6.0 - Ghosts of Doubt



And Lyco… Lyco kept running. Konrad watched the lad’s figure swing past his elevation, and dexterously fly onto the top. To keep himself from falling, Konrad had to stab the column’s wall with his sword, driving it in between the bricks with force. He pushed himself up, but the time was lost. The one second Konrad had to spend to take the sword out of the column, Lyco spent on a timed attack. Konrad reached the top, and felt a powerful slash of a thin kodachi blade on his chest, a bit below his neck. Blood came squirting out of the wound, and Knox started falling. Lyco jumped from the top, and literally flew down, slamming himself against Konrad. An improvised back-flip summersault saved Knox’s landing.

Konrad could not believe his eyes. Were they serious?

"My dear god, how is this possible?"

He entered the doors of the club half an hour ago, and was exploring the facilities in detail, trying to look at his best casual. The giant circular arena was surrounded by massive living space and nested multi-level entertainment centers and shops, connected to each other in all directions, by stairways.

Knox was expecting to see boxing rings, shooting ranges, temples at least, for heaven's sake. But all he saw was literally, dorm rooms, TV screens, DVD players, loud music, noise everywhere, cameras, beautiful naked young dancers, and more than all of those together - dominant three things: drug dealing stands, soda machines, and video games. Young teenage punks in ridiculous randomly brightly colored outfits were snooping around, gaming, enjoying themselves.

Konrad stared in amazement and awe at the atmosphere.

"What is this, a joke...? A bunch of fucking pokemons."

He noted that the most fun games and the most beautiful girls were located on taller buildings and suspended towers, with nothing but overhead bridges above them. More common needs, like bathrooms and refreshments - were available on the floor level, downstairs. Simpler games and TV sets with news and cartoons on them - were located on midlevel, a few feet of rope ladders above ground. The top levels, however, had no stairs leading to them, but instead - tightly nested walls. There were absolutely no ways to walk up to the top level, but surprisingly that level was the fullest. Fighting games, dancing games, guitar games, karaoke, and - not a single kid was standing in line. While waiting for their turn to play something, everyone occupied themselves with some other distraction. People just smoothly migrated between gaming, sex, athletics, drinking, watching cartoons, and sleeping inside the dorm rooms.

People were everywhere, even playing around on the ceiling, exercising on suspended metal rings, attached to the ceiling by ropes. Teens were leaping between them, like monkeys, summersaulting and performing acrobatic tricks. It looked like a miniature sized chinatown cramped up into a stadium.

The place was full of lights, smoke, and stinky sweat, being killed off by obscene amounts of air freshener, pulverizing from ventilation systems on a timer. It was a perfect heaven for a teenagers. For teenage gamers and... fighters? TVs, games, sodas, drugs, young women, and exercise training facility - all in one? A perfect appeal to young men just finishing puberty?

Konrad ducked, and watched in awe as a scrawny teen with up-sticking punk styled red mohawk - aimed for the top level bridge, where a girl beaconed him, dropping some cocaine powder in between her tiny breasts She was beautiful, amazingly beautiful. She was a top quality breed, so stunning Konrad cringed as he thought of her together with this boy.

The boy, on the other hand, took two feet runway and lept up against the wall, slamming his foot into it, and pushed himself off the railing, then bounced off an occupied arcade machine, being completely ignored by the person playing it, and parkoured over to the top level bridge to stand right next to the girl.

Konrad's hair and face were washed with wind from the teen's maneuver, and he swore that he saw distortion of air during the supersonic dash.

Konrad hurried out of sight, turning into a restroom area. He stopped himself to take a breather, trying to shake off the shock.

"How did he do that? That boy looks like a retarded travian junkie. How did he do that..."

The assassin peeked out again and took a closer look over the entire outside cloister pavillion. He focused his eyes on the top level decks. He twitched.

There were dozens of them, dashing up and down every minute, parkouring around. Konrad realized that they were just so fast that he did not notice them travel until they stopped, but once he looked closer - he was able to see how the best boys got to the top level suspended decks - they dashed and bounced off the walls.

It was incredible.

He washed his face with cool water and stepped away from the sink, and slid weakly down the restroom wall, sinking to the floor.

"This is it," he thought, "This is the new generation. How could I have been so blind. Of course, a school for especially talented. These are the gifted children. This is what they make of themselves.

And then, Axium takes them and turns their minds into fanatical doctrine enforcement drones."

-"Yo, homes, you okay? You look like you just fell off the lift cliff. That thing vicious, yo."

Konrad looked up and shook himself awake from throughts. A black haired emo looking teen boy was talking to him. The boy's eyes had bright orange contact lenses in them, or at least he hoped they were lenses.

-"Yo, hey, you actually kinda old. You one of the pro pros? Got ny tricks i c'n check out?"

The boy bowed slightly, putting his hands together in respect.

-"Please?"

Konrad stood up and spoke back:

-"No, no, not right now. Listen, who runs this place?"

-"Lyco, why?"

-"Does Axium pay for this?"

-"Hell if I know, man."

-"Do they give you orders?"

-"Fuck no, homes! Nobody gives us orders, fuck that. The only cat I'm taking orders from is Lyco. He runs our city, not anyone else!"

-"City...?"

-"Yeah man!" - the boy stared blankly, as if he was stating something blatantly obvious to a newbie, - "The City of Arena."

The City of Arena. That was even more twisted. A giant complex in the southern outskirts of Axium Empire... and its denizens think of themselves as a city. A miniature government within a government. A microscopic country of independence within the walls of a colossal structure.

Konrad walked through the layers of the cloister, inward, deeper towards the center of this gamer city, passing dorms and gaming facilities, until he reached the arena gates. Most of them were closed, but a few were open. He walked around looking into the center through the iron bars that separated the dark gamer city and loud parties from the sand covered battle grounds. A few men were walking around the corridors naked or wrapped in towels, coming out of shower rooms and locker rooms and heading back towards the outside ring of the "city". Here, at the center, the citizens were quite older, almost all of them looked in the range of eighteen to twenty, more muscular, more fighter-shaped, mature. These were pros. Quiet, collected, but still retaining those loose, relaxed gamer eyes.

Konrad could not read their faces, they seemed like they had no idea, no sense, they just didn't give a fuck. There was no anger in them, no coldness, no pride.

Konrad approached one of the open gates and stood by the wall, in the shadow, looking out into the sun lit circle, about a football field in size. The ground was hot yellow sand, the arena itself was in the outdoors in the open air. Sunlight was bright and provided for good observation of the fighters.

In the middle of the arena was a fifty foot tall cylindrical tower, more like a giant totem or a column, a solid block of brown concrete, about 10 feet in diameter. On its top was a flat pad.

In the center of the pad was a man in a white tank top and wide green pants, with black Rasta bangs going down on his face. He was barefoot and was armed with two wooden kodachi sticks. The pad had a five foot radius, barely enough for two men to fight on.

The man on top managed to take three at a time. The whole scene reminded of some kind of supernaturally impossible game of King of the Hill. A total of ten attackers with all sorts of real weapons, sharp bladed, made their way to the top of the pad, up to three at a time, by literally running on the tower's vertical surface directly up and somersaulting over to the man holding his position. The man on top was clearly a champion. He dispatched each attacker with the wooden sticks in a matter of seconds, though Konrad could not see how, as the man moved so quickly, that he could only see attackers falling off the tower and landing into sand after a 50 foot fall. Most landed on their feet, recovering balance.

He saw a man on the ground charge his katana sword with a shining yellow energy ball that came from his very flesh, and another man, on the opposite side of the column, charge a large sharp steel dagger with some blue glowing light. They both stood a moments, premeditating, then nodded to each other. Konrad got worried for a second for the man on top, as he saw both contenders run up the tower together, surrounding the champion on both sides - right and left. The swordsman released the energy, charging forward with the massive sonic boom, and the dagger wielder slid forward, producing a hissing sound and a bright blue flash. Another yellow flash at the top of the tower obscured the details of the encounter, but the next thing Konrad saw were both plotters flying down the tower. The champion was still there, rubbing his wooden sticks against one another. They now held the bright yellow charge.

The man was amazing. He blocked, dodged, dashed, parried his opponents, and redirected their charged energy blows. It was like watching a science fiction movie. But it was true.

Inferno existed, and they were so very good at it. The fight continued for some time, until a single strike of a gong.

Eight fighters out of ten immediately sit down on the sand and sheathed their weapons.

Two hesitated, those were the ones who acted in team - the swordsman and the man with the dagger. They looked up at the champion, who was still at the tower, and then looked up in the direction of the gong.

But then, the champion, noticing their hesitation to cease the fight, slid the wooden covers off his kodachi sticks, revealing their true nature - they were never wooden sticks, they were sheathed thin bladed training kodachi. He shook his head at them once. They sheathed and sat down.

He jumped down and joined the contenders, and probably began to educate them on what he has noticed during the match. Konrad could not hear the words, just saw him talking with each fighter individually, debriefing them like an ancient sensei.

Konrad thought momentarily of Shamino.

Some time passed till the champion looked over to the gate and noticing Konrad, stood up in the sand and started walking towards the gate. Konrad took off his boots and stepped forward onto the sand, and into the light. The champion strapped his kodachi to the belt in his pants, and offered a hand, wet with sweat, for a handshake.

"Welcome to Arena. I am Lyco."

Konrad took his hand.

-"So, you are not an Axium organization? How can that be?"

-"I don't understand why you act so surprised, Mister Knox."

-"Well someone funds this?"

-"We selectively pick independent work, as we choose. It's about freedom, man."

-"And you really run this thing yourself?"

-"I don't run anything, Mister Knox. The Arena runs itself. I'm just here to share my art while I can."

-"The people see a leader in you."

-"They see what they need. The boys seek guidance so they see a guide."

-"So you fund this, and the Axium doesn't try to shut you down?"

-"Political wars are taking away your city, man." - Lyco answered slowly, taking a drag of the weed pipe, - "You gotta take the city away from them."

-"Yeah, but they didn't go after you? They just keep... letting you be?"

Lyco smiled and nodded his head towards the arena tower. Then he chuckled.

-"Go after us? That will be an interesting day, won't it?"

Lyco had a point, who could possibly oppose these guys?

-"So you just give training to all who want it for free?"

-"As free as one can afford, man. Best if they come young. This is about brotherhood, and about fun. I don't recruit anyone. They come to me on their own, and receive what they want to achieve. But it's not like I just give it away. They wanna be put to work, so I put em to work."

-"Interesting method of generating revenue."

-"Mister Knox, why don't you leave those matters for me? You did not come here to discuss finances. So just ask what you came here to ask, man."

-"Hm. And you already know what I came here for, don't you?"

-"Of course I do. Same reason everyone else does. You came here for the training."

-"Or I could have come to kill you."

-"No, you didn't. You brought guns here. Which means you're a good shot. You could have easily taken a shot at me while I was training."

-"Would I have hit?"

Lyco smiled.

-"No, you wouldn't have. I saw you the moment you saw me."

-"Well, you're right. I came here to train. Is it too late to ask?"

-"It's never too late to ask for the training. It can only be too late to learn."

Konrad nodded, a slight shadow of fear creeping into his mind.

-"Can I ask you about something?"

Lyco nodded, encouraging.

-"You were fighting with your blades sheathed, but why were the others not?"

Lyco nodded again, and smiled.

-"Knew you'd ask. The Arena's law makes anyone who kills me the new Master. Daily one hour long matches ten against one is their shot, I guess."

-"Kill you to be the leader?"

-"That's right."

-"I thought you said the people themselves proclaimed you their leader."

-"That's right."

-"So they're trying to kill you over the title they gave you on their own?"

Lyco took another drag with a grin.

-"Yup."

-"What kind of sense does that make?"

-"The Master has to be undefeatable, it gives them inspiration."

-"So what the hell are you gonna do?"

-"Keep beating them."

-"And when you no longer can?"

-"Someone else will be their inspiration."

-"But what about you?"

-"Mister Knox, you can drown a man, hang a man, put a bullet in his head. A man dies when he no longer deserves to be the inspiration. Inspiration is bulletproof."

-"Heh, you'll like this thing, if you don't like it already. We call it a lift cliff. The only way to get on top of it is to lift yourself."

-"On what?"

-"On waves of compressed air."

The towering column known as the lift cliff did not hurry to let itself under Konrad’s feet. Sure, he was an amazing athlete and could manage a four step vertical wall run, but this thing, whatever it was, took a lot more effort than that.

-"Oh for hell's sake! Children can do it!"

-"Those back in there are special children. Come on now, living man. You're still trying to accelerate yourself. Accelerate what's behind you. Accelerate air."

-"Alright. Again."

Again. Again. Again.

And Again.

Each day began with a morning physical preparation and by the afternoon Knox reached his peak physical condition. It's been a month since he's lived in the Arena and practiced their lifestyle. He was not much into games and music, but the enthusiastic young girls were hard to resist when you produce a liter of testosterone a day. Wasn't quite sure what their status here was. Some girls trained to be talented fighters, others just hung around and provided company. Some of them were fangirls. The fighting girls were all near obsessed with Lyco and his inner circle. Rightly so, those guys were amazing. Knox felt older than old here, slower than slow. He felt like a dead man. But he took the bad with the good. Diet was nutritious, exercise plenty. It was survivable, if one did not indulge in drugs too much. The old assassin tried to make the experience his own, he carried buckets of water every morning from the water station to the common area, channeling in this urban palace, his own temple experience. He also made use of the swimming pool and massage parlor. They got to think of him quite quickly as the weird one. But he tried to make friends, do favors, and learn from everyone he could. During the training it was essential to master the four elements of nature - water, fire, earth, and air. This corresponded to a number of exercises involving underwater activities, leading to eventual ability to breathe underwater for a limited time, passing through fire, which also included resistance to electricity, fortitude to natural poisons, which covered aspect of earth, and air travel. Knox had the hardest time with the last.

And so, passed a good portion of the year.

Konrad felt strange knowing that soon his new friendships would end. To be friends with people so young, to hear their worries, to give them advice, to share stories and experiences with them - was almost the opposite of humbling. He wasn't sure why it didn't quite feel like kindergarten. What could they think of him? A geriatric newbie, forever late for the train, forever back of the bus. Trying so hard. So many times he wanted to swing and slap a buddy or two across the face for a snide comment here and there. To bloody their noses. But always stopped himself. What else could they see in him? An old man is an old man. Something always put a clump in his throat, prevented him from speaking up. Words just wouldn't come out. Maybe it was because these guys never fell off the hundred foot pillar and ate dust.

By spring Konrad was hard to recognize. He started dressing like them, and acting more like them. There was no way to continue these final levels of training without the drugs. He got to understanding that these were manufactured on purpose, not just for fun. Somewhere at the top of the Axium chain. The forbidden fruit. He tapped into it.

The hardest part was to develop a habit to not answer his phone as Agency's handlers panicked, attempting to reach him almost every week.

Upon the end of next summer at the encampment, Lyco inspected Konrad's body and declared that he was ready.

"I think you're ready for the real deal, man. But once I give it to you, there is no way back to un-develop it. It only develops further."

"I made my choice, Lyco."

"Well here you go then."

Lyco placed a palm of his right hand to Konrad's chest, and shot four consecutive powerful energy blows into his heart. It felt devastating and invigorating at the same time, rejuvenating and juvenile, frightening and just like that, swiftly calming. A flash of blue, yellow, green, and white - and Konrad passed out.

He woke up in his bed the next day in his bunk bed. Lyco was sitting next to him, it appeared that he spent all night by his bed, watching over him.

-"Did I make it? Do I have it?"

-"You woke up, man. It means your heart was strong enough. You made it."

Konrad smiled.

-"That's good."

-"You know, I haven't been truly surprised in some time, Konrad. Now that you're on the other side, I have to admit, I thought you'd never make it. Nobody ever lived if they started after seventeen. I myself started at twelve. You were way too old for learning it, but you accepted it."

-"Maybe it's because I really wanted to."

-"Oh, I don't doubt it was the primary reason. Your mind and your heart are synchronized. They are working in team, and now they became one. They both want the same thing, which is what this whole thing is all about."

Then Konrad got up. Per Lyco's instructions, he proceeded to his daily exercise and confirmed that the Inferno had grown root overnight and given way to development of abilities. Konrad proved a strong affinity to earth, discovering that Inferno pushes his natural resistance and resilience to natural poison, including snake poison and spider poison. As long as he focused on healing, his body was able to push back the effects of poison and overcome their lethal effects over several hours, though throwing him into fever regardless.

-"Does that include scorpions?"

-"I don't know. We don't have any. I guess you could test it on your own and see if it hurts?"

With air Konrad was neutral. He was still on his own. But now he had the means to do what he was trained for.

-"You have a neutral ground with this trick. Your body is well capable of doing it like it does any normal urban acrobatics, but whether you can manage to command your body to do so, is completely up to you."

Again, he stood before the lift cliff. The threatening friend and rival he saw every morning. He took his katana sword out. Its tip balancing Konrad's aerodynamic flow behind him, crafting the airwave with the right angle of travel, he took runway once more.

The lift was glorious, and, step by step, Konrad's feet, bare against the concrete and brimstone, ran vertically up, air compressing and condensing behind him, moving faster than a bullet, and by the time his focus was broken with excitement, he already stood on the platform on the top.

He lifted his sword up in the air and shouted a loud "yes!"

Lyco applauded.

There are two kinds of fighters: the kind who can oppose and manipulate gravity, and the kind who cannot. Konrad just became a step closer in his attempt to keep up, yet a feeling inside him was bitter. Now he has changed in an irreversible way, something that was dear to him, or perhaps to his past, was betrayed. It wasn’t just his skill, just his vigor anymore. Now he let a third power enter within his very soul, the core of him. Now it was inferno.

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