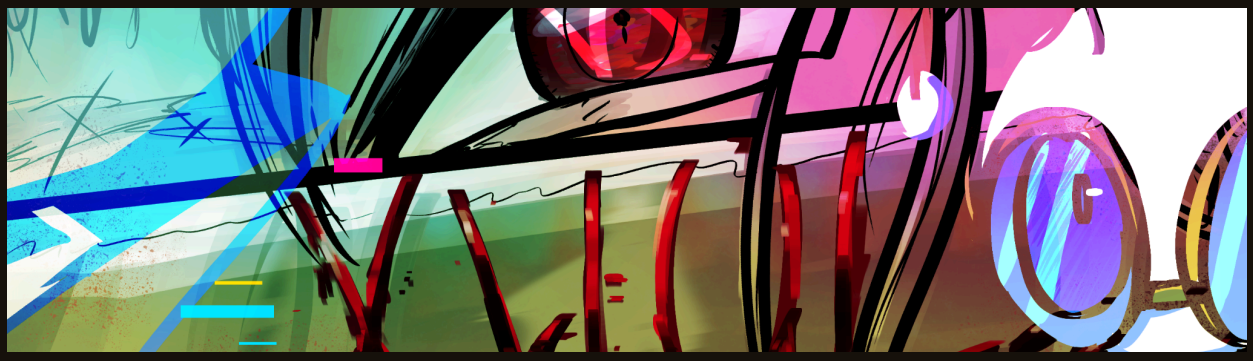


[The Ultimate Dojo Showdown of Ultimate Destiny - Duel #T-4]
-> *[Previous: Duel #T-3]* <-

The following content contains mild descriptions of blood and gore.

This duel also includes a lengthy pre-fight sequence. If you wish to skip to the battle immediately, navigate to the Document Tabs menu and click "DUEL #T-4."

***

Thy Life is a riddle, to bear rapture and sorrow
To listen, to suffer, to entrust unto tomorrow
In one fleeting moment, from the Land doth life flow
Yet in one fleeting moment, for anew it doth grow
In the same fleeting moment thou must live, die and know

Answers - FFXIV

***

♪ - *Neath Dark Waters (Music Box Cover)* - *50% Audio*
♪ - *Distant Thunder* - *80% Audio*

Time has a habit of slipping away from those who need it most.

That, and common sense.

'It's a beautiful evening,' I heard someone say, moments before thunder had begun to roll in the distance. The collective groan from the crowd was two parts warranted and two parts hilarious, as the absurdity of the sheer amount of rain that had plagued the tournament apparently began to set in; I remember hearing the announcers in particular – Magule and Sid – trade curses under the banners in the far corner. The festive, decorated-yet-open space of the center arena began to lose patrons shortly after,

as those who still remained to support the tournament finalists chose, wisely, not to roll the dice against the elements. Sticking around long enough to grab any more conversations from those who lingered, I was eventually encouraged to make my exit as well.

Not entirely out, however. Moreso *up*.

Less frequented, now that many of the tourney competitors had been eliminated, were wooden rafters that extended up from the sand pit's fencing. Some folks had chosen them to sit on in order to watch the matches from above, which I took note of from the ground floor; as they laid temporarily unoccupied, I figured it was about time I got the same experience.

Slinging my pack over my shoulder, I (very gingerly) shimmied my way to the top; the so-called seating was uncomfortable, slightly wet from the humidity, and entirely unsafe due to the lack of guard rails. Or any safety measures at all, for that matter.

Though, looking down at the arena from way up high, wind whistling through the night, it did feel *exceptionally* cool.

Sinking blissfully into my heated jacket, I took a moment to relax with my legs hanging over the edge of the beam, the loud rattle of the party crowd replaced by a blissful peace offered by the night. I recovered my will to move after a moment, sliding my goggles down from my face to around my neck – the sensation of cold around my eyes again was like a splash of H20 after a long cryosleep. I found myself blinking at the sudden sensation.

The air was crisp and cool; I enjoyed a deep breath that set my nerves at ease. I'd read before that warm-blooded creatures, like Cierians, produced trails of mist when they did the same. Weird.

Today was exhausting – it seemed like there were very few days that weren't – but it had still been good. It was customary at that point within the tourney to hold gatherings after tournament rounds, where victors and the defeated could convene together one last time before parting ways; I had gotten the chance to say my goodbyes to both Shen and Huzael in person, thank goodness. There was a part of me that wanted to beg them not to leave, to argue that they should stay until at least the finals were over; reason stated that they should see how it ends in a front row seat, but reason being because I hadn't had the chance to properly interview them. I needed to know how Shen summoned his flames, and how Huzael controlled his chains from a distance.

But, they needed to move along, so I needed to give my regards. There'd been a lot of that recently.

I slowly pulled my legs to my chest, resting my head on my knees.

It had felt like a blur, these months. A grand, sweeping blur; the kind you'd feel on a rollercoaster, or the one that you'd see when your ship jumps to hyperspeed. There was a weight to it, that the finals were just around the corner; it felt like the end of an era. I felt a lob of pride in my chest at that fact, that I'd be standing in the arena at that time, not watching from the stands – and also a wilting, cold sense of finality. The thought of going home felt like an echo.

How could it feel so close, yet so far away?

A sense of anticipation, anxiety, and a desire to give up in order to eliminate those feelings; understanding that I was processing a common emotional reaction to the impending completion of a long-term task and actually living through it were two very different things. Funny how the mind and heart could never agree on the proper handling.

My mind drifted back to the finals. Pre-planning often helps me organize my thoughts, but this time was different.

This time we were fighting *Xhol*.

I remember the time leading up to my trip to this world; days and nights of obsessive research, pouring over written works and video archives of battles and conquests, told through eras of dramas and tragedies. It was a glimpse into the miraculous history of Cier, filled to the brim with conflict and history. Their world was a living battleground, legends forged through the strings of fate all duelists tied themselves to, the Dojo; delving into it was more fascinating than any book I'd ever read, or any film I'd ever watched. Naturally, I'd tended towards the flashier duelists. When someone waves a neon sign around, I'm of course going to stare at it.

I hadn't realized at the time who was going to be the real threat.

Xhol's first match was pretty much a wash – I didn't know what to expect, really, and had no clue why the fight ended with his opponent Gabe in a rattled heap. Naturally, I scheduled an interview; rattled off every question I could think of while he

had the patience to listen. Listen he did, for a while, actually. Turns out, we've got a bit in common.

I thought I'd really gotten an understanding of his combat ability when he battled against the business owner, Slink Hahn. Before his round against Shen.

Now, after that match, I wasn't sure of anything anymore.

...No. That was false. There *was* one thing I was certain of.

My duelist couldn't beat him alone.

Xhol's durability, arsenal, and experience were hard enough to overcome – but what I had gathered about his reaction time pushed it over the edge. Third party documentation, first hand accounts (from both Gabe and Mr. Hahn) and my own eyewitness testimony had all proven one thing; Xhol processed information astronomically fast. Not only was he clearly hyperintelligent and adaptable, the sheer speed in which he could counter his foes was unlike anything I'd ever seen.

He was known to study his opponents as well. Unlucky us, that my duelist's original blueprint had a whole page dedicated to them online, easily accessible after just a few clicks. I had to assume he knew every one of its weaknesses going in.

Our weaknesses.

My mind drifted to our previous conversation, so light in tone at the time. He answered every question, and only asked a few of his own. Innocent ones, like the types of food the Jezoids serve. Nothing about the tournament.

Was that interaction genuine? Could he have been sizing me up, the same way I was doing to him?

Had he even felt he needed to?

...

The night's breeze continued to whisper its way through the rafters as torches flickered defiantly below.

I knew I needed another miracle. The tournament had made me good at building them so far, but I was running out of quack hypotheses to test. All my previous work had

been sourced from the HLD's early stages as a prototype – fragments of ideas and theories I was able to stitch together with elastic wire and a dream. That wouldn't cut it anymore.

I needed something new. Something that not even *he* would expect.

The construct was already equipped with adequate firepower – matched, yes, but still equal, given time. Speed-wise Xhol might be faster in a one-way chase, but my duelist could be potentially more dexterous. What it lacked in direct power it made up for in maneuverability.

What of perception, then? Therein lies the rub; it was not even close. The construct was quick on its feet, but as far as I knew it was mostly reactive instinct. Not the type of battle IQ that Xhol possessed.

Extra modifications to increase efficiency were risky; there was no telling how the construct would react to the sudden change. Manual control also seemed out of the question – the systems were still operational, but frankly I didn't think I would improve our odds by being behind the wheel. As-is, the emergency system I built for the semi-finals could only control the construct's motor functions, anyway. The intent was to prevent attacks, not direct them.

All variables continued to point to an obvious conclusion; Xhol possessed a massive advantage in tactics and execution. We were outmatched.

The chill of the air seemed to prick against my carapace as my eye began to close. How anticlimactic! All this work, and for what? To be beat out in a simple numbers game? What would the audience think, when they see such an unspectacular match? There's no reason it should last more than a minute. Every tool was at Xhol's disposal, every factor would be checked, every moment able to be spent to counter our every move; and I'm here *estimating* as to what he's capable of.

I'm not one for educated guesses. My only true conclusion was that we were going to lose.

It took a moment for me to register that my head had slipped into my hands.

I must've looked ridiculous; sitting like a baby bird on a wire, legs tucked into my jacket as the wind took bets on my chances of toppling to the ground. My good eye fully shut as I rested my head on my arms.

I could see it. The headstone of my passing. “Here lies Tavi, frozen in mind and body. At least she made a colorful popsicle.”

The rustle of the flags above seemed to laugh at my misfortune.

…My thoughts drifted to a conversation I’d held with one of the shield tech engineers. How she’d discovered a problem solving technique that allowed her to conclude any thesis, and find reasoning behind any point.

Something about an elastic water fowl…

I blinked. The HLD still rested over my shoulder, a barely audible hum emitting from its inner workings.

The construct was a practiced listener, at least.

With a sigh of defeat, I slung the device into my arms.

```
> Engaging Hard Light Dock…
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A quick toss to the side and the device lit up like a galaxy, arcs of rainbow lightning spiraling out of its center before roaring back down with a crash. I found myself flinching at the sudden lightshow; I hadn’t realized how dark it had gotten outside.

With a final rattle and kaput, the device shook still, and a distantly familiar figure stood beside me.

The HLD was in good shape; the construct had come out bold and beautiful. I noted little physical interference – very few glitch blocks flecked off of its sides – and its cape took to its physics simulation immediately as the wind blew against its digital threads. It was a far cry from the states I had seen it in previously, where its silhouette was torn and wispy; I had no real proof, but I wanted to think it could feel the difference.

The construct stared silently at the horizon, before wordlessly looking to meet my gaze.

“Hey. Nothing to fight right now. Just here to talk.”

Stoic as always.

“I’m not going to lie to you, things are a little nutty right now,” I raised both my hands pointedly ahead, the shiny material of my jacket crunching at the motion, “and I’m not sure – I’m *working* on a plan to get us through this next round. Cause that’s the finals. And it’s a big deal. …To me. Maybe not to you. But it is to me.”

I let out a quick huff – rambling again. Trying to express my thought processes into words was always difficult. Part of me regretted not picking a duelist that could understand flowcharts.

“So, I mean, we need to come up with a solution on how we’re gonna beat this guy. And, I was thinking, if I could bounce a few ideas off of you-”

Looking up, I tossed a glance back towards the figure; their eye was a tiny slit, looking away and down towards the torches below.

I blinked.

“…I’m being ignored by my own creation. Ok. Alright. Come here you-”

Reaching over, I took a handful of its cloak and tugged gently down. The construct was incredibly touch-sensitive – we had found out the hard way early in testing – but along the way I had discovered it doesn’t actually mind the handling of its shroud in particular. I’d capitalized on this fact repeatedly throughout the tournament, specifically dragging it to place for photos and whatnot, since there was literally no other way to get it to sit in chairs.

It acknowledged the gesture by flitting its eye back to me, but offered no resistance as I lowered it to a seat.

“Good, now you’re not going to get blown over by the wind. As I was saying-”

Time ticked by as I recounted my stream of thought; not even a parsec away, this planet’s sun drifted down and out of sight. The construct remained, regarding me in silence.

Eventually, I stumbled to a conclusion.

“…basically, we need some way to keep up; a method or strategy that lets us operate at the same speed he does, or at least close to it. An energy enhancer, eyes in the back of your head…”

I leaned back, hands behind my head as I laid down on the wood below, looking up at the stars.

"...I *could* clone you. Is that allowed? That feels against the rules. Supreme Queens know I can't afford to break any more. Means Rice is out, not that I was considering it..."

I casted a glance at the construct from the ground, the shadows casted from above settling across its colors like a lingering veil.

Rice is definitely out.

"All that leaves is a solution involving just the two of us. I've got tactical knowledge that could help, and you've got the panache, but neither of us can match up to Xhol by ourselves."

I squinted. "Wonder if I could fly a camera up there, and send messages to you over a neurophone. 'Least then we'd have two pairs of eyes watching..."

The thought turned in my head in a moment of silence, before a grin slowly spread across my face. I glanced back over to the construct, sitting silently a pace away... its single eye looking back at me.

I reached for my face, and rubbed the spot where my own lay missing in kind. "...One pair between *us*, I suppose."

Laying my hand across my chest, still looking up far and beyond, that image continued to linger in my mind. Two eyes. We *would* make up for that lack of perception, in a way. I had the knowledge, it had the skill – it was a shame we couldn't just work together.

Two eyes. Knowledge and skill.

One mind.

...

...Couldn't we?

That turning gear began to tick like a clock as I sat up with a start.

“Wait. The HLD already has a manual remote connection, the emergency system from the semi-finals. That’s *supposed* to inhibit all of your motor functions when activated, but–”

Rotating mechanisms seemed to sing to life.

“I could alter the module to only *suggest* movements, rather than direct them entirely. A half-and-half solution, rooted in a VR setup–”

I clapped my hands together as the machine began to roar.

“*–which I could then use to add my own active perception to yours!* Hot DOG, we’re back in business!”

I practically launched to my feet, before hopping excitedly up to my stoic chaperone. It gave me little regard, of course, but my mind was already racing – the kind of inspiration reserved for nature and classical music found its way to the depths of my scientific mind. This might just be it.

Time to build a miracle.

“Ok, ok, this is going to be crazy; I need some time to draw up some schematics – or should I steal a thesis from the neuroscholars? Ah, heck with it!”

With a renewed pep in my step I gathered my things and slid down the rungs of the nearby ladder – as soon as I hit the ground, I shot a quick whistle up to the form above me.

After just a moment, it slid off the side and plummeted to a standing position next to me with a comical *thoomp* of sand.

I pointed proudly at the distant archways, “We’re off to the lab! This is gonna take a lot of long nights and a questionable sleep schedule, but we can do this! We’re not backing down without a fight!”

Time was of the essence. Common sense had long since gone.

Running forward that night, action and passion were all I had left.

***

♪ - *Full Fathom Five - 30% Audio*
♪ - *Wildflowers & Mountain Views - 50% Audio*

As it turned out, it's hard to play god on a deadline.

The plan was simple; use a Jezoid's natural neurolink capabilities alongside the HLD's imaging tech to create a remotely pilotable, yet still autonomous, hard-light construct shell. A virtual imaging booth would provide simulated spatial awareness for the pilot, while the construct would retain its original array of senses, and both would be able to operate independently of each other when it came to controlling the shell's motor functions. Two minds, two hearts, one body; Lots and lots of fine print.

The first hurdle was frustratingly mundane: Motion sickness.

I spent a couple hours setting up an obstacle course some distance outside the arena before first giving the new setup a try. It was a bulky thing, about the size of my old desk, shaped like an orb and consisting of layers upon layers of chromed steel; a hatch laid subtly in its side, where the user would be able to climb inside and retrieve the headset. Along its inner walls was a rotating track and a multitude of screens that supported full body tracking, no matter the action; It was safe and up to code as is – the only evidence of my modifications rested inside.

I left the construct waiting patiently outside as I first stepped into the depths of the machine. The HLD was docked barely out of arm's reach, casting multicolored shadows on the walls as I reached for the headset.

A click of a button and the hum of the machine whisked me away to my destination unknown.

I had heard of out-of-body experiences before; staring at yourself in a dream, or walking in places you had never been while asleep. Quantifiable, explainable things scientifically; while feeling like magic in the moment.

I didn't believe in magic, really. This, however, almost had me convinced.

The most immediate change was in my sightlines. As the controls whirred and sprung into color, I immediately saw myself standing back in Aegis Fields, looking onward at the control pod in front of me; I could almost see over the device's top from a standing position. I must've been three heads taller at least.

Even weirder, it seemed my entire world had translated two paces to the left. I had figured that our perceptions would overlap in practice, and that I would have balanced vision while in control of the machine. This wasn't the case, as I suddenly lost the peripheral vision on my right side – even odder was the presence of what could only be described as a pink filter temporarily masking the world around me. It seems the machine recognized that as a bug, however, as it was quickly color corrected as its calibrations finished. This still left me with a lopsided perspective, however.

Now for movement... I pulled on the controls, tentatively. Looking on, its hands – my hands – raised slightly aloft. The construct offered no resistance to the suggestion, though my head began to sway at the sudden movement.

Deeply colored, shining limbs appeared before me, layers of cloth draped across its arms.

With a shaky breath, I urged it to take a step forward.

The world shifted, pitched, and then began to roll as a drunken, weighted feeling washed over me – the construct's boot had barely touched the soil before I lurched forward, slamming my fist against the simulation's emergency eject button.

My duelist toppled over, phasing out of alignment for a moment before landing face first into the dirt, just as I crawled out of the pod and promptly lost my lunch.

It took a day's worth of calibrations before I tried again.

Giving more priority over to my own set of vision, I once more found myself in the mind of the machine. Immediately, my senses were more akin to my own, with the only remnant of the previous test still being the loss of rightmost vision; taking a shaky step forward, I was able to keep my balance, just barely. I felt like a hatchling, taking tentative steps across Aegis's emerald fields – but with enough effort, a walk turned into a jog, and that jog graduated into a run; the wind whistled around me as I began to glide across waves of grass and flowers.

Coming to a sliding stop back at the simulation pod, my mind raced with possibilities. *What speed!* The construct's ability to close distances against an opponent suddenly made sense. I marvelled at the simplicity of having longer legs.

It was then, in that moment of excitement, when something dawned on me.

This was all *me*. The movement, so alien in nature, was still left uninterrupted; conscious thought flowing, directions followed, emotions felt in full.

All tests had pointed to a layered consciousness – two minds in one body, communicating, deliberating.

If that was the case, then where was the duelist?

I looked on at my hands, as if reaching for a response. Nothing.

Well, that does make things easier..? The thought crossed my mind as I began to walk towards the obstacle course waiting patiently beyond. Not having two cooks in the kitchen meant there wasn't going to be infighting, but the point of the simulation was *supposed* to combine our awarenesses. If the duelist didn't respond during the simulation, then my plan would be down a mind – and it would just be me out on the field.

The thought formed a pit in my gut.

Where are you?

My question was left unanswered as I approached the course.

It was a simple thing; bits and bobs acquired from the underground storage areas beneath the arena. Stacks of wooden crates swayed dangerously in the wind, while small pillars of stone stood proudly in a zig-zag pattern; bundles of old tools lay haphazardly in piles to simulate uneven terrain, while a solitary sandbag sat in the center of the mess, waiting quietly for its next engagement. On its front, someone in the past had drawn a pair of googly eyes.

A written list laid pinned under a rock on top of one of the crates. I tentatively took it into my hands – manipulating such a small object through the simulation made me feel like I was wearing mittens.

Written in the finest chicken scratch was my working test criteria:

- *Walking*
- *Running*
- *Acrobatics*
- *Climbing*
- *Cape parachute*

- *Lumigons (?)*

Checking off the first two, I placed the paper back under its weight before taking a step towards the ordered pillars of stone.

I had seen the construct climb rough surfaces before – not quite spider-like, but something close to it. Looking down at my hands once more, however, didn't inspire much hope; I had no clue how they had pulled it off in the past.

Taking the concept of rock-climbing literally, I attempted to gain some leverage into the side of the pillar; hooking my fingers into a small crevasse I pushed off, and immediately felt surprised at the ease in which the force was applied. I had never been the most athletic of Jezoids – more of a cool, intelligence-based build – but even I could recognize the fitness needed to gain height so quickly. Digging my other hand into the rockface, I continued to, ungracefully, but efficiently, ascend upwards.

Reaching the cusp of the pillar's top, I scrabbled my way for a handhold before heaving myself forward, the sound of metal clicking against stone as I rolled over on my back. I took a minute to recover before chancing a look over the side.

The ground was so far away, almost a story down, and it began to sway with the movement of the grass…

I broke eye contact and stared straight into the sky.

There's no way I'm afraid of heights..! No, it couldn't be; I'd been amongst the high scaffolding of much larger projects before. Scaling catwalks with a welder in hand, lengths upon lengths of safety equipment trailing behind me…

…Ah. Lack thereof. I see.

Anxiety set in as I slowly turned over, rising to a crouch as I focused on not looking down.

After a moment of breath control I rose to a standing position; training my eye ahead I looked to where I'd be moving next.

Another pillar, located several yards away.

I puffed out my chest, taking steps back in preparation.

Acrobatics, climbing, cape parachute. ONE of these is getting tested!

With a running start and a strong push, I leapt across the chasm.

I immediately clocked my situation as the pillar hurtled toward me; I wasn't going to make it. Gravity taking over, I reached for the edges of the construct's cloak, fumbling as I attempting to get it to catch the air below me, panic rising in my chest–

–before my head pivoted, laser focused, as if with a will of its own.

My legs shot forward, meeting the side of the pillar with a loud *CRUNCH,* flecks of debris flying off as I pushed against the stone. The force rocketed me back, everything beginning to spin as the push transitioned into a backflip, just as my hands grasped the ends of my cloak and pulled outwards, an audible *FWOOMP* cutting through the air as the shroud opened.

With the lift the cape offered, I flew downwards, gliding just long enough to break the fall and slide into a three point landing some distance away.

Back on the ground, my heart pounded in my chest.

None of that was my doing.

"There you are!"

My mental voice, somehow localized on the construct itself, exclaimed into the afternoon air. *It WAS here!* The experience was outlandish – I could feel its presence, fleetingly, as it took control of its body once more; a cold *thing,* a consciousness not my own. It was as if a subconscious, intrusive thought played out in reality, rather than just behind my eye.

It was fascinating, and terrifying, all in one.

The construct seemingly dormant once more, I rose to my feet. How was I to address this? It seems as though it only acted when forced to – though the thought that it could retain control at any point was concerning, especially since it seemingly didn't communicate. Perhaps this tendency to only act in an emergency could work in our favor.

I pondered this as I continued to practice.

Running through my planned regimens, I quickly realized I was going to have to rely on the construct's movement abilities much more than I had anticipated. Maneuvers that it made look effortless on the field were much harder to replicate in training – though a happy medium of me throwing it into a situation and allowing it to react in kind naturally formed as a compromise. Eventually, we fell into a replicable pattern; I directed, and it followed suit.

There was still the matter of offensive capabilities, however.

The Lumigons were incredibly hard to conceptualize at first. How do you simply manifest something from thin air? Matching this question with movement training turned hours into days, and eventually days into weeks… it was the twenty second day of training when something in me finally clicked.

The construct and I had fallen into a rhythm at this point. Although I had gotten better at virtual movement in general, I had also begun to wrap my brain around how the construct approached it in kind. Seemingly a creature entirely of instinct, it offered me no emotional responses, but would respond with record time to any situation that I was unable to react to myself. I had begun to call it 'waking up,' while their default state was to be 'going to sleep,' and I had begun measuring my own training by monitoring when those states were triggered. The point I was able to make the pillar jump without waking them up was the moment I knew I had begun to improve.

The Lumigons, however, were something different. Attempting to manifest them via simply picturing them floating in space neglected to bear fruit – other methods such as meditation and hand gestures were also left in failure. Standing at the front of the sandbag, trying and failing for what felt like hours, was when it finally happened; I was frustrated, the feelings of helplessness I had buried clawing their way back into my heart as I picked up a rock off of the grassy ground and chucked it forward with a cry of rage. The sandbag flinched, barely moving from the impact; I imagined it exploding from the strain.

Immediately, two razor-sharp, bright pink triangles tore forward with a piercing ring, and buried themselves into the bag beyond.

I realized then: It was the objective to hurt. Not an emotional response per se, but a direct intention, that was the drone's trigger. The intent to cause *violence*.

I found this revelation to be equally enlightening as it was intimidating.

Beyond that first hurdle, all that was left was mechanics; Break a Lumigon, and another will appear. The intricacies of controlling the swarm as a whole were lost on me, but imagining forms in space did work to combine them together into something more.

I worked to develop tricks of the trade, even outside of what I had witnessed the construct do in the past. These methods, the strategies I could come up with, would hopefully be what we need to push us over the edge.

That's what I'd hoped, at least.

Our training had begun to round out in the days leading up to the final match. Other duelists, returning to take part in the finale, had begun to make the trek outside the arena to visit us at our training site – bless their hearts, some even brought snacks – which further reiterated to me that our time had drawn to a close. I carried no regrets, and was impressed at our progress… but a nagging sense of doom hung over me regardless. Would it all be enough, in the end?

These thoughts clouded my head as I organized my final trump card – a simple backup weapon attached to my duelist's person, in the form of a real, solid knife stored in their boot. A little something for a worst case scenario.

Draping its cloak over my shoulders, I turned to gather my things.

A voice rang out over the clearing.

"You've been busy."

♪ - *Scions & Sinners - 30% Audio*

My heart stopped cold.

Standing a handful of paces away was a man, leaning casually against one of the stacked crates, cast lightly in shadow by the afternoon sun. He was modestly dressed, but naturally imposing in stature – tall, with a muscular physique, his most striking detail were the rows of scars written across his body, every inch of flesh seemingly peppered with storied marks of battles long past. His curled, silver hair blew gently in the wind, expression pensive as he adjusted the bandages thoroughly coiled around his arms.

His eyes, after a beat, trailed upwards to meet my own.

"Xhol?! Wh- what are you doing here?!"

My voice came out shrill, and panicked; I mentally kicked myself in frustration as my mind ran a mile a minute. Of course, I knew why he was here; he was scoping out the competition. I hadn't exactly tried to keep my operation secret – there was really no way to – but there was a part of me that hoped he would stay away. That he'd somehow missed my plans in shuffle, and that he'd be totally surprised at our dramatic reveal.

But of course he wouldn't be. He'd be here, absorbing every detail.

Because he's *Xhol*.

"Checking in. How are you holding up?"

Genuine concern? A ploy to lower my guard? I'd have to tread carefully.

"Fine, thank you, but I'm very busy," I threw my empty pack over my shoulder with a huff, "and I'd rather not have any distractions right now."

I shot a glance towards him, attempting to ascertain his reaction. He didn't offer one.

"I won't linger long. Do you need anything?"

Something about his casual tone irked me to the core. He's offering *me* assistance? My opponent? As if I could trust him! Does he think I was born yesterday? Is he demeaning me? How dare he ask me now. *After everything was already over*.

I shoved down that last thought as I turned towards him with a growl.

"NO. I do NOT. I want you to GO AWAY."

Eloquent. I watched as his expression shifted, ever so slightly… couldn't get a read on what it meant. I did notice his eyes travel over me once more, though.

What is he looking at? There's nothing–

–oh.

As I held my hand in a point, it dawned on me that I was still in the pilot's chair. The figure currently telling him off was that of the construct, animated to the point of comedy, with my voice inexplicably coming out of it.

Bugger, bugger. If he didn't know what was up before, he certainly did now.

A silent beat fell over the space between us.

He was the first to break the quiet.

"You're shaking."

I hadn't even noticed.

"Tavi. Something has changed in you, within recent memory. What happened?"

The bluntness of his question landed like a punch in the gut. Something in me snarled, biting at its chains to reply with venom in kind; another part recoiled at the pain. Several images flashed in my mind at once; dark rooms, sleepless nights. A shining silver figure, nodding in response, reduced to a flailing, blackened monster, screaming murder in the rain.

Before all that, parties. Celebrations of a battle well fought. People I never dreamed of meeting standing at my side.

"And dare I say.. You are just the spitting image of my own daughter."

A pleasant conversation with an interesting man from space, ending with a pat on the head.

"What happened?"

Hidden behind the construct, my breath hitched as I choked back a sob.

"Nothing! Nothing's happened but *you!* You're the last – thing in my way–"

I couldn't keep the words straight.

"–I won't lose. Not to you, not to anyone – not after everything I've fought for!"

His face remained unreadable as I balled my hands into fists.

"...What *are* you fighting for?"

A simple question, really.

I was fighting for me, and my reputation. So that I wouldn't come back empty handed after coming this far. I was fighting against every Jezoid who told me 'no,' every one who said Hard-Light was a mistake, fighting every nasayer, every doubt, every *thought* that dared exist in my mind, that asked if I should instead of could and if it was worth it all in the end...

I knew this. Fundamentally, intrinsically.

Then why couldn't I say it?

Why couldn't I form the words?

"...You. You won't stop me. Not now. Not ever."

Finally, I could read his expression.

Concern.

"There are two motivators in this universe; passion, and spite. Different in foundation, potent in execution; with failure to ascribe to one spelling ruin."

He turned, stepping away from the shadows. "When we meet next, it will be as opponents. Think well before where your heart lies."

Without another word, he walked away.

It was a trick. He was psyching me out – trying to get into my head. It was all a front, it had to be.

Within the control pod, I shakily took the headset off, clicking the power button on its side; the screens switched offline, only the tiny overhead lights flickering above still alight.

In that cocoon, cradled in cold steel, I sat down, and I cried.

***

♪ - *The Quickening - 50% Audio*
♪ - *Distant Thunder - 80% Audio*
♪ - *Cheering Crowd - 20% Audio*

“We’ve really outdone ourselves this time.”

“For once? I find myself agreeing with you.”

Sid and Magule stood together in the announcer’s booth, just as a second earthquake hit the coliseum.

The sound of interlocking metal shook the bones of the stands as the arena’s final centerpiece was delivered layer by layer. Massive multi-story metal platforms on stilts, tied to struggling Jezoid spaceships, hovered precariously over one another before being dropped into place and sealed together with massive steel pistons. Stacked on top of each other they resembled a massive shelving unit; complete with items held in the space between.

Micro-biomes, different every level, climbed their way to the top. It was a layer cake of environmental hazards.

I could see Sid rubbing her hands together over the jumbotron.

A shield team Jezoid brought me back down from the clouds – it was go time. There was a crackle of static as both announcer’s voices manifested over the PA system, with the crowd’s roar rising to a chorus in response.

Don’t think, just do. My heart pounded firmly in my head as I attempted to bury my anxiety; quickly jogging over to the control pod I pulled the entry latch, shoving the door open and lingering at the entrance.

Bury it. Bury it- my breath caught in my throat. How could my mind be so clear and my body so shaken? I had to focus. Searching for something to ground me, I looked back to the edge of the arena’s shallow pool.

My duelist was there, staring absentmindedly into the crowd beyond.

This was it; the real thing. At least I wouldn’t be alone.

I held that thought like a lifesaver as I stepped into the darkness beyond.

“Ladies, gentlemen - creatures and comrades! Welcome one and all, to the final round of the Ultimate Dojo Showdown of Ultimate Destiny!”

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> XR BOOT SEQUENCE: Active sync in progress...
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My hands were not my own as I stepped into the ring.

The bright lights and overwhelming noise of the arena struck me like a runaway train. The intense roar of the crowd caused my nerves to strike like lightning, just as a camera drone skirted by in a flash of paparazzi – stepping through the waterbank onto the sand felt like trudging through syrup. My mind and heart braced against the waves of expectant eyes.

Deep within though, there was a spark. A flame of morbid, foolish excitement.

I was here.

This was real.

The pressuring aura diminished as I stepped below the metallic platform. Gazing onwards, I heard my name being introduced over the booming speakers, just as I spotted the small, light blue platform I was supposed to stand on.

Across the pit, stepping up to his own plate, was Xhol.

My enemy.

We locked eyes as his name echoed over the intercom beyond.

“Are you ready?”

His voice crossed the gap, rattling in my mind. I hadn’t even realized I had opened a mental bridge to him. Maybe I didn’t care.

“Have been, always. I’m going to finish this.”

He offered a solemn nod in response.

“Without further ado, it is my utmost pleasure to say: Let the final round of the Ultimate Dojo Showdown of Ultimate Destiny–”

For but a fleeting moment, I was among the stars.

“-BEGIN!”

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DUEL #T-4

FLEETING MOMENT

"Tavi, C-AMP's lead engineer, has combined her and her creation's minds with the power of VR, all in a desperate attempt to match her opponent Xhol's overwhelming strength. Thrown into a multi-stage arena with lingering self-doubts poisoning her mind, will she be able to achieve the victory she so desires – or will she be crushed by the weight of her own design?"

♪ - *To The Edge - Rock Cover - 50% Audio*
♪ - *Cheering Crowd - 10% Audio*

Shaking to life, the platform beneath my feet began to rocket skyward, and I was flung face first to the edge.

Shooting through an opening in the floor like a bullet, I was greeted mid-air by the first of three biomes; a lush, rolling jungle. The hatch below me hissed as it slammed shut, its impact punctuated by the ruptured clap of a shot firearm – like clockwork Xhol's magnum tore its way through the foliage, punching straight through towards our shared body as we still hung in mid air.

Gotcha!

Mentally prepped for just this scenario, I twisted sharply to the side – the bullet sliced through a portion of the construct's cape, a spray of multicolored pixels striking their way through the air as we fell. Hitting the ground hard, we curled into a ball and rolled forward before diving into the undergrowth, cutting our assailants line of sight as we slid down a small slope into a clearing.

The construct's presence surged as its programming was activated in full.

Take it away – I'm here.

Its eye blazed to life as it rose to its full height, before rushing forward, tearing its way through the undergrowth.

Chk-

BOOM!

A distant explosion rang out just as the construct flung its way up into the treeline – a wall of fire shattered past in a raging blaze, Xhol at the forefront riding the explosion. The bottom layer of local foliage was incinerated instantly as he slid to a stop, the click of his magnum signaling the turning of the barrel as he turned his attention to the canopy.

He knows – my thoughts were cut off by sudden movement as the construct dove forward, a sickening crack splitting the tree behind us as Xhol's magnum roared once more. Hitting the mud below with a splash the construct rolled with a pivot, its head snapping up to its opponent some space away before surging its arms forward, two bright pink drones manifesting and tearing their way towards him.

Xhol was a step ahead – no bothering to reload he snapped his wrist grotesquely backwards, stowing his gun and drawing his weapon with a practiced song of ringing steel. He stepped forward, holding a steel katana balanced in both hands, and sliced down just as the first Lumigon shrieked to life in a blast of laser fire – in one clean motion he *sliced through the shot,* before continuing forward, closing the distance and striking the drone with the back of his sword, sending it flying. Pivoting immediately he sliced towards the other, and in one clean motion cut through its own blast, *flipped his sword to the other side,* and struck the second Lumigon with the blunt edge once more – both drones flew off into the undergrowth, one disappearing into the caught fires' billowing smoke, the other burying itself into the trunk of a tree beyond.

Both disabled, neither broken.

A moment after and he was right on top of us.

I held the reins and urged us back – before the construct had even risen to its feet we'd begun to fall backwards, just as the cold steel of Xhol's sword pierced where our head would have been a second later. In a flash the construct took back over, meeting the tip of Xhol's driving blade with two Lumigons layered together at the edge of their hands, throwing the blow to the side and causing Xhol to stab into the ground; within milliseconds I felt the construct attempt to capitalize as it began to turn. I wrenched it back instead, throwing it into the overgrowth and behind a tree, just as in a splintering slash the entire space we just occupied was torn in half by our opponent's blade. The construct recovered by scrabbling to all fours, boosting itself upwards and into the canopy as the sundered tree crashed to the ground in a swarm of flitting leaves behind us.

“Good work. Your gambit is paying off, Tavi!” Xhol called into the treeline. The construct surged forward, leaping between branches as it attempted to make distance – my mind raced in confusion. *Why is he talking to us?!*

After a moment the construct turned on a dime, their hands leaving claw marks in the wood as they turned to look for Xhol.

The entire platform seemed to shake as tremor after tremor reverberated behind us – one by one, Xhol was leveling the forest. Trees continued to fall in the distance as his blade cleaved them in two, he himself walking casually through the carnage as he calmly scanned the space above him.

Breath hitching, my mind began to race as the construct stood motionless, frozen in place – it seemed it was deliberating too.

Our eyes narrowed on a distance structure; a stone cave, with a webbing of vines at its entrance.

Jumping across a gap in the trees I knew Xhol could see, the construct tore its way forward, leaping out of the canopy and sliding its way across the cave clearing’s slick mud, and completely under the net of vines at its entrance. My suspicions from a distance were confirmed as my eye caught a light – a small gap in the small cavern’s ceiling led to the space outside.

Not a moment too soon; an explosion rang out as Xhol’s self-propulsion system went off, blasting him into the clearing just as the construct made its way up the wall and partially through the escape exit. Hanging upside down just as Xhol lunged forward to cut after us, I sent two of our Lumigons forward, pivoting downwards at him to fire from above. He shifted his stance, cutting upwards in a motion that would catch both the blocking vines and the Lumigon’s shots in its path–

–and his brow shot up instead as his sword met glassy shards, the blade cleaving through both Lumigons as I threw them both down to break on his blade.

The creeping plants fell to the wayside as he redrew his magnum with blinding speed, the traces of the construct’s cape disappearing through the crack in the ceiling just as the bullet tore past us and into the darkness beyond.

Xhol let out a laugh. “Well done, well done! Be sure to check your blindspot–!”

My mind jumped at what that could mean just as I felt another shot being fired below us; hearing the ricochet before I felt it, I only glimpsed the glimmer of light as a blinding spear of steel bounced off the stone wall below, precisely at the right angle to fly upwards through our exit and rip a chunk of the construct's mask clean off its face.

We fell back from the impact, tumbling down the slope and back into the undergrowth, slipping off a muddy edge and into the depths of a small ravine below. Crashing in a heap, I instinctively held my hand towards my face, a spread of *numbness* making my jaw feel light with static.

It occurred to me then that I had never tested if I, the pilot, would receive signals of pain.

No time to think about that now.

Another explosion, and a living fireball soared over the trench above us.

Immediately the construct open fired – Xhol flew overhead and landed down the other end of the ravine, his blade meeting the barrage of lasers head on in a blur of steel and sparks. I surged forward in a desperate move, concealed by the wall of drones as I slid under the volley, the firing squad dissipating as they left line of sight and re-appearing along the construct's left arm, locked together in a polygon shield. There was an audible ring as his blade clashed with psychic glass, Xhol's advantage in height leaving him to bear down on us as we struggled against his weight.

I envisioned a wall of fire.

In an instant, the polygon shield lit up in a veil of bright pink, before exploding outwards in a blast of energy that sent us all spiraling back.

Regaining my wits, I looked up just in time to see a hand grasping forward through the fire.

Xhol closed his hand around the construct's mask, strengthening his grip around its eyehole before holding us aloft; I felt the construct begin to flail as their sight was snuffed out.

"A valiant effort, worthy of applause."

His words cut through me. *This wasn't over!*

I didn't wait to process what he was going to do next – I took control of the construct's struggling limbs and reached down towards their left boot, grasped the knife stowed there, and reared it back before driving it into his limb.

His outstretched, metallic limb.

The knife was a high frequency blade.

With an awful screech of metal-on-metal Xhol let out a grunt of pain, releasing the face of the construct as he staggered back – we crashed backwards into the mud below. After a second, the construct shot back to its hands and knees, poised on all fours as it aligned our reformed Lumigons with our opponent beyond–

–just as I noticed the tiny beeps of the capsule below.

A blinding, piercing ray of light tore its way through the ravine, wrapping each of us in a crippling flashbang.

My ears rang as my eyes burned; Staggering back, my eye just barely began to adjust as I blinked away the interference. I saw Xhol staggered just a ways away, holding his head in his hands. It seems he hadn't escaped the blast either.

I held up my hands, envisioning exactly the blow that would win me this tournament–

–and saw nothing.

My eye went wide as the construct began to fight against my hold, rearing back and staggering away, tearing at itself with its hands.

I felt a surge within me. I recognized my anxiety, my confusion – this was an emotion not my own.

Fear.

Our attacks were entirely disabled.

It's still affected by the flashbang!

My simulated vision continued to outpace the construct's as my mind raced for other options. A loud *k-thunk* above my head offered an answer; the hatch to the second floor finally shot open with an announcement from beyond.

Without looking back, I strengthened my grip on the controls, tore my way up the side of the ravine, and threw myself through the open chamber.

♪ - Mortal Instants - 50% Audio
♪ - Inside a Volcano - 50% Audio

What greeted me was hellfire itself.

Seemingly a simulation of this world's Magmus Ridge, I was surrounded by volcanic rock and stone alike. A lava river flowed down the side of a looming cliffside, seemingly as tall as the space between the next floor; sulfur and ash hung silent in the air, as waves of heat washed over me in droves.

I raced away from the hatch, the construct still holding its face, before diving across a magma flow and throwing myself into a shadowed crag beyond.

My heart hammered in my chest, my head still numb at the edge – slowly, I sank down the wall, slouching over in a heap as I fought to catch my breath. I watched blearily as, slowly, a drop of liquid seemed to bead off of the construct's hand, falling to the burning stone below.

"It's over, Tavi. Let it end."

Xhol's voice echoed like a phantom over the space between.

"No one will think less of you. You've already done more than enough."

Rage still burned within me – an indignation, fueling me despite my fatigue.

"Stop it! You don't know what this means to me!"

My cry rang out over the sound of molten stone.

"Your resolve is strong, yet you struggle to conceptualize your true goal. How am I to believe you will not destroy yourself in the process?"

My snarl faltered as I struggled to speak. “My– my goal is the same as yours! As any other duelist! Glory and gold – glorious triumph! And I’m not afraid of what I have to do to get it!”

His footsteps, echoing now on the burning winds, slowed to a stop.

“You assume too much. Are you certain that is what you should be fighting for?”

My stomach turned as I closed my eyes.

“What of the bright young woman who entered this tournament? The aspiring engineer with stars in her eyes? Did she fight for gold and glory?”

“I fought– I did what I had to! To be a duelist! Like you!”

The silence that followed was deafening.

“Conflict, Tavi. War and strife. These are the battles that are fought for gold and glory – those do not need to be yours.”

My mind snapped back to reality as my heart raced – the construct had begun to move once more. Blinking the tears from my eye I pulled myself to my feet, daring a look from beyond my small crevasse; a stone’s throw away was Xhol, katana in hand, gazing slowly across the sulfuric field.

A small way uphill, a slowly leaking blockage stifled the lava beyond.

With a roar, I stepped out into the clearing, took aim, and fired.

Xhol’s attention shot up in an instant – he spun on a dime, then back towards the rumble, just to be faced with a surge of molten magma.

I watched as he was engulfed by the flow. There was no explosion, no dramatic escape. Just the splash of molten ore, and the roar of the crowd.

My heart dropped.

No. No no no–

I slid down the slope, stopping feet away from the magma as it settled.

“Xhol?!”

The construct’s head shot up, catching something in the distance. I watched alongside with bated breath.

Down at the edge of the flow, something pulled itself free from the mire.

Not a machine. No longer a man.

Scorched, artificial flesh tore away from burning tendons, revealing slick metal underneath. Xhol stood, his face half melted away, exposing raw circuitry and steel.

Standing to his feet, his burning eyes locked with mine.

A metallic *k-thunk* rang out; the doors to the third floor opened.

With a blast of ragged flame, he leapt out of sight.

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♪ - *Everywhere & Nowhere* - *90% Audio*
♪ - *Howling Mountain Winds* - *40% Audio*

He awaited me at the edge of the world.

The third layer was like nothing I’d ever seen. Clawing our way up through the ceiling’s hatch, our gaze was met with a blinding, golden glow; the sun reflected down from above, clouds seemingly hovering at our level as the platform lay coated in a small pool of water, reflecting brilliantly the light above. The arena was entirely flat, with naught but a single, wooden pole at its center; a red flag blew gently at its top.

Xhol stood quietly beside it, the metal of his body glowing softly in the light.

I stood shakily, attempting to meet his eyes. Feeling as something inside me died.

Staring at him, ragged and scorched, memories lain in scars reduced to cinders…

With a quiet sob, I sank to my knees.

“…I can’t do this. I can’t do this anymore. I can’t pretend…”

His reply was low and cold. “...Is that what this has been about? You becoming a duelist?”

I shook my head, leaning over as if to sink into the water below. “No... not at first. I was happy, then. To play the role. But now, after everything...”

My heart bled on the ground.

“What do I go home to? Smiling faces and congratulations, money and fame... and for what? To never do this again? To go back to a quiet life? I’ve finally gotten my adventure in the palms of my hands, and now at the end of it all I can’t go away...”

With a start, I drove my fist into the water, a splash of sparkles painting across the construct’s mask. “After everything! Everything I’ve done! All the people I’ve hurt just to prove a point! I wanted it to just be about winning – that somehow that’d make it easier to leave! I almost killed two people,” with a shaking voice, I looked up to him, “and now, I’ve hurt *you.”*

“This life, these duels, I’m not cut out for it after all. I crave battle, but I can’t bring myself to break. So I hide behind a name and a story not my own...” I looked at its hands, shaking in front of me.

“I’ll never be a duelist. I don’t deserve to win this tournament. I’ve lost.”

The wind whipped around us, its blade cold as ice.

Xhol was the one who broke the silence.

“For someone so educated on the history of duelists, you seem to be deeply misinformed.”

I looked up.

“Cier’s history is bathed in blood. Conflict, strife, hate and war – all have approached to stain the surface of this planet. Of which has manifested on many I have visited, and which will continue to plague many more, as time moves ever on, immemorial.”

“But there is a unique evolution here, exclusive to this world; the aspect of peace, and conflict, working in kind. A community, sprung up around mutual collaboration – appreciation in the form of combat.”

“Dueling, at its core, is not a competition; it is a collaboration. A mutual agreement to understand one another, through the medium of battle. There are those who twist it, to be about morality, or personal gain,” he gestured with a wave of his hand, “but at its core, it is about self-improvement. A chance to grow, among the aspects of others.”

I listened on in silence.

“What you’re fighting for – you had it right at the start, Tavi. Excitement, appreciation of those around you. Love.”

“That’s all you’ve ever needed.”

I ran over his words in my head. Instinct it was, to filter it through some kind of logical thread. Winding thoughts of pain and grief, of casting off everything beforehand. To forge a new identity of my own. It would take time.

But for one, fleeting moment, I believed I understood.

All there was left was to take the first step.

“I think… I think I know what I have to do. After this. After everything.”

I rose to my feet, staring across that glassy plain.

Xhol gave me a nod.

“I have faith your decision will be right. However, before then, we find ourselves at a precipice. Am I to know of your true resolve?”

I offered a slow nod in kind.

“…Yes. Not for rage, or spite or…anything else. This time… I’ll fight for me.”

For the first time since our interview, I watched him slowly smile.

♪ - *Fleeting Moment - 90% Audio*

“Then let us take this conversation to a close – and embrace the beauty of mutual combat. I expect you will hold nothing back!”

With a small flourish, Xhol, metallic skeleton shining brilliantly in the light, stowed his katana back beneath what remained of his skin, before shifting his footwork to an offensive stance, hands held before him in anticipation.

I took a deep breath, exhaling the rest of my woes into the cold winds beyond–

–before lowering my eye, and leaping forward into the light.

On the spot, the construct burst forward, immediately sending four Lumigons spiraling towards Xhol – each drone was met with a resounding strike, his fists shattering them into pieces as we continued to close the distance. With the strength of a typhoon he struck his heel forward, launching a brilliant wave of sparkling water towards us; line of sight blocked, we leapt forward through the wave, beads of light cascading off our figure as we crashed down upon his defense, the sound crescendoing in a chorus of titanium and steel.

Flipping forwards, we broke off of the clash, eight Lumigons now forming before us in a dazzling swarm–

–I urged them together, linking them into a brilliant glass chain.

Hitting the ground with a slide, I lashed out with my iridescent chainsword – Xhol dodged to the side with precision, skirting the edge in a flash of pink sparks; he drove forward, striking the middle of the chain with his palm, shattering the middle link as he reached to grasp the line.

The wayward links flitted back, flanking him, before unleashing a volley of shots through his frame. With a grunt of effort, he still took hold of the chain – just as we dissolved it into particles, reforming all drones apart and concentrating all fire on him at once.

Blasts of pink fire reflected off of the clouds beyond – a condensed blast sent the ground shaking under our heels. For a moment, we lost sight of him.

Xhol burst forward, coated in iridescent flame, reaching once more for my construct's mask.

A moment to lapse. A single second to think.

I slammed the control pod's emergency eject button.

My screens went black; the headset shut off as the pod shunted itself open. I was back in reality. Immediately, I began to restart the machine.

At that exact moment, the construct phased out of alignment, becoming incorporeal. Xhol fell through and tumbled straight to the ground.

Within moments, I was back online. Stunned by the disconnect, the construct stumbled forward; I caught it before it could fall.

Turning on a heel, I began to will into existence the finisher I had seen them use so many months ago. In the very first round of the tournament.

The Nine-Point Lumigon.

Xhol struck his forward with a rallying roar, and with a mighty crunch, his fist met solid glass.

A massive triangle drone, the combination of nine individual Lumigons, stood between us.

“Let this be–”

–my cry echoed together with the drone’s thruming power–

“*–our final answer!”*

In a flash of absolute power, the massive drone shook still and fired. A rattling, iridescent white-hot beam tore its way over Xhol, punching through the cloud bank and cutting through to the horizon beyond; I leapt into the air, tilting the beam downwards to carve through to the platform below.

With a groaning crunch, the platform below gave way to the roaring torrent; the beam exploded downwards, searing through rock and stone, metal, grass and turf, bearing its way through the entire structure as it plunged to the ground level beyond. The explosion rocked the arena to its core, a tidal wave of sand blowing up from the center pit, crystallizing into glass on impact in an explosion of refracted light.

Slowly, the rolling thrum began to wane as the beam dissipated into sparks, leaving just me and my creation upon its surface at the edge of the world.

♪ - *Scions & Sinners* - *50% Audio*
♪ - *Cheering Crowd* - *30% Audio*

Dismissing the drone, I began falling back to terra firma.

A quick expansion of the construct's cloak and we quickly slowed our descent; the crowd roared like a hurricane as we touched down. The arena was a mess; rapidly cooling waves of glass spread tendrils across the pit, with drops of molten metal still flowing slightly from the hole above.

In the center of the impact was a small crater.

I looked expectantly towards its occupant.

A small hand, slowly raised, found its way from within the earth; and offered a single gesture in response. A curling of the inner three fingers, with an extension of the thumb and fifth manus.

"Yield."

Sid's voice rocketed over the intercoms.

"WE HAVE A WINNER!"

Exhausted, numb, and barely coherent, I clicked the power button off on my headset. With a thunk of the exit lever, the control pod opened into the light.

Stepping out with a smile, and a laugh, as the people who supported me ran to my side, I looked up to the open sky, and cried.

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EPILOGUE

Story #T-5: VICTORY

[Previous: Duel #T-3] →
