“This one? Are you sure?”

“Yes, *I’m sure*.”  
Two voices faintly converse in the blinding light around him.

“Fine. But you *owe* me for this one.”  
“Yes, of course.”  
He can listen but not understand as the darkness claws towards him once again.  
“And I mean it, Fate. This isn’t a light favor. My rep is at stake here, too, you know.”

“I know, Death. And I appreciate your sacrifice. It’ll pay off. *Trust me*.” She assured him.  
The voices start fading, but he wants to listen more. He wants to understand. He wants to, before he’s taken again.

“Yeah, yeah, I get it. But this is your last one, alright. Takes more out of me than you know.” Death complained.  
“I’ve pulled many strings for this one. He can do it.” Fate said, fixated on a small bright orb.

The light is gone; the darkness grows to a suffocation. It’s over.  
“If you say so.” Death agreed.

---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------“GAAAAASSP!” the boy coughed out. Spewing water over the sand.   
“*What is going on*?” he thought to himself, as a million other questions poured into him.  
“Where am I? Who were they? *Who am I*?” he asks himself as panic starts to ensue.   
Hurling and coughing the rest of the water and sand out of him, he takes a deep breath.  
“Ok, we’re ok. Let’s start with *where* are we.” he took a long look around, cupping his hand over his head to block the harsh light.

He appeared to be washed up on a white sandy beach. In front and to the left of him stretched white sand, a cliffside, and vibrant green forests for miles. To the right, green plains leading to an unfriendly looking red canyon. Behind him, crystal blue water with a mysterious gold fog in the far distance.

“I’ll take my chances with the forest.” he settled on, rising out of the sand, hopelessly brushing the specks off his bare chest and tattered pants.

Marching through the ominous green forest, listening to unfamiliar sounds, sweeping the bushes aside, hopelessly looking for a friendly soul to set him straight.  
As he stumbled through the subtle forest, colors of teal and blue crept. Trees grew longer, bushes became bubblier, creatures stranger, and the grass softer.   
“Skitz, no. A Huggle? Meh. Oh, a Toogit…” A deep voice debated in the distance.  
“Oh, uh, HEY! HEL-” he shouted out as his excitement got the best of him, tripping on a tangled glowing root in the ground.

“-loooo…” he squeaked out, face planted into the clay dirt.  
Poking at his entangled foot, he looked up to find a mysterious, tall blue-robed dinosaur-like creature with round features looking down upon him with annoyance.   
“Keep it down, will you, before you disturb something that’s gonna tear both our limbs off.” the blue stranger scowled as he stepped over him, book and orange berry in hand.   
“Agh, he-hey!” shaking the root off and freeing himself from the cursed vine.  
“Wait up for me!”  
Yet the blue fellow kept on, too busy with his reading and berry.   
“And why should I do that?” he sighed.

“Because I need your help?”

“You and everybody else on this continent, kid.” he munched on his berry, face buried deep in text.

“Please, I-I guess I’m new around here.” he shrugged, looking up at the blue trees. Wondering.

“The thing is, I don’t kno-”  
“On your right.” the blue fellow cut him off.  
“Wha-” he gasped out as yet another blue shining root took a liking to his ankle, bringing him to his knees.

“Look.” the blue stranger paused, shutting his book and finishing his berry.

“I’m a busy guy. Nearest village is North-East, that-a-way.” he pointed.

“Its name is Teal. Someone can help you there with whatever problem you have. Now please, leave me alone.” he asked, continuing down the path.

Brushing off his scraped knees, he watched the mystery figure go on about his day as if it was any other.   
“Well, thanks for that much at least.” the boy muttered as he set out for the village.   
Lost in thought about the recent events, a terrifying scream brought him back to reality. Frozen in place at the sound, his mind raced.

“What was that? Should he run? What if someone needs help? What if the blue stanger is in danger?” all these questions tormented him.

He didn’t know who he was, where he came from, even where he was...

He did now one thing, how he felt. And right now, he felt the fire; he felt the butterflies; he felt the blood; he felt the courage.   
Before he knew it, he was sprinting towards the unknown scream, through the mysterious forest, ripping through the obsessed roots, catching his falls, until he arrived at an open blue hill.   
“What th- get outta here, kid!” the familiar blue creature warned.   
“I-I heard the scream, s-so I came as fast, as fast as I could.” he panted, resting his body over the side of a nearby stump.  
“Hey, get away from that, it-”

Suddenly, a giant of a monstrosity leaped between them. A three-horned hunched orange animal, twice the size of either of them, charged the resting boy.

He closed his eyes and braced. Waiting for the end.  
He waited, but it didn't come.  
“WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!” the blue creature yelled.  
Slowly opening his eyes, he saw the familiar blue fellow rather than his quick and brutal death approaching him.

“U-uhh” he stammered out.

“GET OFF OF THAT!” he screamed at him, as the blue stranger brushed him aside, inspecting the stump.  
“What’s your problem?” the boy thought he’d be happy to see him come help. Yet his rude response left him astonished.

“My problem is YOU.” he glared coldly over.  
“Me?! I came back to save YOU.” he screamed back.  
“Oh yeah, it looked like I was the one needing saving!” the blue creature scoffed.

“Well, I, ugh.”

Cutting him off as the monster rained down on them again.  
“MOVE!” the blue fellow commanded as he shoved him aside.

With a moment of silence, a void of swirling blue and black appeared out of thin air above them, consuming the aerial beast and disappearing just as quickly as it appeared.   
“Woah.” the boy let out in amazement as the mysterious blue fellow turned back to him.

“It’s time for you to leave. Now.” he commanded, shoving the boy away from the stump.  
“B-but I have so many questions!” he protested, putting on the brakes with his heels.

“Ugh, you really are new around here.” he panted, shoving him away.  
Suddenly, the blue fellow was tackled from the side by an orange blur, knocking them in opposite directions.

Rising from his knees, the boy realized it was yet again the orange beast as he watched it tower over the fallen blue fellow. The fire, butterflies, and blood all rushed him at once again.

Searching frantically for a way to save his new friend, his eyes met a green, gleaming, overgrown sword stuck in the stump of the tree he rested aside. He quickly sprinted to the stump, catching the handle and yanking it from its roots with one swift pull.

Wasting no time, he sprinted behind the beast and jumped on it’s back, sinking the edge into the monster's back. The orange creature let out another terrible scream, thrashing around and knocking out the cool trees. But he did not falter as he scaled the beast’s back, grasping its horns and slicing the front off clean before finally being flung off.

With its injuries known, the beast retreated into the forest in a fit of rage.

“Ughhhhhh.” the boy let out a long groan.

Split between relief and pain as his eyes flickered and ears rang.

A familiar shape came before him, hand out.  
“My name’s Milo.”  
---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------  
His mind swirled with dark and blue, images he can’t make sense of appearing and disappearing before him. People he didn't know. Sights he never saw. Sounds he never heard. Feelings he never felt. It was all too hazy. All these pictures. Flying by him. He wanted to stay again. Find those voices. Though the darkness was creeping in again. Devouring the images, deafening the voices, clouding his feelings. Until there was only black, a voice spoke out.

“Bo.”

---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------  
“MILO!” he snapped up in an instant of cold sweat.

“Woah, take it easy there, bud.” Milo said, calming him down.

“It was bright! But then it was dark. The images and the feelings and the voices and-and… what happened?” he screeched.

“You hit your head. Got knocked out real quick. So I took you back to my place.” He gestured.

It was a vertical heavy house, with many small rooms stretching up. The boy looked out the window and saw the familiar blue sea and gold fog. It must’ve been cliffside, only way to explain the layout of this place.

“After saving me from the Boolwalker, of course. Quite impressive for being human.” Milo winked at him.

“No, not that. I don’t know where I am or who I am. I don’t know anything.” the boy slumped down in his rather comfy chair, looking down at his hands.

“I see. I’m guessing this is the problem you tried to tell me.” Milo said, tapping his fingers together nervously.

“Yeah!”

“Well, lucky for you, I know where to find some answers.” Milo sat up.

“Really?!” the boy gasped.

“Possibly.” Milo pondered hesitantly.

“It could take a while, though. So we’ll figure something out eventually.”

“We?” the boy asked, eyebrows raised.

“Yeah, you saved my life. Least I could do is help you get back on your feet.” Milo shrugged.

“That’s amazing!” he shouted, standing up from his covers and hugging Milo.

“Uh, y-yeah. You’re welcome, kid.” Milo piped out uncomfortably.

“When do we start?” he said into Milo through a tight gripped hug.

“How about we get some clothes other than boxers on you first.” he suggested.

“Oh.” the boy realized.

“Right.” he blushed.

Milo threw piles and piles of garb and accessories he’s gathered over his time around here together for him.

“Have at it.” Milo said lazily as he flopped in a nearby comfy blue chair.

Bo disappeared into the pile, only to emerge with a vibrant shirt, studded coat, and styled tight pants.

“Too… flashy.” Milo wavered.

He thrashed around some more, emerging with a plain red shirt, shorts, bag, and helmet.

“Too… eh.. Plain.” Milo judged.

After further digging, Bo pulled out a light blue plush in the shape of a long dinosaur with a cup attached to it.  
“No.” Milo said softly.

“Mr. Cups?” he read the tag, puzzled.  
“Hey! Leave Mr. Cu- uh, leave that alone. I have everything the way I want it!” he demanded as he snagged Mr. Cups back and stashed him behind the chair for later.

The boy shrugged it off and kept digging for a while, losing the interest of a napping Milo.

He couldn’t find anything. Nothing stood out. Nothing spoke to him. Nothing in the pile, at least. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see a far bigger wardrobe across the room, slightly opened.

He checked on the knocked out Milo and slinked around the floor to the wardrobe, creaking it open to an assortment of what could only be explained as fashion sense. All freshly ironed.

Out of the bunch, the orange stood out to him, so he started with that. He grabbed a plain orange shirt, some grey shorts, and brown strapped boots. He felt almost at home, but there was one more missing piece. So, he kept digging until he came across a familiar-looking hat. An orange fitted hat, resembling the three points of the BoolWalker he and Milo fought. Curious, he tried it on.

“Hmmphf…” Milo drooled, eyes blurry and crusty.

“Wait no, those are speci-“ He cut himself off as his vision came into focus, and saw Bo in the full outfit. Reminding him of simpler times.

“Hmm?” The boy showed off.

“Spectacular. Orange is definitely your color.” He concluded.

“You think so? It just sorta, spoke to me, ya know?” As he fiddled with the hat.

“Yeah, I think I do.” Milo remanence in nostalgia.

“Anyway, we better get a move on. Here, you’ll be needing this.” Milo offered him the sword he pulled from the stump in the woods. It was wrapped in a blue pack.

“You kept it?” he stared in awe at the beauty.

“Yeah… it suits you.”

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“So what’s the deal?” the boy asked, studying his colorful surroundings and magical life.

“Deal with what?” Milo raised an eyebrow.

“The deal with this place. I mean, I may not remember much about anything, but I still got my feels. And this place feels… different.” reaching his finger out to a nearby glowing particle flowing in the wind.

“Aha, well, uhh..You see…” Milo squirmed nervously.  
“All you need to know right now is that this isn’t exactly a safe place. There’s a lot of mysterious stuff. But we just live with it. Literally.” he recovered.

“I noticed.”

“That and the place we’re going to is one of the only places you can trust, ok?” Milo said seriously.  
“Why’s that?”

“Because the people there are like you and me. They’re heroes.” Milo kept track on the path, clearing a fallen log by warping it a few feet out of the way.

“You’re a hero?” he said, admittedly surprised considering how they met.  
“A long time ago. I’m retired now, though. Have been for a while.” Milo shrugged off.

“Woah, you gotta tell me about that sometime.” he loved stories.  
“Maybe one day, but for now, let’s get you ready.”

“Ready for what?”  
“To be a hero.” Milo claimed as they exited the forest.

“Welcome to the House of Fortos, where heroes are made and sold.” Showing off the old three-story, red and white bricked structure, resting in an open field across intertwining rivers.  
“Sold?”

“Yeah, like odd jobs for the kingdoms.” Milo tried to explain.  
“Kingdoms?”  
“Uh, yeah. We’ll get to that later. First, I’m going to need you to sit out here for a minute while I talk to Kly.” Milo put his hand on his shoulder, looking him in the eye.  
“Kly?” The boy asked again, trying to pester Milo.

“Just. stay put.” Milo stared blankly before walking inside.

Upon entering the building, it’s seen better days. The ground level, the pub, was still rather dusty and old but built as tough as nails.

Milo scanned the room and found a single man having a drink at the bar. He was a rather tall, intimidating, darker, and grizzled man. He dressed in brown and black with a dark brown jacket, a cowboy hat, a prosthetic hand, and a single black eyepatch on his left eye.  
“Kly.” Milo called bluntly.

“Milo.” a strong voice replied.

“Here for another round, eh?” gesturing a drink.  
“I’m here on business, Kly.” approaching him.

“And I’m the King of Viridian.” Kly joked, knee-slapping.  
“You’re serious, aren’t you?” He realized, halting the hardy laugh.

“How could I not be.” Milo was not in the mood for Kly’s games.

“Oh, you never know. You’re a bit superstitious, Milo.” Kly called out, downing the rest of his drink.

“Only a bit, though.” he followed, slamming the empty glass onto the bar.  
“Can you blame me?” Milo gestured to his attire.  
“Heh, I suppose not.”  
“Well, listen. He has Alnum.”  
“Does he know?” Kly looked Milo in the eyes.  
“No, and I want to keep it that way. I have to be careful with this one. I don’t think we can afford another mistake.” Milo looked away.  
“What about the others?”   
“They’re all too young to remember. Should be fine.”  
“Hmph.” Kly turned his back again, filling his cup and downing another drink.  
“Well, we both got our jobs to do then.” he slammed his last glass down.

“I hope *everyone* makes the right decisions this time around.” Kly gestured coldly to Milo’s blue crystal necklace.

“Bring him in.” finally granting permission.

Milo nodded and walked out of the pub.

“Alright, you’re in.” He told the boy as he approached him.  
“IN IN?!” he shouted, excitedly.

“Uh-ha, *of course you’re in. I told you I’d get you in*.” Milo whispered to him, annoyed and looking around for others.

“Now a quick rundown before we enter the House.” Milo cleared his throat.  
“No running, no yelling, no hooky, no magic, no naps, no drinking, no animals, no…

He drifted in and out. Flashes of light and darkness as blue orbs floated around him.

“Bo…” a voice reached out.

“Huh…” he dazed in and out.  
“… hands are never to be raised, you cannot invite others in yourself, and what happens outside those doors stays outside those doors. Got it?” Milo snapped.

“Uh yeah, no naps, got it.” he rubbed the back of his neck.

“This is serious. First impressions matter around here and even more out there.” Milo explained, resting his hand on his shoulder.  
“Sorry, it’s all just a bit much, but I got it.” the boy confessed.

Milo studied him again and nodded, gesturing towards the doorway.

Upon entering, a single darker figure greeted him.  
“You must be Milo’s new apprentice.” he assumed.  
“*Apprentice*?!” he thought, eyes wide, giddy with thought.  
“I’m Kly, the Keeper of the House, and you are?” he gestured kindly out.

“Ughhhhh.” Milo panicked. He never even asked for the kid’s name. Let alone if he remembered to have one.

The boy stood there a moment, thinking. He didn't know what his name was or should be. He dug around, deeper and deeper, and it came to him. Whatever felt right.

“I’m Bo. Bo, the… human?” Bo slid awkwardly out.  
“A human, huh? Been a while since we had one of those.” Kly scratched as he thought of the last humans he met.  
“Wait, you’re not human?” Bo asked.  
“Aha, uh no, *Bo*. Kly is Idian.” Milo said behind a false grin and teeth.  
“Ex Idian.” Kly starred coldly off at Milo, correcting him.

“Right.” Milo sighed.  
“This way, young Bo.” Kly put his arm around the kid, directing him up the flight of stairs.  
“*I’m so sorry*.” Milo whispered to Kly, who just rolled his eyes at him.

Upon passing the sleeping quarters of the second floor, they pressed onto the third floor.

“This is the Hall of Hands. Where every hero is born and raised for their favor.” Kly gestured in grand, showing off millennials worth of history and power.  
“Woooaaah… what’s a hand?” Bo innocently asked.

“Did you even talk to this kid?” Kly snapped at Milo, who tugged at the neck of their robe, sweating and shrugging.

“A hand is the instrument of the chosen hero. Each favor has a hand specific to their powers. Some lay here dormant for years. Others are used and move on from hero to hero.” he explained to Bo while pointing him to the various displays of objects.

“A hand is an extension of yourself, like your sword, but spiritually as well. You are whole with each other, and without, you’re shattered.” he spoke dramatically, crunching a coin with his metal hand.

“How do I know which one will make me whole.“ Bo asked.  
“You’ll feel it.” Kly crouched down to Bo.

Bo nodded, seeming to understand that at least. He then walked around the hall, admiring the beautiful displays of power. A single arrow, with a purple fire engraved onto it, a reflecting sphere, changing shapes periodically, and an empty display.

“Hey, why’s this one empty?” Bo questioned.

Kly’s eyes widened, and ran over to the empty display.

“Oh, I get it. It’s invisible! Wow. I’m impressed.” Bo confessed.

Before Kly could blow his top and somehow blame Milo, a swift figure danced across the hall, entangling around Bo’s neck.

“Ha, this guy seems to like me.” poking at his new yellow friend.

“That’s Praisidio. The hand of Fate.” Kly let out a sigh of relief, solving the mystery.  
“Oh, I’m gonna call you Dio. Sup Dio.” he high fived the scarf.  
“Uh, yes. It seems that, *ahem*, *Dio*, has spoken then.” Milo smugged with himself.

“So now what.” Bo asked, tucking Dio around his neck.  
“I think that’s enough for one day, and I’m sure you, Dio, and Milo have *a lot* to catch up on.” Kly grinned, patting Milo a bit too hard on the back.  
“Uh, yes, of course.” Milo said nervously, rubbing his back.

“Oh, ok. It was nice to meet you, Kly.” Bo and Dio waved bye to Kly.  
“Likewise, and remember Bo, stay whole.” He waved back.

“Stay whole, huh.” Bo thought, eyeing his new friend.

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“I think that went pretty well.”

“Eh, I bet you do.” Milo rolled his eyes.

The two started their stroll home when a flyer blew into Bo’s face. He read “THE CONTEST OF HANDS!” in big, bold letters.

“What’s the Contest Of Hands?” Bo squinted at the paper.

“Ha, already another one.” Milo thought out loud.  
“What do you mean.” Bo tilted his head.

“Nothing, don’t worry about it.”  
“It says here win the tournament for an offer to be Kingdom Viridian’s Hand.” Bo grew excited.

“Like I said, don’t worry about it.” Milo said bluntly.

“But I need work, don’t I?” Bo pleaded.  
“Yes, and you’ll get work in time. Once people start to know your name.” he explained.

“Well, what better way than for competing in a tournament for a kingdom.” he had Milo there, and he knew it.  
“Nope. You’re not ready. End of discussion.” Milo concluded, pulling ahead of Bo.

Casually strolling ahead, a passing Driller, small flying dark blue bugs that are all eyes and drill, attacked him.

“What the.” he thought, swatting away the pest.

It must’ve been a coincidence. And when he thought that, two more stung him.

“Hmph.” he let out angrily, staring up at the sky as he was stung once more.

“You know what, Bo, you’re right.” Milo turned back, shouting.

“Really?!” Bo squeezed the flyer tight.  
“Yeah, I mean, what’s the worst that could happen!” he thought.

“Get your name tarnished, or break all your bones, or die, or… well.” Milo was sweating bullets.

“Milo?” Bo poked him.  
“EVERYTHING WILL BE FINE. I’M FINE. YOU’RE FINE. WE’RE GONNA BE FINE.” he freaked out, shaking Bo back.

“Maybe this isn’t such a good idea then…” Bo stood awkwardly.

“NO. I mean, ahem, no. You’ll do great.” he reassured Bo, patting him on the back with a pathetic smile.  
“You think so?”  
“I know so.” he struggled, keeping the grin together.

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“Milo? Wake up, Milo!” Bo lightly shook Milo.

“Hmmf…? No, no, Mr. Cups. It’s yours by right…” Milo drooled, turning over the couch.  
“Uh, Milo?” he flicked his head.

“Huh, what. I didn’t take nothin.” He defended, half asleep.  
“It’s almost time!” Bo shouted in his face.

“What are you talking about? We still have…” Milo slapped his wrist, causing a star consolation to appear.

“5 hours.” he slumped back to sleep.  
“Yeah, but… I… don’t really know what I’m doing.”  
“Fair enough.” Milo let out a sigh, eyes wide open now.

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“Alright, here’s the game plan.” Milo slapped a portal he conjured, drawing and writing in it.

“We're going to leave and head to Viridian Colosseum. We are going to register you for the contest through a guy named Custo.” Milo stopped writing and glanced at Bo.

“Let me handle him. You just stand there, and uh…” Milo watched Bo listen intensely.

“Be you. Once entered, you will be separated from me until the tournament is over. I will be in the stands, or more precisely two hundred and seventy degrees West, row one, seat one, right next to the main gate. You and Dio will then compete in a series of challenges that will test each other’s strengths and weaknesses. Try your best to impress the King, and more importantly, the crowd.” he outlined, slapping the crowd part, rippling the portal.  
“Now for the rules.” Milo cleared his throat and wrote in big letters.

“Mind your manners, do not speak unless spoken to, don’t stick your neck out, and most importantly, don’t make any friends.” Circling that last part.  
“Why that last part?”  
“I’ve been around these parts awhile. Nobody in that kingdom is worth your time if it isn’t for some coin. Understood?”  
“Understood.”

“Great. Let’s get going then.” He said, clapping his hands of blue dust.

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So the two set out on the green path to Viridian. Following the sound of distant cheering and excitement. Running a bit behind thanks to Milo’s over-preparedness, they finally arrived at the coliseum gates only to be greeted by a dense crowd.

“Hurry up, hurry up! Hands must be punctual!” a rather tall and slim olived colored man, flashing the fanciest drab of green and yellow, shoving the crowd of Hands into an organized line.

“That’s Custo, the King’s left-hand man.” Milo iced out.  
“Then who’s the right?” Bo asked curiously.  
“His good Hand.” Milo elbowed Bo.

“Oh.” Bo let out a grin, catching on.

“Looks like they’re assigning groups. Better run up there and get a spot in line. I’ll catch up.”

So Bo took haste, leaping in line, catching the careful eye of Custo.  
“And you are..?” Custo questioned as he studied the mysterious boy.  
“Bo, sir.”

“Bo, what?” Custo probed.  
“Uh, just Bo, sir.” Bo sweated off.

“Bo hmm.... Bo… Bo.. Bo. Not on the list.” Custo confirmed, tapping his fancy clipboard with his fancy pen.

“But..”  
“*But*, Bo, you’re late. The King’s Hand can’t be late now, can he?” Custo snapped.

Bo gazed down, his confidence fading.  
“No, sir.”

“Ah, there he is!” Custo clapped in joy, shoving Bo aside.  
“Well, if it isn’t the Hand of the hour!” he giddied as a golden boy in full green and gold armor swept past the line accompanied by a similar but much older figure. The two looked identical to Bo, wondering if he’d finally find other humans.

“Make yourself at home, General and sir Leo!” Custo gestured the two towards the colosseum as they brushed past him. Not offering as much as an eye for anyone.

“Hey, what gives? He was later than me?!” Bo protested.

“When you’re the prodigy of the father of the royal fist, then you’ll know what *gives*.” Custo spat out to Bo, shoving him out of line again.

The crowded line was growing more and more restless with shouts of annoyance.

“Now, now, everyone! This will be your first test of four!” he announced, pacing back and forth, organizing a line together.

“The judgment test! It's quite simple. I will work my way down the line, and you will present yourself and your Hand to me. Impress me, and you may enter. Failure to do so, and you will be sent home.” Custo announced with a wicked smile.

“Let’s get started, shall we!”

Without hesitance, Custo started outing the contestants, quickly moving his way up the line. Bo looked around hopelessly for Milo. He would have to take matters into his own hands and snuck back into line in hopes of getting one more shot with Custo, as much as it pained him.

“And you are?” Custo questioned Bo.

“Uhh, I’m Bo? We just went over this.” his eye twitched.

“Ah yes, the show up.” Custo judged.

“And where might your hand be?”

“Oh, he’s right here. This is Dio.” Bo presented as Dio waved, nested around his neck.

“It’s… a scarf. A magical scarf.” Custo snorted.

“Well… yeah?”

Custo giggled in both of their faces, spraying them with his saliva.

“Oh… oh my… isn’t that something.” he teared up.

“What are you talking about.” Bo was getting red.  
“What kind of Hand is a scarf good for? It's… A SCARF.” he laughed off.

“I’ll show you what he’s goo-”  
“Pass.” Custo shoved his hand in Bo’s face.  
“Go home, little boy. You’ve entertained me for far too long now.” he clicked his fancy pen, turning his back to them.

“But, but this isn't fair! This whole challenge isn’t fair!” Bo stomped.  
“Life isn't fair, kid.” Custo snapped back.  
“This is a judging contest. I’m the judge. I judged you. Now ta ta.” Custo explained harshly as he flicked at Bo.

“He gets a pass, Custo.” Milo wavered as he flipped a coin to him.

Custo studied the coin, shocked at the engravings.

“You and I both know this hasn’t held any merit in a long time, Milo.”

“You can’t change history, Custo. Or shall I ask your King what is and isn’t worth around here?”

“Tsch, whatever. Group 2 and get out of my sight.” he snarled.

“Pleasure as always, Custo.” Milo sarcastically bowed and dragged Bo towards the cheering coliseum.

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“I’ve been here for five minutes, and I already hate that guy.” Bo muttered grumpily.

“Yeah, me too.” Milo smirked as he patted Bo in reassurance.

Bo and Milo, blinded by the open Colosseum, entered through the jaws of the main gates. Met with the full power of the crowd’s chants and cheers in anticipation of the event.  
“This is all you, bud. Good luck.” Milo patted Bo off, walking towards the stands.

“WAIT, is that it? No speech or advice?” Bo stalled.

“Trust yourself. Trust each other. And you’ll come out on top.” Milo spoke back, disappearing into the stands.

Bo and Dio stared at each other and back at the open arena.

“GROUP 1 AND 2, TO THE ARENA, PLEASE!” a commanding voice called from overhead.

Bo slowly made his way to the opening, taking in the sounds, smells, and colors. So much energy. So many shapes and tones. So bright. He felt the butterflies again, but no fire, no blood, and no courage.

“Move, move!” his peers shouted, shoving past him and forming another line.

Bo hustled up and fell in line. Looking frantically for Milo. Two hundred and seventy degrees West, row one, seat one, next to the main gate, he remembered.  
And there he was. Cloak dawned and hood up, consulting with another familiar figure. A yellow and green armored man. The one he saw accompanying the boy who skipped the line. He tried to make out what they were saying before being interrupted.  
“WELCOME ALL TO THE CONTEST OF HANDS, HOSTED BY NONE OTHER THAN YOUR ESTEEMED HOST AND KING, CUPIIIIIIIIIIIIIIST!!!!” The announcer flared as golden fireworks lit up the noon sky, sparking a significant shout from the green crowd.

A chubbier and greener figure, accustomed with poofier and greenest drab than the rest, stood high among the crowd in a decked out terrace, waving and boasting gestures for the public. Accompanied on the left by none other than Custo and what must’ve been the princess, wearing a small gold crown, vibrant green and yellow accented skirt, seemingly disinterested in the show.

“TODAY AND TODAY ONLY, THE HANDS OF MIDI, THE BEST OF THE BEST, WILL COMPETE HEAD TO HEAD FOR A CHANCE TO ACCOMPANY THE KING AS HIS RIGHT HAND!!!!” the audience and Hands erupted in joy and giddy as a lid sealed shut over the colosseum, lights flashing and panning a spotlight to the right of the king himself.

Bo watched in awe at the spectacular display before him. Forgetting for just a moment, he was about to face his greatest challenge yet. Which isn’t saying much since he’s only been awake for two days now, but it still got to him.

“NOW FOR SOME OF TONIGHTS HIGHLIGHTED HANDS. KEEP AN EYE ON THESE ONE FOLKS, FOR COULD IT BE THE DYNAMIC TRIO OF ROCKY, DAVID, AND GOLIATH, FAVOR OF PETRA!!!!” the crowd cheered away as a darker scrawny man in nothing, but tan shorts rose, flexing enormous purple gauntlets.

“OR MAYBE LACY AND AMNIS WILL STREAM BY THE COMPETITION, FAVOR OF LACUS!!!!” the crowd praised and screamed as a tan short-haired girl in a blue piece swimsuit danced elegantly with a stream of water flowing through a whip.

“AND THE FAVORITE OF THE KINGDOM, THE GENERALS ONE AND ONLY SON, LEO AND BOLT, FAVOR OF COELUM!!!” the crowd erupted, loud as ever, as the spotlight shined on a familiar golden-haired kid. Rising in his gleaming armor, bowing for the audience, feeding their excitement.

“NOW WITH FORMALITIES CONCLUDED, LET'S GET TO THE REAL REASON WE’RE ALL HERE! TO SEE DISPLAYS OF AWE, CRUSHING DEFEATS, AND A HARROWING VICTORY BECAUSE ONLY ONE OF OUR 16 CONTESTANTS WILL COME OUT ON TOP!!!!” the audience cheered again in eagerness.

“GROUP TWO PLEASE EXIST THE STAGING AREA AND WAIT IN THE INNER GATE. GROUP ONE, GET READY FOR YOUR FIRST CHALLENGE, A TRADITIONAL FAVORITE, THE CHALLENGE OF CELAS!!!” the announcer boomed as Bo, and the others of his group cleared the way.

The arena fell quiet in anticipation. Sounds of murmuring echoed throughout the dome as the first group lined up in the center of the arena.

Bo observed, leaning against the wall, for this was all new to him in this foreign land.

The lights cut off, and out of the brief darkness shined four small metal cages in the middle of the arena. With the lights slowly growing, the Hands circled the cage in sequence, waiting, anticipating, silence falling upon the colosseum.

Until the cages bursted open suddenly in all directions, shooting up four small gold and green armored birds, frantically maneuvering around the arena. The contestants exploded into a dazed frenzy. Pillars stretching in and out of the arena blocked and gave way, pumping out of the ground like clockwork.

Bo could hardly keep his eyes on the glowing birds as they paced spontaneously between the Hands, as they grasped at the birds and fended each other off.

Out of the madness stood out a single Hand, the golden boy, remaining calm and collected. Waiting patiently for the right time to strike. And just like that, like catching lightning in a bottle, he reached out and snagged the first elusive bird. Crushing it until a bright explosion of dust blew through the armor, forming a much larger version of itself until it faded onto the ground, glittering.

The volatile crowd erupted at the display, cheering the name Leo as the second official challenge of group 2 went to him. Following suit in the distraction, three more victorious contestants, though through much more struggle.

“WOW, WHAT A DISPLAY OF PATIENCE AND GRACE FROM NONE OTHER THAN LEO!!!! BUT LET'S BE REAL, DID ANYONE DOUBT HIM!!!! I KNOW I DIDN’T!!!!” the audience agreed in infectious approval of applause and whistling, commemorating the victors and outing the losers.

“GROUP 2 PLEASE MAKE YOUR WAY TO THE STAGING AREA!!!!”

Bo took a deep breath to clear his fuzzy mind.

“Here we go.” he exhaled.

Slowly walking out with his peers, single file. Watching the lights dim as they started circling the center of the arena, the crowd grew quiet. Bo frantically looked for Milo, but it was too dark to see. The pressure and sweat getting to him now.

“What am I doing here?” he thought.

He didn’t think he was one of them. At least not yet. Consumed in his thoughts, slowing his tracks.  
“Hey! Pick it up!” a voice hissed, bumping into him.

“I-I’m sorry.” he apologized, picking up the pace.

It felt like an eternity waiting for those cages to drop. He didn’t know how much longer he could stand the anticipation.

Until suddenly, the gleaming white lights burst on, releasing the armored feathered creatures from their prison.

The crowd burst out with the built-up energy, cheering and booing their Hands on.

Bo got knocked to the ground, too slow for his opponents. Picking himself up, the floor before him rose, lifting him high on a pillar.

He stood atop watching the chaos below him, Hands fighting Hands, sporadic Knightley birds racing across the surface, ground shifting. He took a deep breath to process it all and calm his nerves. He exhaled and felt normal again for a moment. Whatever normal was, it was short-lived. But it was enough to clear his head. He decided the best way to catch a bird was through timed execution, not running around, and using brute force. Although, it seemed to work for Rocky and his Hands as they caught one in his giant fists, squeezing tight, releasing golden snow across the arena.

Bo snapped out of it, picked his target, and studied it. Much like how Leo seemed to pull it off. He noticed a particular bird that made dive-bomb runs from left to right of the arena. This was his bird.

He quickly located a pillar along the bird’s pathing and leaped over, clawing at the grips of the edge and lifting himself up and onto the platform. He scanned the arena for his bird again as the others started getting grabbed left and right. Lacy whipped Amnis inches in front of his face, entangling a strafing bird to his right before his eyes. As she winked by him, landing perfectly below, releasing the creature into a burst of light. He panicked. Thinking his bird was taken and it was over.

Until it wasn’t. He didn’t hear the announcer, the pillars didn’t rest, and neither did the remaining Hands. Bo quickly scanned once again and found his target, coming in for another dive bomb. But the bird had moved since he got distracted by Lacy.

It was out of his reach again, diving straight at another Hand waiting below for the opportunity. Bo didn’t know what to do, but he knew staying on this pillar wouldn’t win him anything anymore.

So he took a deep breath and risked it all in a leap of faith, jumping as far and reaching out as far he could, believing in himself to make it.

The cold ground, aching bones, and empty hands filled him with grief as he waited for another poof of gold.

Except it didn’t come. The crowd stood still, Hands frozen in place, all eyes on him.

He frowned as he didn’t understand what just happened or was going on. Until his face filled with gold light, gleaming from the tucks of his scarf, Dio.

He stared in disbelief as he unwrapped his new friend and scooped up the shining bird, holding it tight in his hand.

Slowly, he tightened his grip around the shell, releasing the bird into an explosion of light before his eyes.

The crowd wasn’t sure how to react. They’ve never seen this Hand before, defeating their favorites.

“WHAT A TURN OF EVENTS, FOLKS! ROOKIE HAND BO AND DIO, FAVOR OF… AM I READING THIS RIGHT?! I THINK I AM FOLKS! BO AND DIO, FAVOR OF FATE!!!! IT’S BEEN A MINUTE SINCE FATE’S RETURNED TO US FOLKS, BUT WE’LL BE SEEING MUCH MORE THAN THAT NOW BECAUSE HE JUST GRABBED HIMSELF A TICKET TO THE THIRD CHALLENGE!!!!” the audience applauded loosely, whispering among each other in such a public revelation.

“Wow, we did it.” Bo stood still, dumbfounded by the turn of events.

“Great job, Dio.” he praised as he pet him.

Making his way back to the inner gates, he drew the glances of many. Some curious, some fearful, some cold. He heard the whispers, “Fate is back?” “Kid is going places.” “He got lucky.”

All such mixed emotions. But he shook it off. He had to. To be ready for the next challenge.

“GROUP ONE PLEASE MAKE YOUR WAY TO THE STAGING AREA FOR THE THIRD CHALLENGE! A REAL BRUISER, THE CHALLENGE OF FORTI!!!!” yet again, the crowd responded with a belch of screams, applause, and chanting.

The Hands split up into pairs, facing each other meters apart.

The lights dropped again momentarily until the spotlights shined on a pair to the far right. A nimble looking man with boxers and a girl in tattered white cloth with a black streak running across her face wielding a shattered sword as the pieces flowed with some kind of energy, forming the tip naturally.

The colosseum came to a standstill as the two studied each other. Until a loud buzzer rang through the dome, the Hands each struck once ever so precisely across each other. The sword Hand fell back, recovering posture as the nimble boxer flew across the arena into the wall, knocked out cold.

The audience cheered and applauded her before the lights went out and shined on the next group, causing a standstill.

It was between Leo and a lean hooded figure, drawing their bow.

The lights flashed off again and back on. Leo had drawn his sword in a defensive stance as the archer readied their barrage. The buzzer rang, and in a flash, Leo cut clean through the first arrow and backhanded the archer with his hilt, knocking him to the ground.  
Again, the crowd sang for Leo, congratulating him. The lights faded, and the swordsman and woman fell into place through the dark. The lights burned on, showing off yet another defensive stance from Leo and an aggressive one from the swordswoman.

The crowd held its breath waiting for the buzzer. And with the piercing signal, the swordswoman struck high. But with a simple bit of footwork from Leo, he swept out of the way and slammed his elbow down into her back, crippling her momentarily. But that was all that he needed as the crowd blew a fuse over yet another victory for Leo.

“SUCH STYLE, SUCH POWER, LEO DOES IT AGAIN AND IS THE CROWNED WINNER OF GROUP ONE. HE WILL GO ONTO THE FINALS!!!!” Once again, the crowd raved at the thought of Leo winning.

“GROUP 2, PLEASE MAKE YOUR WAY TO THE ARENA FOR THE THIRD CHALLENGE!!!!”

Bo was sweating bullets again. He had never fought anything before. Or at least he could remember, besides that BoolWalker, but that was a sneak attack. This was clearly a precision and strength challenge. Something he wasn’t sure he had much of.

Yet, he made his way back to the arena, still searching for Milo. But it was too dark to make out any distant face.

“I must say, I’m quite surprised you’ve made it his far little Bo.” Custo chimed in.

“Yeah, well, I’m full of surprises.” He muttered back.

“Oh, I *know* now. Which is why I’m taking no chances here, yes?” Custo cheerfully gleamed out.  
“What are you talking about?” Bo scowled.

“I’m also in charge of pairing Hands for the fairest matchups.” he said with a wide smirk.

Bo’s eyes widened, realizing what was about to happen.

“You will be going against Rocky. Good luck now!” Custo winked as he clicked his fancy pen in his face once more and disappeared into the darkness.

Bo froze up to the sudden news.

Rocky was the guy with two giant gauntlets for fists. How was he going to beat him in a contest of precision and might?

Panic set in again. He felt so alone out here on the stage. Until a silky touch swept across his face, and Dio stared on at him, or at least he thought he was staring at him.

Dio started to glow, trying to help Bo understand that they’re more than just a lost boy and a scarf. He began to understand. If there’s one thing he understood, it was how to feel. And he felt Dio on this one. He felt whole.

Rocky appeared from the shadows before him, gauntlets bulging.

“Hi! My name is Rocky, and this is David and Goliath!” he greeted, raising and waving each gauntlet.

“Oh, um, hi. My name is Bo, and this is Dio.” Dio gestured out, shaking Goliath and then David.

“Those gauntlets are, um, cool. I like the eye design?” Bo complemented awkwardly.

“Really?! That’s so nice of you! Look, you even got Goliath to blush.” Rocky pointed out to a literal blushing gauntlet.

“Oh, they’re ALIVE?!”

“Of course they are! All hands are sentient, don’t you know that?” Rocky asked, puzzled in the thinker pose.

“I’m sorta new at this.” Bo admitted.

The lights began to flicker out, silencing the crowd, preparing the other pair.

After a moment, the lights flickered back on to reveal Lacy in a neutral stance standing off with a man half shrouded in armor and half bare wielding a scythe with a red tip, eager to strike.

The two stood off, awaiting the alarming noise. Until boom, before the alarm could finish, Lacy entangled the scythe, yanking down in one swift elegant motion. Sinking the man's own scythe into his shoulder and holding him down into the ground.

The crowd went wild, showing who the clear favorite was in that standoff.

“Oh man, she’s great, isn’t she great?” Rocky looked in admiration at the work done.

“Uh yeah, pretty great. For her, I guess.” Bo gulped at the sight of what just happened.

If he somehow beat Rocky, he’d have to get past that too. The lights lowered again, as did the noise until silence and darkness consumed the arena.

“Psst, Bo, good luck, okay mate?” Rocky offered.

“Mmmhmm.” Bo squealed out, thinking of what he would have to do.

“You can’t tell, but I’m trying to bump fist you.” Rocky told Bo.

“Fist bump me? Fist bump me.” he thought to himself.

He knew Rocky was strong. And seemingly precise. I mean, how can you not be with gauntlets that huge. So his best bet was absorbing or avoiding his blow and go for him while he recovers.

But how would he avoid fists that big? Dio started to glow through the dark, and Bo understood what Dio planned.

“I’m trusting you here, bud.” Bo whispered with his eyes closed, concentrating.

With a flash of bright light, the buzzer rang, and the titan fists came in as fast as the lights did.

Bo raised his hand, absorbing the full force of the blow with Dio, holding the fist in place. The crowd gasped and screamed in fright at the turn of events as everyone expected Bo to be paste by now. Even Rocky looked horrified for a moment.

“WOAH, BO, THIS IS AMAZI-” Bo cut him off by pushing the force absorbed by Dio back into the gauntlet, sending Rocky flying into the side of the dome, stuck in a crater from the impact. The crowd looked on in horror and silence.

“Oh my, I'M SO SORRY ROCKY!” Bo yelled across the arena.

“IM OK!” Rocky faintly yelled back, remaining in his crater.

Bo looked around in the light to catch the gaze of thousands of strangers. Looks of horror, disgust, awe, glee, you name it. He looked again for Milo, but no luck. However, he did catch the king, who raised an eyebrow at the display of events, Custo with his jaw dropped in terror, and caught the bored princess’ attention.

The lights faded again, turning pitch black as he heard who must’ve been Lacy step up.

“So, you’re the new hotshot, huh.”

“I mean, is that what people are saying?”

“Probably, but I called it first.” she flirted.

“Oh, o-ok.” he stuttered.

“Hmmm, that was quite impressive, you know.” she kept at him.

“Uh, thanks, you too.” he tried keeping it short, focusing.

“Aw, that’s sweet. You really mean it?” she asked cutely.

“Errhmm..” he grunted out, trying to remain focus.

She was trying to distract him. He took another deep breath and let his thoughts flow again for a moment. Ignoring all outside noise. She was quick, didn’t seem as powerful, but more precise and swift. Best bet he had was being unpredictable. But what could she never expect?  
The lights burned on once again. She waited in another neutral stance. He readied in an aggressive position, sword drawn, tensing the muscles across his body, ready for one swift movement.

The buzzer blared, and she lashed out for his advanced leg movement. But his legs weren’t there. Instead of charging, Bo lept back, dodging her grasp. He retaliated with his own as he unwinded Dio and stretched out for her whip, grabbing it clean off her. Lunging forward for a body slam, knocking her flat onto her back.

The audience was silent again. The silence grew to a slow clap and then some cheering and then shouts and then praise soaked Bo in the light. He had finally won their hearts.

“WOAH FOLKS DOWN GOES LACY! WE GOT A HOTSHOT IN THE MAKING! BO TAKES THE THIRD CHALLENGE AND MOVES ONTO THE FINALS!!!!”

His heart raced. He wanted to scream and run around and cry all at the same time. He’d come so far and learned so much. The only thing standing between him and his destiny now was Leo.

“BO, PLEASE MAKE YOUR WAY TO THE MAIN GATE, LEO PLEASE MAKE YOUR WAY TO THE OUTER GATE!” the announcer boomed through the stadium.

Bo strutted, high and mighty, feeling the adrenaline pumping through his veins as he was praised and cheered on.   
“Pssst, Bo.” Milo rang.

“MILO?! I was looking EVERYWHERE for you!” Bo let out in relief as he tiptoed up the wall to talk to him.

“I told you, two hundred and seventy degrees West, row one, seat one, right next to the main gate.”

“Yeah, yeah, it was dark, and I also don't know how to tell directions.”

“Oh. Well, whatever, look, this is the last challenge. You win this, and you’re the kingdom's Hand.”

“Trust me, I know.” Bo acknowledged with the pressure creeping in again.

“BO AND LEO. PLEASE MAKE YOUR WAY TO THE CENTER OF THE ARENA!!!!”

“Got any more of those tips or speeches before I go out there?” Bo asked over the sound of the crowd.

“Be yourself out there. Nobody fights like you do.” Milo reassured him.

Bo nodded and stepped away from the stands, locking eyes with Leo, who waited patiently at the center of the arena.

“Bo.”

“Leo.”

The two faced off, relaxed, waiting for their cue.

“Drummed up quite the noise, I see.” Leo gestured toward the crowd, responding in cheers.

“I’m figuring it out as I go, I guess.” Bo admitted.

“More like copying my style.” Leo accused.

“What? I mean, I-”

“Save it. You’re up against *me* now. And nobody fights as good as me.” he bragged.

“Arrhhh..” He let out in annoyance.

Bo studied Leo, remembering an earlier realization.

“Hey, don’t you realize we’re the same?” he genuinely asked.

“What are you talking about?” Leo narrowed his eyes on him.

“Like, we’re both human. I haven’t been around much, but nobody is like us. Haven’t you noticed?” Bo thought to Leo.

“Hmph. Don’t know. Don’t care. These are my people. Not you.” Leo bluntly laid on Bo.

“Bu-”

“LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, BOYS AND GIRLS, WIZARDS AND SPIRITS, THIEVES AND CREATURES, MAY I PRESENT TO YOU THE FINAL CHALLENGE, THE END ALL BE ALL, THE MOMENT OF TRUTH, THE DUEL OF THE MILLENIA, BECAUSE LET’S BE HONEST IT’S BEEN A PRETTY BORING ONE, I GIVE YOU, BO VS LEOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!” The crowd erupted, piercing the opening dome’s sky, revealing the natural afternoon light once again.

“HANDS, PLEASE TAKE TWENTY PACES BACK AND WAIT FOR THE KING’S HORN!!!!”

Leo gave one last eyeing glimpse before turning his back to Bo and counting his paces back. With his mind made up, Bo turned and counted.

One, two, three, he felt the rush, four, five, six, he felt the butterflies, seven, eight, nine, he felt the eyes, ten, eleven, twelve, he felt the adrenaline, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, he felt the blood, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, he felt everything, nineteen, twenty. Turn.  
He locked Leo’s fiery gaze. Taking one last deep breath, he reached for the hilt of his sword on his back and the other on Dio.

*WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAWMPH,* The horn blared.

The two started slowly walking towards each other, drawing their weapons. Leo took a defensive stance, circling Bo, hand on hilt, ready. Bo still didn’t know exactly how to fight. Just what he thought and felt was right. And right now, he felt this wouldn’t be won with a sword.

The two circled each other, waiting for the other to make the first move. Both patient. But not that patient.

Bo drew Dio in an attempt to disarm Leo like he did Lacy. But Leo was quicker. He swept his sword behind him to his off-hand, as Dio instead caught Leo’s empty hand. Leo then swung down on Dio, causing him to flinch back.

Bo staggered backward at the force, and Leo followed up with a flurry of strikes. Left, right, left, top. He had Bo on his heels as he tried to keep his balance and body away from the blade.

Leo continued his assault, applying more and more pressure on Bo. The crowd let out a gasp.

Not being able to keep up, Bo switched pace and committed to falling backward, tucking and rolling, gaining distance from Leo.

Leo halted his assault and resumed his defensive stance, watching for Bo to make another mistake. But Bo had another idea.

He drew his sword and threw his bag on the ground. The two circled it until Bo kicked the bag up at Leo, forcing a strikeout of him in which he countered with his own.

Yet again, Leo was too quick. He was able to slice the bag away and counter Bo’s follow up attack.

The two clashed and traded blows for several strikes, Bo holding onto dear life. Leo had him on the ropes as he threw a low kick into his combo, tripping Bo and swinging down on him.

Managing to hold the clash, sword to throat, Bo used all his strength to shove Leo’s sword off of him. Suddenly, Dio started to glow again, maneuvering through the clashing blades and socked Leo right in the face, sending him flying and disarmed.

The crowd cried in horror and surprise at Bo yet again.

Bo struggled to his feet, taking a moment to catch his breath and rub his throat.

“I-I love you, Dio, y-you know that?” Bo panted out.

“Alright, let’s finish this together.” he nodded to Dio, and what he could only imagine was a nod back.  
Bo looked over to Leo, rising to his feet.

“Huh.” Leo examined the blood he swiped across his lip.

“Alright, then. Fine. You wanna fight that way. I’ll fight that way.” He muttered under his breath.

Leo took a deep breath and whistled, ringing throughout the open colosseum and beyond.

Bo slowly started approaching Leo again.

“You know what my Hand is, Bo?” Leo smirked.

“Uh, your sword or armor? Right?” Bo guessed. He wasn’t sure this whole time, but he had to have seen it at some point in the contest, right?

A distant roar echoed in the distance. One Bo couldn’t recognize through sound but could through feeling. And it made his stomach drop.

“May I present to you my lifelong BEST friend and Hand, Bolt.” he gestured as a yellow dragon five times the size of Bo dropped into the arena, curling around Leo. With its white mane flowing, dark yellow horns, white curled eyes, and a mouth full of sparks.

“That’s… not… very… fair…” Bo let out, taking in the majestic beast.

“Life’s not fair, Bo.” Leo explained.

“Get used to it.” he suggested as he patted Bolt, letting out a jolt of lightning towards Bo. Bo moved, escaping the initial blast zone but not the explosion that followed.

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Bo’s ears rang, vision blurred, clothes charred, and smoking. Everything hurt. He laid there, just breathing and staring at the clear blue sky.

He couldn’t fight anymore. How could he? Leo was obviously better than him in every way. He had armor, real training, a freaking dragon for a Hand. It was over.

“Bo…” the voice whispered again.

“H-uh. N-not, now.” He gasped out in pain. Watching the pink glow cover him.

“Pink.. glow?” Bo realized. It was Dio. He was doing… something.

Leo and the crowd watched in awe at the magical display. Leo being hesitant to let this go on but too intrigued to let go.

The glow started to consume Bo. Mending his wounds, his charred clothes, his fatigue, until he looked and felt brand new.

“Agh, AGGHHHHHHH!” Bo gasped up and coughed smoke and blood out. He studied his now healed body and clothes, feeling brand new. As energetic and confident as ever.

The crowd cheered in amazement, with the King, Custo, the princess, and Milo on the edge of their seat.

“ARE YOU SEEING WHAT I’M SEEING, FOLKS! BO JUST TOOK A FULL LIGHTNING BOLT TO THE FACE AND IS WALKING IT OFF LIKE IT WAS NOTHING! WE ALL HAD OUR DOUBTS, BUT THIS IS LUDICROUS! I’M LITERALLY EATING MY MIC RIGHT NOW!!!!”

“Right.” Bo said, admiring the work on him.

“Let’s get it right this time.” he patted Dio as the pillars started operating again.

“Pshh. Whatever. I let you do that anyway. Makes this more… interesting.” Leo played off.

“Plus, Bolt loves playing with his food.” he smirked as he patted Bolt again, sending another jolt at Bo.

Except this time, he was ready. With Dio in hand, Bo advanced towards the jolt, absorbing it with Dio and releasing it into the sky with the crack of lightning filling the air.

“What the…” Leo started to panic, patting Bolt to fire more jolts at Bo.

But it didn’t matter as Bo absorbed each one, releasing it in an instant to the sky, filling the static air.

“Grrrah! FINE! Let’s do this.” Leo composed himself and hopped on Bolt, kicking up for liftoff.

Leo and Bolt rose high up in the sky before nose-diving down at high speed for Bo. But again, Bo was ready. He’d done this already. Just a bit bigger this time.

As the dive came in, Bo dove to the ground as Bolt skimmed him. As they made their pass, Bo latched onto Bolt with Dio.

Gaining altitude, Bo held onto Dio for life, climbing the beast.

“What the- WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!” Leo lashed out, trying to kick Bo off of Bolt.

But Bo didn’t come this far to falter now. He ate the kicks, continuing his climb.

“JUST..GIVE..UP!” Leo screamed, trying to smash Bo’s face in more.

“Agh..errrrhhg...n-NEVER!” Bo yelled out, advancing further up the dragon.

Bolt suddenly started another nosedive in hopes of shaking Bo off.

“**AHHHHHHHHHH!!!**” Leo and Bo both let out in terror as Bolt was fed up with this.

As they approached the ground, Bo latched onto Leo’s foot, with Dio tangled around Bolt’s leg in his off-hand.

“LET GO OF ME YOU, YOU PILLOCK!” Leo screeched.

“YOU… FIRST!” Bo shouted, shoving Leo off balance by dragging his leg off Bolt, sending him dragging across the ground. Coming loose and wiping out across the floor.

“AAAAHAHAHAHA, WE DID IT, DIO!” Bo celebrated while still strapped to Bolt, gaining altitude again.

“Wait, oh, uh, go down.” Bo asked, patting Bolt politely.

Bolt snarled and started taking evasive maneuvers.

“AAAAAAAHHHHH YOU'RE GONNA KILL US ALL!” Bo screamed, trying his best to mantle the dragon.

But this only freaked Bolt out more, sending him into a chaotic spiral, slamming into the rising and falling pillars, crumbling the arena around them.

“NONONONO, YOU’RE GONNA HURT PEOPLE” Bo begged as Bolt ran through the debris, wounding his wings.  
He wasted no time and abandoned the spiraling dragon, jumping to falling debris, desperately trying to slow his fall.

But it was too much. He got clipped and pelted from broken pillar to broken pillar until he was finally crushed and crash-landed.

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As the debris cloud rose, Milo looked on in complete focus.

“I’ll admit, that was closer than I thought it would be, Milo.” The armored figure rose.

“Sit down. It’s not over.” Milo told him, still focused on the cloud.

“It’s over Milo, I win. Again.” The armored man concluded and walked out.

Milo stayed focused on the cloud of dust covering the shattered arena. Those who didn’t flee, breath held.

As the dust settled, two faint figures came to shape. One on top of the other. Sword to throat.

We had a winner.

The dust finally clearing as a badly wounded Leo stood over an unconscious, broken Bo.

The crowd erupted into a roar of chants and applause one last time before rushing over to Leo, carrying him to the proud King, an ecstatic Custo, and a disappointed princess.

“No.” Milo breathed out in sadness.

He reached into the void, appearing beside Bo, picking him up carefully, and portaling them back home.

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“I knew this was a dumb idea, Fate.” Death raged.

“Why do I always trust you?” He ranted on.

“Because you know I’m *eventually* right.” Fate teased.

“Tsch.” Death grunted.

“Not this time. He failed.”

“No. He didn’t. This was supposed to happen. He’s going to be fine.” Fate reassured.

“What are you talking about?! I have him *right here*. He’s mine. AGAIN.” Death was baffled, holding Bo’s soul, juggling it back and forth.

“Just wait for it.” Fate said, annoyed, paying close attention to Bo’s soul.

“Wait for *what* exactly?” Death narrowed his vision, growing impatient.

When all of a sudden, Bo’s soul started to glow, dispersing back into reality.

“What the?! Who has the power to do *that*?

“As I said, I’m eventually right.” Fate smirked at Death.

“So what was the point of all that then?! Kid had to die to learn a lesson?” Death asked abruptly.

Fate walked away, studying herself in the reflection of the silver pool.

“Yes.”

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And then it was black again.

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“GAAAAAAAAHHHHH!” Bo sprang up, panting.

“MILO, MILO, MI-lo?” Bo stopped, catching Milo resting in a nearby chair holding Mr. Cups.

“Oh, hey, buddy. You feeling alright?” Milo asked.

“Yeah... I am now. That was crazy.” Bo wandered off.

“I-I can’t tell what was a dream and what wasn’t… I woke up on a shore, I met you, we fought this orange beast, I had my own outfit, became a… a hand… and I fought in a coliseum with these crazy powerful and magical people and… and I almost beat them all!.. until I didn’t…. I was crushed, and then it was just blank…. I heard some voices…. voices I feel like I should recognize, but I…. I don't remember, and I can't make any sense of it…” Bo trailed off again.

“That was all real, Bo.” Milo admitted, clenching his drained crystal necklace in hand.

“And you *lived*. That’s all that matters.” Petting Mr. Cups.

“Yeah. Yeah, I guess you're right. No matter what happens, the only thing that matters is coming home after a long day. And after an adventure like that, I feel like, with enough practice, we can do anything together.” Bo wondered, laying in comfort.

“Anything?” Milo softly asked in wonder.

“Anything…” Bo dreamt.