

## The Fight

a timed exercise by Chris Kingham

She prowled the locker room, pacing up and down relentlessly. In brief moments, when the concentration that had been forged over years of routine and ritual weakened, she allowed herself glimpses of the opposition. As battle approached her coaches had always advised her that it was prudent to lose oneself in the known, to rely on the tried and tested. However Olivia often found that it helped to understand the task that lay ahead - she appreciated that whilst it was important to focus on what she had to deliver, it was not a dance danced alone.

As the sound of the bell drew ever closer Olivia began to progress her preparation to the physical. She placed her muscular leg on the pristine white window ledge that sat at the eye level of someone considerably taller than her. She felt her hamstrings tighten as she brought the top of her thigh into contact with her torso, her delicate hands wrapped tightly around her leathery and misshapen foot. She intensified the stretch further by twisting her supporting leg, allowing her standing foot to rotate out and her hip to unlock further. She had been in this game along time now and achieving the same feats was becoming harder every time. When she was a little girl she could always effortlessly drop into the splits in an attempt to impress and garner attention. As she became a woman this became more of a chore, her body became more resistant to such tension.

Olivia repeated the same exercise with her left leg and found herself running through the same internal checks - steeling herself for conflict. She could feel the unforgiving edge of the window ledge dig into her achilles heel, and the familiar sensation of her

sharp shinbone meeting her sharper cheek bone. Sweat trickled down her forearms, not so much due to the physical exertion but as her mind became more alert to the struggle that lay ahead.

A girl sat opposite her in the locker room, her elbows resting on her knees and the scowl on her face somehow unnatural. Olivia knew this girl from old. In combat they say you learn the most about someone. Olivia found her opponents to often be elusive. She never understood them, not fully.

“Olivia, it’s time,” said the scowling girl who sat opposite.

Olivia methodically thumped her body, systematically reassuring herself that it would not let her down, confirming it remained taut and ready to protect her one last time. She had run through every superstition she had, ensured every muscle had been stretched and warmed up ready to perform optimally. The smell of chalk filled her nostrils and her emotions began to narrow, her vision becoming more blinkered. She followed her opponent out of the dressing room and down the ornate and ominous golden corridor. Its red carpet kind and soft on her beleaguered feet. She always found that particular sensation to be especially cruel, and likened it to the feeling you get when you are warm and cosy in bed and the dark and cold working day awaits you immediately on the other side of your front door.

She bounced on the balls of her feet, rotating her arms to ensure the blood still flowed and the muscles had not stiffened in the brief journey from the dressing room to the ancient wooden staircase that led into the abyss. As she heard the music grow louder she listened for her cue. In previous nights she had misjudged this and the effect was dire, coming back from the brink seemingly insurmountable somehow.

Not even aware how she got there she found herself gliding across the stage. Tonight it felt right. Tonight would be the last time.