

Bloodsport

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Dust floats beneath my feet, filthy and alive. It too waits for the show. It pulses up in bursts; the thumping music makes a puppet of even atoms.

My opponent is a shadow on the wall. He sits waiting, puffing his chest; a throne of straw piled like corpses. He is well versed in bloodsport. His last bout lasted 20 seconds, that neck he split open, his bloodshot, manic eyes—Can he smell the adrenaline in my throat? Or must he taste it?

I lean my trembling face against the bars and gaze up at the spectacle above the arena. With greasy fingers, they tear into meat—drumsticks, wings, fillets: ground up and scraped over crackers—waiting for the savages below to begin.

Men in multicoloured fabrics clutch paper money with white knuckles. Some wear dark glasses obscuring their faces; others let their hair droop like velvet curtains, concealing all but their peering eyes.

Those with black garb and uncovered faces bow their heads. Their keen eyes trained on the floor, soft and nimble, fluttering between tables—filling glasses, clearing trays. When the songs are raucous, they perch idle. In the quiet, they emerge, swooping to the floor to scrub

spilled drinks, then vanish again. When the blood's spilled and the crowd thins, they will pluck through the remains for shiny things, coins left over—the second stage of evolution, from chicken to crow to human.

The bamboo shakes before me, snapping me out of my reverie. I flutter my wings, feathers steeling for the duel, practicing my war cry:

Bu Bu Bukaw!

The crowd swells. Most have selected a champion—I expect almost all have chosen my foe. The bars lift swiftly and I stumble forward, eyes a blur. The pit is jagged and oblong, wooden planks for walls, haphazardly pressed into place. They loom overhead, splintered and menacing. Built by men who would never see it from below.

He emerges leisurely, inhaling the cheers of the crowd. Fully upright, I see him for the behemoth he is—towering inches above me. He preens, gloating before victory. His wings are bigger than mine by half. He stalks forward, circling—a hawk with hunger in his eyes. My legs are spaghetti, wobbling back. Blood pulses in my eyeballs; mouth bone-dry. I turn to face him, always, he circles faster than I turn. Dizzied by his steadfast, hungry approach. He nips at the air—a cat playing with its mouse.

He pounces with bloodthirst. I flail back, my skull knocks against hardwood. I see stars—and his deranged eyes. His beak is upon me, raining daggers from above, tearing my cheek, flesh from bone. Slicing, nipping, pecking—a vulture to a cadaver, the thousand jagged teeth of a beak on my brow. I press my feet against his torso, feeling for any weakness, any give.

His jaws close, squeezing my left eye, squashing the fleshy ball between them. I scream—hellfire flashing before me, legs writhing against the monster. With a squelching pop, an inferno unleashes in

my head.

My voice finds war songs, joining the chorus of roars. My legs are sledgehammers, drumsticks on a recoiling chest. My talons carve into his cheek—his neck is pastry before my beak—flesh peeling, confetti on my wings. His trachea, straw beneath my jaw, torn in euphoric ribbons. The rhythm of his heart pulses into my mouth—slowing, slowing.

He slumps, lifeless, to the floor. The crowd rises in ecstasy. I inhale the sweet electricity, reanimating my half-dead body to glory. My eye hangs out of my skull, a battered, skinless grape loose on a stringy pink tendril. It swings as I roar in triumph. The crowd and I scream in unison—the arena has become my own. I plant myself on his head and greet the world from my podium. Crushing his skull beneath my foot: I become human.