*Ry stood, marking his breath.*

*All around, the crowd murmured but Ry gave them no mind.*

*In the center of the sand, some foppish talker yelled through some manner of amplification cone, working up the onlookers. This was all parts of the fights here, in the arena; the money changing hands, the gambling, the big talk-talk, the anticipation & the lust for blood. Ry’s blood he assumed they preferred… though he supposed they’d settler for the reigning champion’s after the half-orc broke him apart.*

*Ry tried not to smile at the thought; it was unbecoming to the life of contemplation he’d devoted himself to. But his face flashed a brief smile all the same.*

*They’d taken Ry’s potions, his meager gear; leaving him only with his small clothes. But such trivialities hardly mattered; Ry had little need of the magic stored in his clanking phials & glass bottles, in his enchanted weapons, not when he knew and commanded the paths of aether within him and how each could be unlocked, shifted to fill himself with power. Intuiting that the time for bluster and talk was drawing to a close, he began to move, assuming the correct postures: crane takes fish, contented lion, lizard climbs- held each pose for a breath all the while ‘seeing’ the flows within himself change, glow, and he felt his flesh charge in response. He grew stronger, faster, his mouth filling with steam.*

*Finally, the announcer finished, bowed and the crowd roared in response. The thousands of spectators began to shouting a name like a mantra ‘CHANGA, CHANGA, CHANGA.’ The name of their champion.*

*The portcullis opposite Ry opened, and through the ten foot tall arch a grey skinned, rune inscribed humanoid crouched to get through. In answer to the crowds sounds of appreciation, the stone giant bellowed, raised his arm in anticipation of triumph.*

*Then he charged flat out towards Ry.*

*Ry idly thought the creature was bigger than he’d expected as he finished the last process. Not for the first time, he wondered how a seeker of knowledge like himself ended up in situations like this. And, despite countless hours of meditation to banish such base dross- he felt that flicker of a smile return, larger than before to split his lips and reveal his sharp teeth. As a young half-orc, he’d loved nothing more than fisticuffs. And even now, decades later, even now, after all his master’s lessons to empty his heart of desire he still loved a good fight, loved to test and push and thrill at battle on scales the child he had been could only dream at. Perhaps he always would love it. He allowed himself the grin for another breath, suppressed his desire to scream in joy-rage, and returned his face to a mask of calm.*

*Empowered by his final process, Ry leapt fifteen feet into the air to catch the charging stone giant right in the chin with a punch that would have done his master proud.*