

The Main Attraction

An Oathbound short story

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Bob had been announcing Rugrat's titles for twelve seconds when the portcullis hit the floor.

“Scourge of kingdoms! Breaker of armies! Defiler of—”

Rugrat turned his character towards the gate.

The iron bars were as thick as his wrists.

bob

The imp stood on a broken statue at the edge of the arena, one claw raised towards the empty seats.

“Occasional victim of stairs.”

why did the door shut

Bob looked over his shoulder.

Somewhere beneath the sand, machinery began to turn.

“They're committing to the atmosphere.”

At his desk, Rugrat took his hand off his drink.

Across the arena, two stone doors slid apart. A bronze figure stepped out carrying a hooked blade in each hand. Then a second appeared behind it.

Both were level twenty-five.

Both were elite.

Bob climbed down from the statue.

“Before you become emotional, the directions did say treasure.”

* * *

Ten minutes earlier, they had been looking for a ring.

Not a magic ring. An actual ring on a map, drawn around a patch of hillside south of Crownreach by somebody who claimed to have found an unopened arena vault.

Rugrat had bought the map for ten copper. He was a level-twenty-five warlock, four thousand experience short of his next level, wearing a shoulder piece he was sick of looking at. The seller had mentioned rare caster equipment.

That had been enough to get him off the road.

Behind a tumble of white stone, he'd found steps leading underground. At the bottom was a narrow entrance hall with a bronze plaque. His cursor wouldn't translate it.

Bob could read it.

This had seemed useful at the time.

what does it say

The imp traced a line with one claw.

"One challenger. One attendant. Rich rewards for the victorious."

Rugrat waited.

Bob moved to the next line.

"Weapons permitted. Cowardice discouraged. No feeding the spectators."

There were several more lines.

and the rest

"Seating arrangements."

Now, in the arena, pale figures were appearing in those seats. Hundreds of them, fading into view through the dust. Some had no heads. Others had too many arms. One enormous spectator occupied four benches and seemed to have brought its own bucket of something alive.

A gong sounded above the central balcony.

The bronze fighters crossed their blades.

BRASS REAVER — LEVEL 25 — ELITE

Rugrat pressed the retreat key.

The first Reaver charged.

* * *

Its blades hit the statue where Bob had been standing.

The upper half came off.

Bob landed in the sand with both hands over his head.

"There's no need to take the introduction personally!"

Rugrat was already casting at the second Reaver. Dark bands closed around its body, holding it inside a smoky sphere. Bound construct. The control worked.

One problem postponed.

He put a curse on the first and sent Bob to attack from the side, away from the trapped enemy. Fire struck bronze. Rugrat's next bolt blackened the joint beneath the Reaver's shoulder.

It came straight at him.

He ran around the broken statue.

The Reaver went through it.

Stone exploded across the sand. Rugrat's health dropped as a hooked blade caught his character's back. At the computer, he stopped leaning casually in his chair.

The creature planted one foot.

Both blades lifted.

A narrow red strip appeared across the ground.

Rugrat moved sideways before the Reaver shot along it. The hooks carved a deep furrow through the place he'd just occupied.

It stopped at the far wall, blades buried in the stone.

For two seconds, it couldn't pull them free.

Rugrat hit it with everything he could finish casting in that time.

Bob hurled another firebolt.

"Lovely entrance. Now do it facing a wall, you overdecorated cutlery drawer."

The second Reaver's binding began to thin.

Rugrat broke off his attack and renewed it before it could move. The first pulled its blades free and spun towards Bob, who had continued throwing fire while Rugrat was busy.

A red strip cut across the sand beneath the imp.

Bob looked down.

"I have attracted professional interest."

Rugrat pointed his character towards the bound Reaver, then issued the move command just beside it.

Bob ran to the marker.

The red strip turned with him.

wait

The charging Reaver lowered its head. The strip stopped moving.

NOW

Bob jumped sideways.

The Reaver hit its companion hard enough to ring both bodies like bells. The binding shattered. One bronze fighter went down; the other stumbled over it.

For a moment, their hooks were tangled together.

Rugrat planted his feet and cast.

The damaged one broke first. Its shoulder joint burst, one blade dropped, and the body folded onto the sand.

EXPERIENCE GAINED: 550

The second kicked free of the wreckage.

Bob examined the fallen construct.

"Your friend was better."

The survivor turned towards him.

"Not by much."

Rugrat pulled its attention back with a bolt and kept circling. He made it commit to the red strip before moving, then punished the recovery. Bob stayed wide this time. When the Reaver finally fell, Rugrat had barely a third of his health left and far less mana than he'd wanted to spend in an entrance hall with ambitions.

EXPERIENCE GAINED: 550

The dead audience applauded.

A figure rose from the balcony above them, tall and thin in a coat of tarnished gold. Its porcelain face had a painted smile. Behind it hung the gong, suspended between two iron posts.

“A spirited beginning!”

Bob brushed sand from his knees.

“Thank you. He requires supervision.”

Rugrat typed without looking away from the balcony.

you said seating arrangements

“And now we’re all seated.”

The imp glanced at the two broken Reavers.

“Some more permanently than others.”

* * *

A side door opened beneath the balcony.

The announcer spread its hands.

“Refresh yourselves, challengers. The final contest awaits.”

Rugrat checked the entrance gate. Still shut. He had the option to abandon the challenge, but a warning said he would forfeit its rewards. There was no explanation of where it would put him.

He looked at the balcony.

Behind the golden figure, a chest sat on a stone plinth. Violet light glimmered through its seams.

He did not abandon the challenge.

Bob noticed.

“Ah. The moral centre of our expedition.”

you better hope theres something good in it

“Perhaps a second map. We could make a day of it.”

The side passage led to a small chamber with benches, a water trough and a man sharpening a sword.

He looked up when they entered.

His armour had once been red. Most of the colour had worn away at the elbows and knees. A silver band circled his throat. Its chain ran through the wall behind him.

HADRIK — ARENA CHAMPION

There was no player guild beneath his name. No trade option. He was one of the world's inhabitants, placed here with a sword and a remarkably tired face.

“Warlock,” he said.

Rugrat sat his character on the bench and used a meal. Eating restored health slowly outside combat; it did nothing for the amount of trouble he'd purchased for ten copper.

Bob inspected Hadrik's sword.

“Good edge. Shame about the rest of the arrangement.”

Hadrik set the blade across his knees.

“How much of the entrance plaque did you read?”

Rugrat looked at Bob.

Bob examined the ceiling.

apparently the seating arrangements

The champion closed his eyes.

“Right.”

He had come looking for the same vault. He'd beaten the previous champion. The silver band had fastened around his throat before he could collect the prize.

There was always a champion.

A victorious challenger inherited the title, the duty and the chain.

Rugrat stopped his hand above the keyboard.

Bob took a cautious step out of easy kicking distance.

you knew that bit

"I knew there was a vacancy."

bob

"I thought we'd decline it."

Hadrik lifted the chain. It vanished into a narrow slot lined with fresh scrape marks.

"I declined it for the first three days."

The imp's ears flattened a little.

For several seconds, he had nothing to contribute.

Rugrat finished eating and used one of his mana tonics. The recovery took half a minute. He spent it turning the camera slowly around the chamber.

A framed illustration hung beside the door: a champion raising a sword, a challenger kneeling, the golden announcer watching from above. Beneath it was a smaller panel showing two fighters turning their blades towards the balcony. The announcer stood among them in the sand.

Rugrat moved closer.

whats this one

Hadrik followed his gaze.

“An appeal against the master of the games. Both finalists must refuse the title before the finishing blow. Then he has to face them.”

Bob brightened.

“There. Customer service.”

“I tried,” Hadrik said. “The last challenger thought I was bluffing. The one before that attacked while I was explaining.”

Rugrat understood the difficulty. Put a glowing chest behind a man with a boss-shaped health bar and a surprising number of people stopped reading.

how do we beat the master

Hadrik pointed to his collar.

“The gong. He rings it when he changes the bout. Every time, this pulls tight.”

He showed them a crack along one link, where years of tugging had weakened it.

“I’ve reached the balcony once. Struck him through the chest. Nothing there. His body was a projection. The gong had a shadow. He didn’t.”

Above them, metal sounded.

Hadrik's chain snapped taut.

He caught the edge of the bench before it dragged him off.

Bob's smile disappeared.

Rugrat clicked the smaller illustration.

APPEAL OF THE FINALISTS

DEFEAT THE MASTER OF THE GAMES.

REWARD: 2,000 XP · RELEASE OF THE CHAMPION

He accepted.

Then he opened chat.

we do it your way

Hadrik looked from the message to the warlock.

“Don't change your mind when the chest opens.”

Rugrat glanced at Bob.

hes staying on my side

The imp folded his arms.

“Fine. But if the corpse audience starts throwing things, I am returning them.”

* * *

Hadrik was faster than either Reaver.

The announcer hadn't given them time to position. The moment they stepped onto opposite sides of the arena, the gong sounded and the chain pulled the champion's arm into a killing swing.

Rugrat dodged backwards. The sword cut through the front of his robe.

“I have to fight until you force the first yield!” Hadrik shouted.

Rugrat put his curse on him and ran.

A silver tether stretched from the champion's collar to the balcony. It was long enough to let him cross the arena, but every time he tried to turn away from Rugrat, it jerked him back towards the warlock.

Bob threw a bolt at Hadrik's boot.

“Nothing personal.”

The champion kicked sand at him.

“That was,” Bob said.

Rugrat moved towards one of the tall stone pillars supporting the balcony. There were three, with narrow gaps between them. Hadrik came after him, sword low.

At the last moment, Rugrat sent his character around the nearest pillar.

Hadrik's forced swing hit stone.

The tether wound halfway around it.

He stopped with his shoulder pressed to the pillar, jaw clenched, fighting against the pull.

Rugrat cast twice.

Then he moved before Hadrik could wrench himself clear.

Bob stood beyond the next gap.

“Come on, then. I've seen faster charges from a landlord.”

stop winding him up

“You're literally winding him round a column.”

The next swing came overhand. Rugrat avoided the blade but caught the edge of the shockwave that burst from the sand. His health dropped.

He could have kept running. He could also see Hadrik's hand trembling around the sword.

The champion was trying to turn each forced attack just far enough to leave him a gap.

Rugrat stayed close enough to use it.

Bolt. Move. Curse. Move again.

Bob attacked when Hadrik was recovering, then retreated behind the pillars. Between them they wore the champion down, one difficult opening at a time.

At a quarter health, Hadrik planted his sword and dropped to one knee.

The tether slackened.

“Now,” he gasped.

Rugrat pulled Bob to passive before another firebolt could leave his hands.

The imp swallowed whatever comment he'd been preparing.

On the balcony, the chest opened.

Purple light spilled over the rail.

PITGLASS FOCUS — RARE — REQUIRES LEVEL 25

Rugrat's cursor drifted towards it.

Bob turned to look at him.

“*Don't you fucking dare.*”

Rugrat selected the appeal.

His character lowered his staff.

“*I refuse the title,*” Hadrik said.

The painted smile above them did not move.

The audience stopped clapping.

A line of fire ran around the arena wall, sealing every doorway.

“*Then let us dispense with the preliminary entertainment.*”

The golden figure stepped off the balcony.

It hit the sand without bending its knees.

MASTER OF THE GAMES — LEVEL 26 — BOSS

Bob looked up at its porcelain face.

“There he is. All this fuss and you’re a fucking ornament.”

The master struck him across the arena.

* * *

Bob hit the sand, rolled twice and came to rest beside a broken spear rack.

His health bar collapsed to a thin red line.

Rugrat's hand tightened on the mouse.

The master raised a golden baton. A bright circle appeared under the imp.

Rugrat used the pet movement command.

Bob crawled out of it.

A spear punched up from beneath the sand, exactly where his chest had been.

The imp stared at it.

“I have identified a sensitivity.”

Hadrik charged the master from the side. His sword passed through the golden coat without slowing.

The boss's health didn't move.

Rugrat tried one bolt.

IMMUNE

Above them, the gong shimmered with the same gold as the figure's coat.

Hadrik had been right.

Rugrat put his next curse on the gong.

A dark stain spread across its face.

The boss's health ticked down.

The master turned towards the balcony.

Then back towards Rugrat.

“Interference with arena property is forbidden.”

Bob hauled himself upright against the spear rack.

“So is hitting staff, you long streak of piss.”

The baton pointed at Rugrat.

Three bright circles appeared beneath his feet, one after another.

He ran diagonally between the pillars. Spears erupted behind him. The third caught his robe, and his health fell far enough that he used his healing draught without waiting.

Hadrik stepped into the master's next strike. This time his sword met the baton with a crack that carried around the arena. The champion could block the weapon even if he couldn't wound the body.

“Get to the gong!”

There were stairs inside the left-hand pillar. Rugrat had seen the narrow doorway while circling it during their duel.

He sent Bob towards the broken spear rack to keep him out of the fight, then ran for the stairs.

The master drove Hadrik back.

Rugrat reached the first step.

The gong sounded by itself.

Iron shutters dropped across the balcony openings.

The curse stopped ticking.

LINE OF SIGHT BLOCKED

Rugrat kept running up the stairs. Perhaps he could reach the gong from behind.

A locked grille waited at the top.

Through it, he could see the shutter mechanism: a heavy crossbar on two brackets, with a catch at one end. A narrow gap remained above it, between the shutters and the ceiling.

Far too small for his character.

Below, Hadrik shouted.

Rugrat turned his camera.

The master had caught the champion's chain in one hand. It pulled him off his feet and swung him into a pillar.

The audience cheered.

Bob stood alone beside the spear rack.

The imp looked from Hadrik to the stairs.

Then at the master.

"That's your big finale?"

The porcelain face turned.

"An armoured man on a string? I've seen children do better with a dead rat."

Rugrat swore and clicked the pet retreat command.

Bob was already moving.

Three circles flashed across the sand behind his heels.

He reached the foot of the stairs with a spear close enough to lift the end of his tail.

Rugrat met him halfway down.

you have about one hit left

Bob clung to the stair rail, breathing through his teeth.

“Then stop making such poor use of me.”

Rugrat brought the camera up towards the gap above the shutters.

He marked it.

The imp followed his gaze.

“No.”

you fit

“I fit in a boot. That doesn't make it a travel recommendation.”

A crash came from below.

Hadrik was back on his feet, fighting to keep the baton away from his head.

Rugrat typed quickly.

i cover you. lift the catch. open the shutters

Bob looked through the grille at the mechanism.

The bright gold around its edges pulsed in time with the gong.

“And when you hit it?”

get behind stone

The imp studied him for one more second.

Then he climbed onto the rail.

“If this works, I am telling everybody.”

if it works ill help

* * *

Bob climbed the stonework above the grille while Rugrat returned to the arena.

His mana bar was nearly empty.

He couldn't drink the slow restorative tonic while the fight was active. His healing draught was still unavailable. He could exchange health for mana, but doing it before a spear hit would be a short lesson in arithmetic.

He waited for the circles.

One beneath him. One ahead. One to the right.

He cut left, stopped behind the centre pillar, and used his own health to fuel another spell.

His character bent at the waist.

Fresh mana filled part of the bar. Health drained away.

Up on the balcony, Bob's small shape disappeared into the gap.

The master looked upwards.

Rugrat cast at its face.

IMMUNE

The bolt accomplished no damage.

It did get his attention.

"Your incompetence diminishes the spectacle."

Rugrat opened chat.

your spectators have been dead for a century and theyre still trying to leave

He sent it just as the next circle appeared.

The master's baton struck the pillar behind his head.

Stone showered across his character's shoulders.

Rugrat ran.

Overhead, metal scraped.

One shutter lifted a hand's breadth.

Bob's voice came through the gap.

"Who builds a lever you have to pull towards the spikes?"

There were spikes inside the balcony. Of course there were.

Rugrat could see their tips through the opening, pressing down as Bob hauled at the catch.

The master raised its baton towards the gong.

Hadrik caught the golden wrist with both hands.

The tether at his throat tightened. He staggered, feet dragging through the sand, but held on.

Rugrat had enough mana for a curse and two bolts. Maybe three if he risked another health exchange.

Not enough time for all of it.

He moved until he could see the exposed strip of bronze.

Cast.

The curse caught.

The master shuddered.

The shutters rose another foot.

"Bob!" Hadrik shouted.

"I'm fucking doing it!"

The crossbar came free.

Both shutters slammed upwards.

The spikes descended.

Bob vanished sideways behind a stone pier.

Rugrat's first bolt struck the centre of the gong.

A crack ran from the rim to the dark stain left by his curse.

The master's coat split in exactly the same place.

Hadrik released its wrist and stumbled backwards.

Rugrat switched Bob back to attack, marked the cracked gong as his target, and began the second cast.

The golden baton swept towards him.

Hadrik threw his sword.

It struck the baton and knocked it sideways. The weapon hit the sand beside Rugrat's character, close enough to fill his monitor with dust.

His cast completed.

The gong cracked from edge to edge.

It did not break.

A thin section still held beneath the suspension ring.

The boss had a sliver of health left.

Rugrat pressed his attack key.

NOT ENOUGH MANA

He pressed the health exchange.

The master lifted its baton.

On the balcony, a little red hand appeared around the stone pier.

A firebolt hit the crack.

The gong burst.

The sound cut off halfway through the note.

Gold peeled away from the master's body in strips, exposing empty air. The baton fell through its hand. Its porcelain face turned up towards the balcony as the rest of it came apart.

Bob leaned out just far enough to look down.

"That's for the stairs."

The mask hit the sand and shattered.

EXPERIENCE GAINED: 1,140

For a moment, the audience remained.

Then the enormous spectator in the upper row stood, tipped its bucket over a neighbour and vanished.

The rest followed, fading out amid a final, ragged burst of applause.

Bob surveyed the empty seats.

"Tough room."

* * *

The fire around the exits went out.

Hadrik's collar opened and fell onto the sand.

He stood over it, touching his throat.

Rugrat kept his character beside him while Bob found his way down from the balcony. The imp took the stairs slowly, one claw trailing along the wall. By the last few steps, he was making a considerable effort to look as though nothing hurt.

Hadrik bent to pick up the broken band.

Then he left it where it lay.

“Thank you.”

Bob opened his mouth.

Rugrat turned towards him.

The imp looked at Hadrik, then shut it again.

A notification appeared.

APPEAL OF THE FINALISTS — COMPLETE

EXPERIENCE GAINED: 2,000

LEVEL 26

Rugrat's health maximum increased. The health he actually had stayed painfully low.

He sat down on the first intact bench he could find and started eating. Hadrik fetched water from the rest chamber. Bob sat beside the warlock's boots, rubbing one shoulder.

For almost half a minute, he was quiet.

Then the chest on the balcony clicked open.

Bob raised his head.

“Well?”

giving you a minute

“I've had it. Get the fucking loot.”

The grille at the top of the stairs had opened with the rest of the arena. Rugrat walked up and collected the Pitglass Focus: a black crystal held inside a bronze claw, with a rare-quality border and a spell-power bonus worth the trip.

He turned it in the inspection window.

Beautiful.

Bob peered around his leg.

“Very nice. What did I get?”

Rugrat checked the rest of the chest.

Coins. A worn belt. A gold-trimmed sash.

The sash was marked ceremonial. No combat benefit.

It was also long enough to wrap around Bob several times.

Rugrat dropped it beside him.

The imp lifted one end.

“What is this?”

your cut

Bob held it against his chest, considering.

“It says champion.”

Hadrik, coming up the stairs behind them, stopped.

“Take that off.”

Bob let go so quickly that the cloth landed in a heap.

Hadrik looked at it.

Then at the imp.

For the first time since they'd met him, the former champion smiled.

“Only joking.”

Bob stared.

Rugrat laughed hard enough to miss his first attempt at typing.

your friend was better

The imp slowly gathered the sash again.

“I saved you both. This is a very disappointing response.”

* * *

They walked out together through the entrance hall.

Hadrik paused at the plaque. With the tip of his recovered sword, he scratched a deep line through the promise of rewards.

Underneath, he carved a short warning.

Bob watched him work.

“Concise. Lacks elegance.”

“People read short words.”

Outside, evening light lay across the hillside. Hadrik stood in it for a while before taking the road towards Crownreach. He had a friend there, he said, if the friend still kept the same shop.

Rugrat watched until he reached the bend.

Then he checked his friends list.

Azmongold was online. Still grinding towards his name duel with the paladin. Rugrat considered telling him about the arena. Bob would certainly tell him about the arena, probably with a much smaller role for Rugrat and several additional enemies. zacks going to hear about this isnt he

Bob adjusted the sash over one shoulder. He'd shortened it with a knot, leaving enough trailing behind him to catch on every bush they passed.

“He deserves an accurate account.”

which bit are you going to lie about first

“I'm deciding how many of them there were.”

Rugrat turned his character towards the main road.

A message appeared in local chat.

anyone know if the arena has good loot

Another player stood at the top of the steps, holding a familiar map.

Rugrat stopped.

Bob smiled up at the newcomer.

“Oh, excellent loot.”

bob

“Read the entire plaque.”

The imp took another step, then turned back.

“Especially the seating arrangements.”