

Severed Connection

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"No! Don't punch, kick him!" Derek yelled to the TV. "Block!" Suddenly, he was greeted by the GAME OVER screen. "Dammit." Somehow, Derek kept himself from throwing his controller, then returned to the Character Creation screen. This time, Derek would play ION, not PROTALY. But his controller seemed busted, because no matter where he moved the cursor, it always pulled back to PROTALY. "Stop!" Derek said, finally throwing his controller.

"You stop."

"Huh?" The boy looked up at the screen, which now showed an angry PROTALY.

"I can only do what you're doing, and you're just button mashing. If you think you're so good, pick up that controller."

Derek stared open-mouthed at the female gladiator.

"Pick. It. Up," the digital woman said, staring at Derek through the TV.

The boy slowly reached down, hesitated a moment, then grabbed the controller. Light flared around Derek. When he came to, he was standing in a green mesh world, facing a full-sized PROTALY. And he couldn't move. He didn't even have a body!

"What happened?" He said, his voice appearing as a waveform in mid air.

"Tell you in a minute," the gladiator read a floating menu, "Hmmm. You seem to be good with agile fighters, and like accuracy more than raw power. That can be done." She collapsed the menu, and popped up the character screen and selected CREATE CHARACTER.

"What base model do you want to use?"

"Where am I? Why am I here?" Derek shouted.

PROTALY sighed, "You're in the game, numbnuts. You're here because I'm tired of your pouting. Now, what model do you want to use?"

"None! I want out!"

"Alright, I'll choose for you." She scrolled across the model list and hit enter. Instantly, Derek felt he had a body again. The model was a flat-shaded gray, but Derek noticed he had breasts.

"Hey! Why am I a girl?" He winced at his feminine voice.

"Because you had your chance, and I think it's funny." PROTALY selected a dark tan skin, then went into the head options. She gave Derek a smallish nose and mouth, and blue almond shaped eyes. Then, she put a pair of pink sunglasses on Derek's face. Lastly, he was given long blue hair. "How's that?"

"Let. Me. Out." Derek threatened, but his statement didn't faze the AI, who continued onto Derek's clothing. First came blue tights over his legs, then a pink leotard with a high-cut leg hole. Then came blue glovelets and sneaker-like pink shoes. For additional decoration, Derek received two pink stripes across each of his thighs and upper arms. Finally done, PROTALY selected the done button. When the game prompted for a name, she thought for a moment and entered DEE.

"Ready, girl?"

"No. I don't even know what the hell is happening!"

Still, PROTALY kept on, and the green field dissolved away, replaced by three platforms floating in space. Both gladiators knew the level as SPACE BRIDGE.

"Here's the deal, DEE. One match. If I win, I get out of this game, and you stay in. If you win, you get back out."

"No deal, I want out. Now."

"Beat me, and you will."

A few seconds later the announcer yelled, "FIGHT."

Ironically, DEE was more prepared than her opponent, and she leaped at PROTALY. The other gladiator couldn't side-step quick enough (10-0, DEE) Unfortunately, PROTALY recovered, and performed a wheelhouse into DEE's chin (15-10, PROTALY). A series of blows sent DEE flying (35-10, PROTALY). The AI nearly got another combo off, but DEE managed to block.

Then everything went black.

Billy opened up the game system and pulled STAR ARENA out of the console. "What a dumb game." He replaced it with HORROR SHOW VII.

Days later, DEE and PROTALY awoke.

"Oh, no!" PROTALY cried, "This is not happening! I was out! I was out!"

"What happened? Why aren't we on SPACE BRIDGE."

"Why do I have to explain everything? Someone turned the game off, DEE."

"So?"

"So, when they turned off the game, my connection with the world was severed. Without that, neither of us can get out." She fell onto her knees and began to cry.

"Hey, why are you crying? I'm the one who's stuck here. You've always been an AI." PROTALY looked up to DEE and gave a little smile, "No, I was a beta-tester for the game. My name was Julie. The original

PROTALY somehow sucked me in here. I think that was the last chance I had to get back out."

DEE knelt down and covered PROTALY's hand. "Hey, it won't be all bad. I mean, you're hot, and I'm hot . . ."

PROTALY laughed, "Sorry, DEE, but I don't swing that way."

Years passed, and PROTALY and DEE matched up repeatedly, and DEE quickly learned how annoying a button-masher was. She hated not being able to fight at her highest capacity. Eventually, both forgot their lives before becoming computer code. After six years of fights, the outside world turned STAR ARENA off for the last time, and Derek and Julie finally died.

In the final tally, PROTALY defeated DEE by 2,860-2,497.