breath. 'I will enjoy time's relentless flow.' She looked back at Piano and took a fighting stance. Piano discarded the scabbard she used to store her crimson blade in and took a stance as well.

'You're going to pay for that.'

Matriarch could sense wrath slowly taking hold in the young woman. Yet, she retained a magnificent control. Fear, anger, anxiety. . . Piano had suppressed them all and focused on the task ahead. Vilivian scoffed and her expression turned serious.

'I'll hold you to that.'

Both women started running at each other and met in the middle. Vilivian met a haymaker which Piano quickly kicked away and struck her chest twice with her fists, before Vilivian managed to swing wide. Piano evaded low and struck into stomach and face in two quick moves. As Matriarch recoiled her face slightly her right hand came down with a chop. Piano leaned left and attacked her head with two quick strikes which were evaded and countered by Vilivian's left arm coming down like a hammer.

Piano defended herself with her right forearm. Vilivian gathered some of the rain in her palm and threw it in her face, blurring her vision.

Despite that, Piano predicted Vilivian's next two strikes and deflected them. It was Vilivian's habit to always go for the chest. Piano was finally getting a read on her opponent's moves.

She followed up with a strong kick with her left leg to Vilivian's ribs. Matriarch answered with another wide swing Piano dodged and then deflected oncoming chop from below.

Yet another kick to the ribs and Matriarch made pained expression. Piano continued with a strike to the cheek, then another to the chest and went for a kick with a right leg.

Matriarch, unsuspecting a kick from the other side, didn't have a choice but to finally be toppled down by Piano's strength and was effectively, albeit very briefly, moved out of the way.

Piano wasted no time and rushed towards her bleeding brother. The tournament was secondary. The safety of her brother was paramount.

'You're as predictable as sunrise!' Vilivian's arm lit up when she raised it.

Cobble wall erupted right between Forte and her. She could've jumped it or destroyed it, but she was afraid of the rubble hurting her brother should the wall be destroyed either by her or Vilivian.

She turned around to see the Matriarch charging her with her fist ready to strike. Piano put her hand on the hilt of her silver rapier.

She needed to disable her. When Vilivian was close enough, Piano ducked unsheathing the blade aiming to slash Vilivian's side.

But as Piano did to her before now Vilivian did to her. Matriarch fainted, and instead kicked Piano's head, felling the young devil and her blade.

Reeling from hit, Piano saw Vilivian take the blade in her hand and approached her. Before she could react, it was sunk in her gut.

She yelled out in pain as Vilivian twisted the blade. She knew exactly where to strike to inflict as much suffering without killing her victim and yet, she didn't seem to enjoy it one bit. Rather, she was very indifferent.

Devil blood ate away the silver coating as she pulled it out, and Piano held onto her wound as it ate through her clothes. Gasping for air, enduring the pain, and trying to maintain consciousness.

'It's time to choose, Blackblood.' Vilivian said deadpan. 'I know you have the stone. I know you must realize that your brother is holding you back. Choose. Your life . . . or his.'

Piano reached for her pocket and pulled out the rejuvenation stone. The seemingly empty crystal was heavy and capable of healing one fatal injury. She clutched it in her hand.

It was the easiest choice of her life.

Determined, she crawled towards her brother. Her wish. Her life. It didn't matter anymore. He had to survive. It was pointless to go on trying without him.

She managed to get to him, whilst holding onto her wound. She raised her trembling hand holding the crystal over his wound. It was fine. He was going to resent her for that, but it was OK. Those were the consequences. And she was willing to pay them. She wanted to win, and she wanted to live. But if the price was to be left alone in this world, if the price was to fill a grave with his body . .

. then it was too high.

She saw shadow, and then was kicked away by Vilivian. Crystal rolled on the ground as she recoiled in pain. 'Why . . .?' she asked. Her eyes swell up.

'I expected you to hold some sentiment,' Vilivian picked up the crystal. 'But I didn't expect you to choose poorly. Your potential, your innate abilities are far too great to be discarded in exchange for this male. In this adversity, you will find anger – and anger will give you strength.'

'I don't want it! I want him to live!'

'I'm afraid I've already made my choice.'

'It isn't yours to make!'

'I'm glad you get the point.'

Piano tried to crawl away as Vilivian grabbed her and held her down with one hand. Devil kicked and flailed trying to escape. 'Stop!' she screamed. 'NO!' tears started falling from her eyes. She was sedated as the crystal shimmered with magic and her wound started healing.

The electric current numbed the pain of the mending spell and Piano's cries became quieter. She was finally let go as the crystal crumbled from her hand. Piano looked in despair as slowly subsiding rain swept away the dust.

'No, no, no!' she collapsed on all four as her body was still numb from the spell. Vilivian took a step back. She sensed fear and anxiety; desire for revenge, to get even. Perpetual wrath stirred in Blackblood's veins, fuelled by her loss. Vilivian expected her to explode; to attack.

But Piano broke down in despair instead. Her tears abundant and consumed in the rain. She crawled up to her brother. 'Please,' she begged. 'Please, heal him!'

Vilivian stood astonished.

Piano leaned above Forte. She gently grabbed his hair. 'Forte?' she said weakly. 'Brother, can you hear me? Please talk to me!'

His eyes were shut. There was no answer.

'Please! Please . . . Don't leave me.' She sobbed quietly.

He's barely alive, Vilivian thought. You should be able to tell, WHY can't you tell?

That vortex of emotions she sensed inside was gone. Naught but grief and guilt remained. What Vilivian once saw as a penultimate to great power now devolved into emotions of no value. Despair brought no benefits; it sowed nothing but self-doubt and Vilivian recoiled in disgust sensing those things in her opponent.

Livid, Vilivian grabbed Piano's hair and pulled her back on her knees.

'Explain to me, Devil. Why?!' she yelled. 'Why do you care so much for this male? He's a wretch! He's been holding you back your whole life! He demeaned your victories; he halted your growth by interfering into fights he had no business doing so! He brings misery to all he talks to, possesses no respect for anything but his own desires and you *revere him*, deluding yourself that you must depend on him like human must depend on air, or fish on water! Why, why, why?! What is so special about him that you abandon what you are and forsake all that you could be?!'

'He's my *brother!*' she cried. 'He's all I have!'

Vilivian's face turned from wrath to guilt back to wrath in a span of two seconds.

“*All you have?*” You have talent! Your skills are supreme! There is *so much* potential waiting to be unlocked! Why are all those things suddenly made redundant when that deadweight is removed from the equation? Why? Is it pity? What poison did he give you that made you so reliant on him?! Do you understand where you would be if he were dead? Do you understand where you would be if . . . if . . .

Where would I be if my brother were still alive?

Still stuck in a cave, most likely. Though perhaps with more reliable company than wild beasts and creatures. With loneliness never infecting her sense of duty she would remain as the Sentinel of Graal. Fated for eternity to guard the artefact until she was killed and beaten.

There was a time in her life that her siblings were all she had. Her sisters, as crude as they were, still acknowledged the bonds of the brood and would visit every so often. She felt their deaths through the blood – it was like the very last conversation she's had – a storm of emotions they experienced as they perished, and it was usually just . . . anger.

Vilivian desperately sought some sort of sense of belonging, whether it was by softening up to some of the challengers or insisting on a promise to a *dead man*. She opened herself to the idea that the outside world may not be so terrible after all.

She yearned for the place of belonging – a place where she could be herself and be accepted for who she truly was – a Matriarch. The invitation to the tournament was a chance – a hope for her to finally find her place.

But she's committed fratricide and felt she had no right to be anything but an outcast. And the more she acted as one, the more people despised her; turning the circle where she would become even more withdrawn and forgetting the people who did reach out to her and gave her place.

Piano's twin may be the only reason for her to walk the earth. Should she really take the only solace she has in the world. Was his sin truly so grave? He almost killed me. And he's teetering on the edge himself. What if he didn't learn his lesson? He'll learn again.

Vilivian was proud of the experience she accumulated throughout the centuries. But some of these experiences, she would rather never pass on.

She let go of Piano's hair as anger within herself came to a sudden halt. She walked around Forte's body and leaned on the other side.

Piano stared, uncertain, afraid, but said nothing.

'It's going to hurt.' Vilivian hovered her hand above the wound in Forte's chest. '*Mend.*'

Forte groaned in pain as light appeared in Vilivian's veins. Piano grabbed her brother's hand and tried to soothe him as the flesh knit and grew inside his body. He writhed, and as he moaned and coughed when his lung was being returned to its health.

After nearly full minute, the last tissue was healed back, and Forte finally breathed out uninterrupted. Piano was elated to see her brother turn his head towards her. He tried to speak to her but struggled to get even a word out.

Vilivian stood up and Piano followed suit.

'Why?' the young devil asked.

'Because you wanted me to.' Vilivian picked up the silver rapier from the ground.

'And you very clearly didn't. Was it one of your games?'

'I don't play games. You failed, Blackblood.' She threw the rapier hilt first towards Piano who caught it without an issue and then sheathed it. Vilivian then approached the keepsake and picked it up in her two hands. Its weight became manageable. 'You couldn't protect your brother. I simply allowed you to improve on that.'

'I am not the Blackblood you think me to be, Vilivian!'

'No, you're exactly what I think Blackblood should be. You were willing to die for him. To beg *me* to help him. I couldn't even protect my own brother from myself.'

'I thought your clan view Blackblood differently . . .'

'My family is dead, Piano. I endangered the people of Crossroads thus betraying those who thought me decent.' Vilivian frowned sadly. 'I'm the last one. All I have left is a promise.' She clutched the keepsake closer to her.

She looked at Piano with newfound resolve.

'I don't want your forgiveness, Blackblood. Merely a fitting finale for this pitiful parable.'

Piano looked back at her brother.

‘Someone will come and get him, I’m certain.’ Vilivian reassured her.

‘I know.’ Piano dried off her tears with her sleeve. ‘He’s come that far he won’t die now. Our fight has been prolonged enough. I’m willing to finish it.’

‘Good.’ Vilivian smiled then exclaimed out. ‘I know you can hear us Trickster! Move us somewhere where we can finish it uninterrupted!’

There was a silent pause during which the rain subsided. Then, the world moved while Piano and Vilivian stayed in place. They saw all of Crossroads move next to them until finally they found themselves in the middle of Cross Colosseum.

The arena, now emptied, was wet. The dark clouds were still hanging above in the sky, but there was nothing that would interrupt them anymore. No crowds. No brothers. No rain.

With trembling hand, Vilivian unsheathed the keepsake. Piano swallowed. The glint shined in the middle of the arena as the legendary blade saw daylight for the first time in four hundred years.

And though the blade shined, it didn’t appear to be anything special. It was a sword. A long piece of metal with very sharp edges. There was truly nothing out of ordinary in its appearance other than the blade’s blueish colour with silver spots.

But she noticed that it didn’t quite fit the scabbard. The blade was longer and the hilt much more suitable for wielding with two hands size of someone exactly like Vilivian.

‘Excalibur.’ Vilivian presented the weapon as she discarded the scabbard. ‘Legendary blade forged in times where function preceded over form. Its weight depending on the wielder’s guilt, balanced out by their resolve.’ She swung the air a few times. She had no trouble carrying the blade almost the same length as her. ‘I had hoped for it to not see daylight until I can present it to him. I’d kill anyone that dared to show any interest in it and now I’m the one wielding it. What’s one more broken principle, however? I must keep my promise. I will bring back Arthur. And it’s only fitting that his sword would help me achieve that.’

Piano untied her black scabbard and unsheathed the silver blade. She discarded the sheath and looked over the rapier’s blade. Its tip was slightly charred due to her devil blood, but she swung it confidently as well.

She put her left hand behind her back and positioned her blade low, slightly to the side.

‘Excalibur or not.’ Piano spoke confidently. ‘After I defeat you, I will claim my wish. And I’ll make sure that the events of today never happen again.’

‘Well said,’ Vilivian said and started circling around Piano whilst holding Excalibur high. ‘There will be no more interruptions in this venture, Blackblood! *Now show me what you CAN do!*’

Both women may have been wounded and spent but were still unwilling to compromise anything other than a decisive victory. With the only witness to their battle being the God Eater herself.

Vilivian slashed vertically. Piano parried it to the side and counter with a slash on her own that the Matriarch evaded. They struck relentlessly, each unwilling to give up an inch of advantage. Every time Piano's silver blade struck Excalibur's, a bright light of magic gleamed and a sound of corrupted, metallic sounds echoed in the empty arena.

Crossroads was covered with a blanket of mist. The sound of several dozen was heard walking through the main street towards the colosseum.

Men, women, humans, beastfolk, demons and devils; elves and dwarves; they were all armed with weaponry and prejudice. In their eyes a feverous zeal; in some uncertainty. On the very front, leading was Vito. He was holding his handgun high in the air.

'Step up, ladies and gentlemen! A little bird just told me where we can find the Matriarch! Follow me!' he shouted. 'And we'll bring that demon to justice for what she's done to our beautiful town! It is now the time for mortals to take hold!'

Cheers erupted behind him. Towards the back there wasn't as much commotion. It was rather difficult to hear him and even then, some of those people didn't really share his mad ideas. They really were there just for the drama and any excuse to beat up someone else was good enough.

'STOP!!' somebody shouted.

And they did. Short of twenty meters away from him.

There saw an oni boy standing on a wooden box in front of the entrance to the colosseum.

He was wearing a white shirt and his shorts. He was raising his arms as if trying to fully block the entrance.

'What's the idea, brat?' Vito shouted.

'I can't let you interrupt Miss Vilivian's fight! Turn around and leave!'

'Or what?'

'I'll beat you up!' he jumped off the box and cracked his knuckles.

'Are you daft?'

'I'm not daft! I'm Volley! Miss Vilivian's my friend and—'

'Ah, a fiend sympathizer! Your statements are already made redundant. We don't have to fight you, kid. We'll just walk you over!'

'It's the quality that matters, not quantity.'

A woman exited the arena. She was carrying an umbrella in her left hand. She was wearing purple dress and large witch hat.

'Hello, Miss Wendy!' said Volley. 'What are you doing here?'

'Good afternoon, Volley.' The mage smiled at the boy. 'I was worried about Vilivian after she destroyed the plaza. I've been all over Crossroads looking for her. I'm glad I finally found her . . .'

'Are you another sympathizer?!' Vito was spitting everywhere.

'I am her friend.' Wendy said firmly.

'You saw what she did to the town! Homes destroyed; families shattered! She has to pay!'

'I am perfectly aware of what she's done. I don't believe, however, that's done that out of malice or ill intent towards any resident of Crossroads. Even you. She was desperate.'

'Desperate to kill.' Vito growled. 'Enough! Two against an army what possibly do you hope to—'

'Three.' Another person came from the direction of a side street. She was wearing a black sweatshirt with her hoodie on and was hiding her hands in her pockets.

'Hello, Miss Angie!' Volley waved at her as if there wasn't a horde of angry people waiting to slaughter them.

Angelique waved back, slightly taken aback by his innocent friendliness.

Vito snarled.

'Will you fight us to spite Piano? So regretful of your loss—'

'Shut up.' Angelique exclaimed and pulled her hands out of her pocket. 'I don't care for Piano. But I saw Forte getting carried away by Fox Den's barkeep and it made me feel all warm and fuzzy inside. I feel inclined to return a favour to Vilivian for making my day.'

Crowd behind Vito grumbled. The voices of uncertainty gained volume.

'That's it!' Vito raised handgun. 'It's time for you to—'

They were once more interrupted. A young man wandered in-between two groups, gathering their attention with his nonchalant biting of a chicken sandwich. He munched, carefree, as everybody stared at him.

Once he realized where he was, he looked at the mob then looked at Volley's group.

'What?'

'You there, Quan boy!' Vito shouted. 'Come join us and let's trample these pathetic collaborators!'

'Do not listen to them! Help us if anything!' Volley shouted.

'Why?'

'It's the right thing to do!'

'Eh.' Quan turned to Vito 'What's your offer?' Quan asked suspiciously.

'Freedom! Truth! Justice!' Vito claimed and the mob behind him cheered.

'Hard pass. You can't fill your stomach on those, y'know? I tried.'

'Of course, there shall be a feast fitting for champions once we're done!'

'See, now, that's an offer.'

'Food?! Really?!' Volley shouted in disbelief.

'Fine choice, comrade!' Vito said to approaching Quan. 'Let us trample these fools and after that we shall teach Matriarch a lesson she'll never forget!'

Quan stopped.

'You mean to fight Vilivian?'

'Of course!'

'Oh, you're capping if you think I'm going to fight her. I'm with them!' Quan said and like a blur appeared next to Volley. He smiled at Wendy. 'What's up? Name's Quan.'

'What? Coward! Why would you choose the losing side?!'

'Listen, mate. Even if we lose, I at least won't have to fight Vilivian. I like my limbs as they are, thank you very much!'

Angelique scoffed.

Vito was red with fury.

'You idiots! Fools! Buffoons! What do you think it will give you, hiding underneath that demon's skirt?! You all will suffer, punished for your ignorance! And the God Eater?! She, too, shall know . . .'

He rumbled on as Volley and the gang watched him impressed.

'The lungs on this man.' Quan said.

'So, do we have any plan or are we just going to wing it in hopes they forget who the enemy is and start beating each other up?' Angelique asked.

'We need to huddle up. The numbers aren't *quite* in our favour.' Wendy advised.

'Fear not, for I have the strength of ten!' Volley remained undeterred.

'And there's a hundred of them.' Angelique noticed.

'Fortune favours the bold!'

'And they favour themselves.'

'Despite the impossible odds you're still here, aren't you?' Wendy said.

'Difficult, not impossible.'

'Why don't we have some fun, eh? One who knocks the most knuckleheads out, wins. You up for it, Volley?' Quan smiled.

'Any time, any day!'

'Can we *focus*? We're still outnumbered.' Wendy stepped behind the group.

Vito was still screeching while the small group bickered. Even the mob itself started getting uncomfortable with the man's fanaticism.

His words were finally cut short when someone from the crowd behind him pulled him by the collar and threw him to the ground.

'Who dares—'

'Me.' Said the orange-haired vixen. She was wearing a golden crown. 'Now shut your mouth before I make you swallow your teeth.'

Vito thin-lipped as she brandished her bat onto her shoulder. He trembled, pinned under her condescending glare. She walked towards Volley's group. There was slight excitement in her step.

'I followed this cavalcade hoping for a shot at Vilivian, but here I found something more interesting. A fight that happens only once in a lifetime. Some of the best Crossroads can muster team up to go against the impossible odds. I simply cannot miss a chance like this.'

'Aude?' Wendy spoke softly.

Volley matched her glare and as he put up fist, ready to throw down with her. He was stupefied when she turned around and stood next to him, ready to fight. She gave him a cocky grin as took a fighting stance; her bat ready to swing at the mob at any moment.

Now, the five of them stood stalwart against the mob.

‘Oh, for the love of . . .’ Vito shouted as he struggled to get up. ‘JUST KILL THEM ALREADY!’

The mob was waiting for that command. With their battle cries they charged toward the group of five people.

‘So, what’s the plan?’ Wendy shouted, slightly concerned.

‘Bash their bloody heads in!’ Aude shouted, bloodthirsty.

‘I’m not really physically capable all that much!’

‘Play to your strengths,’ Armel appeared next to Aude. Slight glow appeared around both. ‘Let Aude and Volley take the point. Don’t let Wendy get overwhelmed and stick together!’

‘There’s ghost fighting with us, hah!’ Quan laughed as he brandished his knives.

‘Oh, Angie, what have you got yourself into now . . .’ Angelique lamented quietly as she positioned herself behind Volley.

The crowd was about to run into them – a large bull beastman led the charge. The ground quaked underneath their boots.

‘Let’s do this, Armel!’ Aude shouted.

‘Naturally.’

Aura surrounding her and Armel intensified giving them, as if covering them in white flames. Armel disappeared into Aude’s crown.

The vixen met beastman head on. She crushed her baseball into his torso and flung him away. Laughing, she proceeded onto the next opponent, focusing her bat on their heads and knees.

From the outside, the battle in front of the arena’s gates was a complete havoc, but a more focused eye could discern how well the defenders have divided up their roles in battle.

Aude and Volley were the vanguard – both could easily handle several enemies at once, though Aude’s opponents had lower chance of getting back up due to their more severe injuries.

Wendy stood in the back, using her elements of lightning, fire, and ice to disrupt the enemy advance. Nothing overly damaging, but she preferred to save her more powerful spells in case of

emergencies.

Not that any occurred. Angelique and Quan both took on more supportive roles. She used her magic to immobilize and disrupt much like Wendy did but in addition knocked out anything that wasn't worth wasting magic on.

Quan was like a fly. He was everywhere in battle at once being more of a nuisance than an actual threat, but he performed his duty of cleaning up anything Volley, Aude or Angelique missed very well.

Wendy was focused on spell-weaving. As she completed casting spell in one hand, she casted another with her other hand. She tried to be very economical with her magic. She noticed that the mob started surrounding them; more coming from the sides, giving Quan and Angelique more to work with than they could handle at once.

As Wendy focused on trying to support Volley's onslaught, she noticed a handgun emerging from the crowd. Vito got closer and took aim at her. She was about to shout when a blur passed through, and revolver fell out Vito's hand. He was then tackled by Angelique, causing his hat to fall and show off his receding hairline that might've blinded few members of the mob. He consequently had his face rearranged into a pulp which was an impressive feat on its own.

Wendy then noticed someone pick up the revolver. A black-haired youth, with tired eyes aimed it at her.

'Pembroke . . .!' she said in shock.

'Focus, Wendy,' he said.

He fired twice. She felt bullets swing next to her head and then two bodies collapse. She unleashed a spell, and a shower of ice pelleted the man trying to blindside Aude. He lost balance and fell. He struck his head on a small stone, losing consciousness and ultimately being saved from vixen brutally savaging him.

Wendy looked at Pembroke as he walked up to Vito's rearranged body and started taking out bullets from his pockets.

'If it weren't for your magic, I might've not survived my round with Vilivian, Wendy. Consider this a favour returned.' He grabbed the revolver in two hands and started picking off anything that would try to get into the backline.

Gunshots, magic, and screams caused due to fracture were the most prominent sounds now.

Aude's playful laughter didn't exactly fit with the sound of bones breaking, but it didn't stop her from enjoying every moment of the fight.

'Oh, this is hardly a hallmark of my career, but it's so much fun!'

'I told you it would be interesting.' Armel appeared, sitting on one of the larger bodies. Someone tried to hit him, but the fist phased through.

'Oh, Armel. You know me so well . . .' She said in sultry voice. He smiled as the assailant who tried hitting him was dropkicked into the group of five other men by Volley.

'How about dinner later? There are few places I saw last time I was on a walk.'

'You guys want dinner?' Quan blurred after he tripped up the man trying to charge at Angelique. 'There's a nice restaurant by the warehouse in business district. Hardly any rats, and let me tell you—'

'Can we *focus*!' Angelique shouted as her shadows stopped three men in place that were then beaten by Aude.

Wendy was preparing another spell when Pembroke walked up a little closer to her.

'So . . . Armel is a ghost, right?'

'Pembroke, I am trying my best to focus so that my spells don't blow us up to kingdom come. Do NOT ask me that question.'

'How do you think they—'

'I said *don't*!'

As the fight raged on outside the arena, there was one in the very centre of it, with much higher stakes.

Vilivian's style was quick and aggressive. Not willing to give Piano room to breathe and despite most of her attacks being evaded or parried, she succeeded in putting on a pressure.

Piano, however, was much more confident in her sword skills than Vilivian was. Matriarch wasn't using techniques she was familiar with, but the swordplay was very unrefined and poor. All she need was a single opening and when she'd get one . . .

Piano led the Excalibur to the ground and when Vilivian tried to lift it up she was forced to defend herself against Piano's attacks. Series of unrelenting strikes pushed the Matriarch back as she tried to gain distance so that she could launch an offensive once more. She would finally try to get her with a thrust.

Piano parried and led the legendary blade in a circle and unarmed the Matriarch. They watched Excalibur fly away and land on the ground.

Piano aimed her charred blade at Vilivian's throat who looked at her blade in disbelief.

‘It’s a fantastic work, this blade of yours,’ she said. ‘You could use a bit practice, though.’

Vilivian smirked.

‘Well, it’s been a little over a thousand years.’

Her veins started shining turning purple.

‘I won’t let you!’ Piano shouted and slashed at her. Matriarch ducked under and grabbed Piano’s arm. She broke her wrist on her own shoulder disarming the young woman. Rapier fell to the floor. Vilivian delivered a powerful strike to Piano’s chest sending her flying.

Vilivian’s veins turned purple once more. She began transforming. Desperate to stop her, Piano picked up the Excalibur and threw it without any effort.

Vilivian just barely managed to fall to the ground avoiding the flying blade. The magic finally started working and her body changed.

Her clothes torn apart as she increased in size; Piano watched in horror. She saw it twice already, but it was completely different feeling seeing it from that close.

Her hair fell out and instead gained tail. Her limbs and body morphed into caricatures of their human forms gaining reach and sharpness. Her head was like a white skull, with her eyes hollow and devoid of any light. And there she was in all her Matriarchal glory. Vilivian’s tail flailed on the ground. She stood upright. Only her tag remained – a scarf on her left arm.

Piano had to defeat her in that form. Form, that she prepared for by buying that rapier. But now, she lost it and she had just thrown away her only weapon, by trying to avoid the situation she prepared for.

Vilivian spoke no words. She instantly got on all four and charged.

Piano’s body was overcome with extreme anxiety. She just in time managed to decide to dodge-roll to the side as Vilivian’s tail barely missed her legs.

Piano stood up and sprinted towards the sword. She didn’t turn around. She heard the Matriarch slide and turn and chase further. Piano felt her hairs standing up and chills running on her back with apprehension.

She reached the Excalibur when the steps were at their loudest. She grabbed it and instantly slashed around her, trying to strike the Matriarch.

Vilivian instantly dodged back and ploughed the ground, tossing the debris at Piano, trying to distract her. Piano jumped back avoiding it, keeping a close eye on the Matriarch.

They circled around each other.

YOU WIELD EXCALIBUR EFFORTLESSLY, there was sense of awe and admiration in Vilivian's voice. EVEN ARTHUR FELT ITS WEIGHT AT SOME POINT.

Piano hadn't realized it by herself, but indeed, the blade wasn't as heavy as Vilivian made it out to be. She could lift it very easily. It also fit perfectly in her hand, though she felt as if the sword itself changed its form to allow her to use it one handed.

YOUR RESOLVE MUST ADAMANT, OR YOU STILL POSSESS THE INNOCENCE OF AN INFANT.

'It doesn't matter.'

INDEED.

She struck with point of her tail and Piano blocked with the broad side. She then attacked with her claw and Piano managed to parry it as Vilivian withdrew her arm the moment it made contact.

For some reason, Vilivian wasn't keen on clashing with that blade. Did it have some effect on the Matriarch? Or did Vilivian simply not want to dilapidate it any further?

It was an opportunity, nonetheless. A reason for Piano to go on offensive. Matriarch tried to toss and throw rubble at her, but Piano would push through and try and strike either at heart or any limb.

Piano used the fact that Vilivian didn't want to destroy the sword patiently. She waited for the Matriarch to slip up. Vilivian finally struck with her tail trying to trip her up. Piano reinforced the strength in her leg and stepped on it and then proceeded to cut it at its thinnest part.

Vilivian let out a screech of agony as her tail bled purple after being cut off at half-point. Piano pressed the advantage and thrust at Vilivian's heart. She covered herself with her left arm and the blade pierced right through the onyx skin, just barely missing the chest because the guard got stuck on the arm.

Piano cursed when Vilivian grabbed her with her right hand. The grip was too powerful for Piano to wiggle her way out and her skin too tough to be broken by Piano's fists. Excalibur fell out of her bleeding wound onto the ground.

Piano refused to submit. She raised her knees and reached for her boot. She took out her last throwing knife and slashed open her forearm. The devil blood splashed onto Vilivian's face and burned her.

Matriarch recoiled in pain, as the acid slowly ate away her face. Piano fell onto the ground. She quickly picked up the Excalibur and charged the Matriarch once more.

Vilivian's veins lit up with purple light. Her heart could be very clearly seen beating inside her chest. She looked straight at Piano.

She knew what Vilivian was doing, and she refused to stop. She's put all her faith in the ability of the ancient sword.

Vilivian opened her mouth. A wave of pure magical energy was fired at Piano who swung the Excalibur just at the right moment.

There was a loud sound – the colour of magic filled the arena. Both finalists were consumed by the explosion of fantastic light.

Wendy struggled to put up any more glyphs. Not because she was exhausted, but because she had to prioritize her targets very well.

Pembrooke has run out of ammunition and has been picking off single strugglers. He was a decent fighter, but the moment he'd get outnumbered he was done for. Angelique scarcely used her magic anymore and only picked fight nobody else could. Likewise, Quan's blurs and appearances became scarcer.

Aude and Volley managed to keep up, though the vixen started showing signs of exhaustion as well. Her aura dissipated some time ago as well. Volley was seemingly the only one that was as brisk now as he was in the beginning.

Their opponents had a very large number advantage. And despite group's best efforts – some of them stood back up again (unless they were handled by Aude) for more. They kept coming, and Wendy has decided to give in to desperation – before they get seriously hurt.

This is going to hurt, she thought. She wasn't big on inflicting pain. She really wished she could just knock them out, but to win immediately she had to use all her strength and magic. Frankly, it was going to hurt her more than it would them.

Orange glyph appeared in her right hand and violet in left. She put them closer together and focused, connecting both magics.

Taking from experience while working with Vilivian she tried to create something extraordinary. Something massive, but subtle and yet extremely efficient.

He felt energy being sapped from her very being. Two glyphs connected into one as she ran through the concepts and ideas in her head on how to handle the literal bomb in her hand.

The result was an unstable sphere of fire and lightning. She could sense the energy expanding - demanding to be let out.

She threw it high up. It flew into the air before exploding just above the end of colosseum walls.

The few dozen red-blue bolts fell freely, before suddenly sharpening and turning towards their targets.

Lightning fast, all still-standing members of the angry mob were hit with exploding surge of energy, sometimes even jumping to next targets. In few blinks of an eye, all their opponents were knocked to the floor, with members of Wendy's party being omitted.

They looked at the battlefield, now littered with bodies.

Wendy collapsed on her knees.

'Eureka . . .?' she said slightly perplexed.

Her body was numb. She had never exhausted herself so much with magic. Thunder and fire. But what allowed her to use such combination was . . .?

'THAT WAS SO COOL!' Volley shouted in excitement.

Aude's ears were flat.

'And slightly . . .'

'Unclimactic?' Armel finished with a sigh of relief. 'Good. It started getting a little dire towards the end.'

'You mean it started getting good.'

'But it was fun while it lasted, right?' Quan said as he pulled out a bin bag from his pocket.

'I want a beer.' Said Pembroke as he holstered Vito's handgun behind his belt, claiming it for himself.

'I think I might a beer.' Angelique massaged her forehead through her sleeve.

'Fox Den?'

'Maybe later. I have to find Vivi, first. She was probably helping people out near that crater.'

'Quan?' Aude asked. 'What are you doing?'

'Getting my pay,' he said as he pulled off shoes off Vito. 'Do you know how much a good pair goes?'

'That's rather . . . gross.' Aude grimaced.

'No, no,' Armel argued. 'He has a point. See, back in the day . . .'

From a nearby alley, a pair of eyes watched them.

Well, shit, thought Camio from underneath the lid of his pot. *I didn't expect them to turn that around.*

He's been observing how Vito's mob endeavour was going since the beginning. It was entertaining to see them all fall like dominoes; it was just as entertaining to see the smaller group struggle more and more. Until the witch turned serious that is.

'I'd rather skedaddle before they notice me . . .' and as he said that he noticed a large shadow loom over him. He was then picked up and turned and his eyes met Saki's.

She was furious.

'Blimey,' he said.

'Hello, Camio.' She said scornfully. 'You know that I don't appreciate you betraying me. Why must you pick the worst moments to do that?'

'Wait, Saki, I can explain! I'm a demon! That's what I do!'

Saki shook her head disappointed.

'Well, I hope that you know what that entails. It's back to Closet of Comeuppance for you.'

Camio's ethereal face turned dreadful.

'No. Saki, no! Please not the Closet of—'

But she closed the lid shut and then duct taped all around the pot. She put it underneath her arm and whilst humming returned to Fox Den.

'Are you alright?' Aude asked.

'Yes,' Wendy smiled. Her muscles ached, but she recognized that she wasn't in any danger. 'I just need a little rest and I'll be fine.'

'You know, that was some fantastic magic.' Armel said.

'And volatile,' Angelique added.

'I thought I should've done something sooner rather than later. We weren't exactly in the best positions.'

'I still would've rather fought it out till the end.' Aude said irritated and then turned to Armel. 'Whatever. What about that dinner—'

Then they all felt a large wave of energy coming from the arena. A great pillar of rainbow light shot up to the sky dispersing the clouds. It persisted for few seconds before it dissipated.

Pembrooke looked at Wendy.

‘Did you do that?’

‘Gods, I hope not.’

Vilivian felt the warmth of the sun on her naked skin. She was lying on the ground, returned to her human form. She recognized the smell of after-rain breeze. She tried standing up but was too weak. The resonance of silver and magic had sapped nearly all her strength.

The wound in her right forearm remained and she felt that part of her face was scarred after being struck with Piano’s black blood. Her fingers were also scarred from the time she wounded Forte. Her hand instinctively reached for the tag. The scarf was still there, unscathed.

She mustered whatever strength she had and stood up. The clouds above the arena were gone, sun illuminated the colosseum.

She looked forward and noticed Piano standing up in the distance. Her clothes were in tatters; she was bruised and burned. Her hair had come undone. She, too, noticed Vilivian standing.

They both started approaching each other. Slowly stumbling along the way, exhausted and spent. Walking hurt, but they would not deter.

Vilivian passed Piano’s silver rapier, but she ignored it, while Piano passed Excalibur and chose to ignore it as well. What little strength they had left could not be wasted on wielding weapons.

Vilivian was the first to throw the first punch and she missed. Piano stumbled to the side and countered with right hook. It was a very weak strike, but Vilivian nonetheless fell down.

She was panting. She finally felt her age. But she refused to back down. Not yet, she thought.

Through the pain, she stood up and swung again. Piano dodged, despite being just as spent as she was. There was another counter; Vilivian endured it and took yet another swing.

Piano shoved it away and struck Vilivian in the cheek with her fist. Vilivian tried to reach with her other fist to trade, but Piano moved her torso back, barely evading it.

She was then struck by Piano’s left fist while she blocked Vilivian’s with her right and struck again with her left. Vilivian took a wide swing, but Piano crouched and struck her chest.

When Vilivian tried to uppercut, Piano once again dodged it and hit her chest again. No matter what Vilivian did, Piano read her every move. She found counter to every strike. An opening in

every stance. She had answer for every one of Vilivian's moves.

And while she stumbled backwards under the strength of Piano's attack, she refused to give. She planted her foot as firmly and leaned forward. Piano went for another direct attack with her fist. Vilivian stood – and took it straight to the face.

Though the sheer force should've toppled her and knock her out, she persevered. She grabbed Piano's arm and pulled the Blackblood closer. Vilivian's right fist went forward and struck her rival's shocked face with every ounce of power.

Piano fell backwards and Vilivian fell forward along with her. She landed on all fours and Piano's body fell on the side. With all her energy gone, Vilivian could only muster a glance in her direction.

The four tails on Piano's back glimmered for a moment before they disappeared and Vilivian felt them appearing on hers giving her the collective eight.

She couldn't laugh, cry tears of joy. She could barely breathe, but she managed to utter last couple words.

'Well fought.'

She stared at the ground, doing her best not to pass out, when she saw a glimmering light appear before her.

She raised her head to see the Trickster in all her God Eater glory.

Her pure, shining white hair and the nine tails contrasted her magnificent attire. She crouched in front of Vilivian and reached out her hand.

She looked into her golden eyes and her soft, satisfied smile. Vilivian grabbed the hand and stood up.

They looked at each other silently. Vilivian was the first to speak.

'I'm sorry.' She said sadly. 'About your city.'

'It's fine. I expected this.' God Eater spoke calmly.

'I hurt a lot of innocent people.'

'We're in Crossroads, Viliv. They'll get better.'

There was a short silence during which Vilivian came to realization.

'It was you, wasn't it?'

God Eater smiled proudly.

‘You were the one who incited hate towards me,’ Vilivian continued. ‘You’re the one that had that lesser demon betray the Wordsmith. You’re the one who had would . . .’ Vilivian shook her head in disbelief. ‘See her city burn if she’d get a kick out of it.’

God Eater cliqued her tongue.

‘Not quite. Believe it or not, I had very little to do with Camio’s interference.’ Pipe appeared in her hand. ‘I had hand in inciting the mob and I did give my guards a little vacation for the duration of that brief . . . Well, let’s call that “revolution”. Camio, however, was on Saki’s payroll and decision to betray Forte was his own. The old coot is just extremely petty, and Forte was the perfect occasion to teach a lesson to the “whippersnapper.”’ God Eater chuckled. ‘Saki knew that Forte would somehow bring your wrath on himself, so she tried to at least delay his demise until after the fight. Unfortunately, in that dire situation the only person Forte would show any semblance of trust other than his sister would be his former associate.’

‘But why would you put your people against me?’ Vilivian said hurtful.

‘Two reasons,’ God Eater raised her finger and smoked her pipe. ‘Firstly, every so often there happens a person coming to Crossroads that has dreams of deicide and revolution for the sake of “the people”. They usually try to raise up a mob and I need to gently swipe them into the river so that they don’t spread it to ordinary folk. It’s quite effective, but since I do it as a deity there’s always one or two that slips away and continues to spread the poison until it’s time for cleansing. This year, I decided to have the people of this very town handle it for me. Not in my name, but in the name of their friend.’

‘Me?’

‘You were perfect,’ God Eater smoked again. ‘An unknown. Unashamed of her demonic heritage and ruthless, but also honest and respectful. You incited fear and hate in people who only saw you in the arena, but you made comrades of people who earned your trust. You lured out the masses, who through you wanted to hate me, against the few people who had some sort of faith in you.’

‘The townspeople won’t forget.’

‘Not outright, no. But town will be rebuilt, and the wounded healed. In a year’s time they’ll be treating you like another regular at Fox Den.’

Vilivian pondered that in silence.

‘What was the second reason?’

‘I wanted you to think about yourself.’ God Eater smoked her pipe.

‘What do you mean?’

‘The reason we had that conversation yesterday, after your fight was because I wanted you to decide on a wish that would be yours.’

‘Mine?’

‘If you wish for the Holy Grail to be destroyed, I will grant it. If you wish for your demonic half to cease, allowing your humanity to finally grow, I will do it. If you wish for your Friend to be brought back . . . I’d like to do it because you want to, not because you think you need to.’

God Eater smoked again and looked up. The clouds were drifting away from the Crossroads. Summer shining once again above the town.

‘If you lost, would you be able to live with that failure? Despite all you said about travelling the world with Volley, or on your own, or even returning to guarding the grail? Would you spend time in Crossroads, drinking and working at Saki’s, visiting Wendy, and partaking in all her deadly experiments?’

‘. . . I don’t think I could.’

‘Me either. Thus, I sowed that doubt.’

‘Why go that far for me? I never held you in high regard.’ Vilivian said with regret.

God Eater shrugged.

‘Empathy, maybe. Longing for companionship? I appreciated the few evenings we spent together at the bar, just drinking. I spend a lot of time with the residents there, but it’s rare to find someone who understands eternity.’

Vilivian couldn’t help but laugh.

‘So, even the God Eater has a human side.’

‘You’d develop yours too if you spent a millennium talking with humans instead of killing them.’

They both laughed shortly. Vilivian took a deep breath and turned around. She went to pick up Excalibur. It felt so light. Though the blade’s gone blunt it still retained its power.

She went for the scabbard and sheathed her keepsake safely and then returned to the God Eater. The deity looked at the sheathed sword and smoked.

‘Are you sure?’ she asked.

‘You already know.’

‘Sometimes, I like being surprised.’

‘So, you haven’t seen anything beyond my victory?’

‘I haven’t seen anything beyond your coming here.’

'I see.' Vilivian took one last glance at Piano. 'I can wish for anything, right?'

'I'll grant you any wish, Vilivian. I can free you from your duty forever. I can allow you to be human. And I can, and will, bring your Friend back if you wish so.'

'No matter my feelings?'

'No matter.'

Vilivian thought for a moment.

'There are many possibilities for me. To walk the world free would be . . . fun, I reckon. And becoming human would certainly be a fascinating experience. But I know what I am. And I have a promise to keep.'

God Eater sighed.

'Of course, but before that,' she snapped her fingers. Vilivian's wounds healed, her clothing reappeared, and her hair was tied into a braid once more. There was still exhaustion, but she felt energized. 'We need you to be looking your best at your long-awaited reunion, right?'

'Thank you.'

'Sure. Now, I know your wish, but the satisfaction should be yours.'

'No, truly,' Vilivian smiled brightly at the God Eater. 'Thank you for everything, Chifu.'

The God Eater stared, deadpan. But then her lip trembled. She averted her gaze as she teared up slightly and Chifu started pouring out.

'Piss it all,' she complained. 'Do you know how much effort goes into being a serious and earnest god?' she wiped her eyes with her sleeve. 'Brace yourself because I'm coming in for a hug.'

Chifu did as she said and wrapped tightly around Vilivian. The Matriarch hugged her back with one arm.

'How does it feel hugging someone for the first time in your life?' Chifu asked.

' . . . Fluffy.'

'You got that right.' Chifu let go of her. 'Now. Go ahead.' Chifu said with earnest smile.

Vilivian nodded and swallowed. Her heart was beating fast. She was afraid of stuttering or mis-saying her wish. She could feel her eyes welling up.

She clutched Excalibur closely to her chest and finally took a deep breath.

'Please,' her voice cracked. Tears started pouring out. 'Please, bring Arthur back to life.'

Chifu smiled warmly and raised her fingers, ready to snap.

‘Gladly.’

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