

Tournament

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A short story I wrote for an English assessment this year. It got me my best mark for the year, and is going to be used as an exemplar for future assessments. So exciting...

Provided by Fanart Central.

<http://www.fanart-central.net/stories/user/Bluebayou/49794/Tournament>

Chapter 1 - Tournament

2

1 - Tournament

Tournament

By now, the player's lounge is just about empty.

I sit alone, the glass of spirits cool against my fingers. Both refreshing and organic, it is untainted by any synthetic nerve-calming agents, the likes of which some of the weaker competitors might consume. Around me, the air is filled by the unending and annoyingly upbeat commentary delivered by a soulless corporate puppet. The voice issues from a dozen oversized screens, one on each wall, filled with looped clips of past events. There's only one more on today's roster, but I don't hear the announcement. Only through some change, somehow, I know it's been made. And like my thoughts, the liquid I gulp is clear. Crystal clear.

For a second my hand trembles as I set the glass down with a dull thunk, and as I stand, my stomach, uncalmed by alcohol, tightens into knots. It is a feeling I'm familiar with, yet one I'll never get accustomed to, and this match is as inevitable as the closure of the universe. So I still my hand. My stomach relaxes. The room empties.

There are nine access-ways to the arena floor, but only two important ones. The first is a long, decorated hall leading to and from the player's lounge, the one through which I now stride. The other is a similar corridor, albeit jack-knifed since its recent redirection to the on-site hospital. Regardless of purpose, the two portals themselves are identical, and it's a common joke that says the only way to distinguish between them is by whether or not your heart still beats within your chest. Well, mine's beating now, that's for damn sure.

As I wait at the entrance, the pillars call to mind memories of my home, Nakhti, and the ancient architecture of our heritage. Only there they were built of history and tradition, and here they are a tribute to the overpowering egos of the corporate sponsors who pay for us to play.

Nevertheless, there is a certain majesty to the gateway, a towering arch of steel polished blazing white in the glare of a thousand incandescent bubbles, on the ceiling, in the walls, even in the floors. To either side stand two motionless guards; androids, shadows in the light. Sentries to a moment that can make, and break even the greatest. A soft step brings me back out of my reverie, and I turn to face today's opponent.

THUNDERCRASH was once the most powerful team in the tourney, winning the cup seven times straight while Malcom was their captain. But times have changed, and now Malcom's a little older, and Brock and Lauren are a little... deader. Sapphire's the last one left.

Five and a half feet, black half-calf boots, and a skirt shorter than Gorge's temper: she's all woman, and

when she sees I notice her, she raises a cocky eyebrow, something close to a sneer on her lips. "If you're nervous, you should sit down." She says, motioning with her head towards the low benches on the right. But I'm no rookie.

"I'll manage." I reply, turning back towards the arena entrance.

"Well, you have the whole Afterlife ahead of you if you slip up. Right?" She continues, but I ignore her stab at my ancestry. We have history, me and Sapphire, but we haven't talked in ages. And this doesn't strike me as the perfect end to that. Some things aren't worth fighting about. Ironic.

Above the gateway is yet another screen, showing segmented footage on a live feed from the stands beyond. A display counts down, unrelenting, towards inevitability. Then there is an immense cheer as the master of ceremonies appears; only a few moments remain.

She comes up beside me, a hand raised to zip her jump-top up to her collarbone. I steal a glance at her, but she notices and winks, and I'm reminded of those qualities that set her opponents' hearts racing, often for two very different reasons.

The best advice I ever heard was to not get shot. After that, it's always "Never get involved. No friendship, no team-mateship (they're all opponents after all), and certainly nothing romantic". But as my breath quickens, I'm back two months ago, if that's ages, and suddenly I'm realising we got way too deep.

Distracted, I thumb a button on my shoulder, and duranium plates settle into place over my own body. Armour, burnished in gold, worn by countless generations of ancestors. With a rustle, my hands are gauntlets, and I brush a few rogue strands of hair out of my eyes.

Despite its age, the suit is new for me, and it takes a bit to adjust. The clip for my blade digs in slightly, but I figure I'll ignore it when the time comes.

"Nice armour." Sapphire says. She notices. "Does it help?"

I want to say *it always helps*, but for some reason I don't.

"A little bit." I say instead, "But every armour has its weaknesses..." I look at her, straight into those eyes. Blue, yet more than blue. Sapphire.

"Armour or no armour, I gave up on hiding a long time ago." Her look matches mine. Yes, we kept a secret, but did we hide from the masses, or just ourselves? Suddenly I'm not so sure.

But Sapphire is already moving towards the gateway, the rumbling of pyrotechnics a reverberating echo of her every step.

"The crowd is waiting." She says, hands reaching for the hilts at her waist. With a crackle of electric discharge, the two blades light up, cryo-swords, once wielded by the first arena champion.

I want to hold onto this moment, this second, of realisation and reconciliation, yet I can't. It is the way of inevitability, to lead you down a course plotted since time's dawn. There's no use fighting it, so I don't.

Sapphire vanishes through the portal in a blaze of sulphur and light, and in an instant I'm following her. Into the stadium, a sea of humanity, just us and the thunder of the crowd. Then the master of ceremonies shouts, his voice rising even above the roar of spectators.

"Last year's champion: Sapphire!" Ahead of me she raises her hands, enjoying the audience's adulation, and I follow suit as the announcer continues, "And this year's tourney winner and grand challenger, the

Princess of Pain: Selket!"

I hear nothing but my heart, and my breath. My hand reaches for my sword, and with a shimmer the blue blade surges into life. An electric tingle thrills my spine.

This is inevitable.