

## Fighting Monsters (Recursion)

Parry. Turn, leap, twist and land ... attack.

The blade sliced through the air, made thicker and heavier to make movement more difficult, and to train the operatives who still thought it was air that they were breathing.

Xenthi threw her crouched form backwards, sword arm snapping back close to her body as she moved into a reverse somersault. She landed and arched backwards as her opponent's weapon sliced past her in a wide arc, bringing her own sword up rapidly to block its counter-swing.

The opponents ran towards each other, the metal of the blades singing out until they touched at the hilt.

"I'm not afraid of you," Xenthi sneered, staring into the black lidless eyes of her hooded attacker.

It emitted a low, guttural growl and dropped the sword, spinning backwards on its left foot out of the way as Xenthi staggered forward.

Her mind raced at a thousand miles a second as the ground rushed to meet her. She managed to break her fall enough to avoid any broken bones, but her momentum was now lost, as was her sword. She managed to twist away just as a heavy foot crashed down on what would have been her spine.

Xenthi flipped herself onto her feet as her opponent charged. She neatly leapt over his head and broke into a run, tearing across the dojo towards one of the main supporting wooden beams.

She performed a small hop at the end of the dojo, her tiny bare feet landing on the wood, and she focused on the task at hand. It was only a short matter of time before gravity took its hold, but she had done this sort of thing enough times to learn when that time ran out.

At the peak of her run, she pushed off the beam, soaring out towards the middle of the room in a bizarre kind of airborne backstroke. Her outstretched fingers reached for the small bars that hung suspended from the high roof, a grin on her face; a grin that quickly faded as she missed her target.

All composure lost, she hurtled towards the ground, hitting it hard with her knees and screaming out in pain as she bounced and tumbled to a halt.

She glared teary-eyed hatred at the monster before her as it picked her up by her neck, huge armoured hands closing around her frail form.

"Fuck," she said weakly, half-sobbing, half-coughing, trying to breathe despite herself.

Her opponent flared huge nostrils, blowing hot air in her face as it felt her spine pop and crack under the pressure. Letting her limp body fall to the floor, it wondered why the fight wasn't over.

"I'm .. not dead you motherfu..."

It stamped a huge foot down on the talking head, and in a flash of light disappeared into nonexistence.

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Xenthi swore as her eyes opened, the neural jack sliding from the back of her skull with a soft hiss of compressed air.

She got up from the metal chair, its restraints already retracted, and padded out of the room, leaving its other sleeping occupants to their own battles.

"You did well," a soft female voice said behind her as she pulled a towel around her neck and prepared to shower, "Most people get stuck with the sword."

Xenthi turned to see Ducis, her appointed guide and mentor-figure. Xenthi had learnt that Ducis' real name was actually VZX133926, but she had to admit Ducis was easier to say.

The hand that fell on her shoulder felt human, looked human. Xenthi still had a little trouble adjusting to the fact that this pretty brunette with a shapely figure and a voice that could charm birds from the trees was actually a machine.

"Maybe I did, but he still crushed me like a bug."

They walked into the shower-room, as pristine and perfectly proportioned as all the rooms in the complex, and Ducis stood at the entrance as Xenthi stripped down to her underwear and switched on the jets of hot water.

"He's a fierce program. Ungainly at martial arts but his size and strength make him deadly in melee combat," Ducis said over the rushing sound of the water, "believe it or not you actually taught him a thing or two with that sword fighting."

Xenthi looked quizzically at Ducis as she ran her hands roughly through her hair, "He learns?"

"Of course," she replied with a giggle, "you don't think we'd keep pitting you against the same opponents do you? They learn from the operatives we pit against them. It makes them very hard to beat, but if you do, it's a much greater achievement."

Xenthi switched the jets off and stood squeezing water from her hair which fell down to her shoulders. In the Matrix she had adapted her RSI with short hair; one less thing to get in the way and act as a weakness.

"I'll have to think of some new tricks then, and make sure I kill him before he gets a chance to use them against me."

She padded past Ducis, taking the proffered towel to wipe her face with and went to stand in a drying booth.

"I'll see you later." her guide called out as the blasts of warm air hit her lean, toned body and drowned out any sound. As she turned in the booth, letting the air evaporate every water droplet, Xenthi reflected on her past few weeks. Zero One itself was forty clicks or so South of the compound that she now inhabited, and Zion and the Matrix itself even further in that direction. Some humans freed by (or that defected to) the machines preferred to return to pods, living the rest of their lives either in the Matrix or in constructs. But the efficiency and understanding of the machine civilisation had created a near-perfect replica of humanity's living conditions in this outpost, for those who wished to retain some sense of where they came from.

As the dryers shut down and she stepped naked from the booth, Xenthi sighed to herself. If only the rest of the Awakened could experience what she had seen, maybe they wouldn't be so quick with their hatred.