Short Science Fiction Story
By Joseph

CHAMPION

Traditional warfare between the Factions had ended twenty centuries ago. Determined as too costly and destructive it had been abolished by their ultimate solution for unified government, the Uber-Guild. Efficiency was the watchword of the UG and quick resolute decision making was how they governed.

Nevertheless conflicts between the Factions still occurred pushing them inexorably into war. Therefore the UG with all its efficiency provided the solution. Wars could be waged to decide disputes, but they would not be fought with legions of armies that destroyed economies and disfigured societies leaving cities in ruinous polluted heaps, instead war was refined. Honed down to a single day contest between two opposing Faction combatants on whose victory or defeat road their Faction's objectives for territory and resources as well as the more banal such as vidcast time to promote political ideals. All this and more was settled inside the Arena by the two single combatants fighting to the death on their Faction's behalf.

If so desired, a Faction could enter a qualified challenge against the Uber-Guild itself thereby winning the Supreme Chair. But that would be certain suicide on a massive scale. If the battle were lost, the Faction leaders would be executed and their resources, both human and material, would be distributed among the remaining Factions as the UG saw fit. The last challenge brought against the UG came a little over ten centuries ago. Now spoken of only in legends. The story goes that a strong and benevolent Faction presented their Combat Champion, a Fighter with an unprecedented nine cycle win streak as their greatest, as well as the human race's greatest hope at usurping the ironclad rule of the UG. Hopes had run high and expectations were great. Surely a Combatant with a nine cycle win streak could not suffer defeat. It was the time to strike so the challenge was made. The fearless, strong and brave nine cycle Champion strode proudly into the Arena… and lasted exactly seven seconds against the UG's Champion. Succinctly and without hesitation the benevolent Faction was thereafter dissolved, the leaders executed and a pall of fearful obedience spread throughout the system. No one has since dared to challenge the UG. There is no mistaking the following fact. The UG's Champion is without doubt unbeatable. You see, the UG are machines and their Champion is a Metallic. A three Meter tall, 400 Kilograms heavy, Hyper Poly alloy fighting machine, they call HATRED.

The two blazing suns of Tertius VII beat down upon Jexx Ulay's closely shorn head causing sweat to pour down his rugged face and into his stinging bloodshot eyes. His face and normally dark beard were now a yellowish red tint of caked on dust and blood, as was most of his lean muscular body. His bleeding swollen hands throbbed and ached as he gripped the two meter long steel alloy staff while he slowly weaved clockwise countering his opponent's feints and thrusts. Jexx was laboring heavily against this younger, stronger opponent and he wouldn't survive if the death match continued much longer.

A quick overhead assault came at him as his opponent violently swung his weapon downward hard and precise. An aggressive move meant to crush his head had he not instinctively executed a perfectly timed high block counter movement of equal speed and force.

Jab, move! Swing, block! Circle feint thrust! And then repeat it all over again and again. The sharp pitched sound of tempered steel staffs hitting each other with brutal velocity rang throughout the arena while pungent odors both acrid and sweet permeated the air in a thick choking haze, the result of huge cisterns loaded with burning incense, courtesy of the three hundred strong and devout Holier Than Thou Priests of the Duhlmari' Religious Faction, as they sat beneath huge fluttering banners clad in their identical saffron colored tunics. As usual, in the section directly adjacent to the Duhlmari' Priests, sat the 1000 piece High Resonance Personified Band. No words can adequately describe them or the incredible din of melodies they could produce, which depending upon the moment were either lovely or grotesque. The conglomeration of sights, sounds and aromas jammed into a 90,000 seat Death Match Arena is quite the spectacle to behold. One must simply see, hear and experience it in order for it to be fully appreciated.

His younger, quicker opponent was superior to him in strength and agility. But what Jexx lacked in those areas he made up in abundance with experience and tenacity. Jexx swung his staff in an arc across the front of his opponent's body. He missed again. He spun the weapon into thrusting position and drove the blunted end forward. He contacted nothing but air. His right leg buckled from a blow behind his knee. Short, quick strikes pounded his body. Another blow connected against his temple, dazing him. Falling to one knee, Jexx braced his weight against the staff to keep from toppling over.

And then the moment came like so many others before… With a single miscalculation. Sometimes it was in the form of a simple stumble or over extension. Sometimes it was in the form of fatigue… This time it was via the over confidence of youth. Thinking Jexx to be too injured and slow, his opponent carelessly exposed his flank while going through a power-windup maneuver. The young opponent's strong hands gripped the staff, cocked

and ready to swing like a club, he aimed directly for the swollen temple of the exhausted and kneeling Jexx Ulay - A certain deathblow he thought, I'll be headed home soon with a victory... A quick strike to the solar plexus with closed fist by Jexx stunned his opponent causing him to gasp as his diaphragm collapsed forcing him to instantly buckle and starve for air. Heaving and laboring to breathe as he dropped to his knees he made a perfectly stationary target for Jexx. With one fluid and skillful move as his younger immobilized opponent stooped before him, Jexx now stood, and deftly positioned his staff horizontally behind his back by supporting it in the crux of one elbow, he was now in his patented power strike position. The roar of the crowd increased exponentially at this sudden turn of advantage, they knew what they were seeing was Jexx at his best. In fact, they came to expect this and they reveled in bloodthirsty intoxicated anticipation at what they knew was about to come. Taking a quick step back, then followed by a short lunge forward, Jexx coiled and twisted his body while bending at the knees like a locked and loaded human spring. Once fully charged he exploded upward and out, bringing the full force of his attack to a single point on his staff, the single point that was just now connecting with the side of his opponent's head, crushing his skull, breaking his neck and dislodging an eye that flew across the arena and into the frenzied crowd! Jexx came to a sudden upright and rigid stop, standing on his toes. The energy of the moment coursed through his entire body, causing him to shake and tremble as he held his staff aloft he pointed it toward the sky and let out a guttural, primal sounding spit spewing scream of victory! Softly at first a few voices could be heard intermixed within the roaring cheers of the crowd. The now familiar chant grew and grew until reaching an earsplitting crescendo of Ulay! Ulay ! Ulay!

Pumping his fist and holding the staff high overhead in a victory salute to the ninety thousand patrons in attendance Jexx Ulay strode casually across the arena floor and out the Gate Of Triumph.

Even before passing through the gate the gray suited sanitation crew had already entered the arena and tossed the lifeless body of his opponent into the perpetually burning cremation pit at the center of the arena.

There are no second place finishers in arena death-match.

Congratulations came at him from all directions as he made his way to the recovery chamber beneath the arena. "Close one today, eh Jexx?" Said one of the arena merchants. The only response he could muster was to raise his brow, give a wry smile and nod. A wide-eyed youth stood to the side grinning fanatically, his high-pitched voice cracking "You're awesome Jexx! No matter what, you always find a way, *you always find a way!"* Others just stood and stared in amazement at the man. Distant and muted

shouts of “nine cycles! nine cycles!” echoed throughout the corridors. How he had survived nine cycles worth of death matches in the arena was baffling, he never lost, he some how always found a way to win. It had been ages since anyone had even survived past one cycle, yet there he was. A nine cycle Champion indeed! And all the Factions were abuzz with optimistic talk of legendary proportions. After ten centuries people dared to be hopeful once again.

The hot therapeutic salts bath followed by a complete deep muscle massage was exactly what he needed leaving him comfortable and loose. His wounds cleaned and tended to he dressed and caught the next TransPod taxi to the city sector where his residential block was located. The ride home through the subterranean tunnels were usually uneventful. More often than not he was fast asleep and had to be roused upon reaching his complex, a habit he had become a accustomed to after nine long cycles in the arena.

Upon entering his well appointed although small living unit, he decided to forgo his regular routine of watching the daily vidcast briefing on the flat panel and instead went straight to his meditation room and climbed into the hyperbaric sleep chamber for the night. As he lay there he thought, ***There must be another life than this. Can this really be all there is to my existence?***

Eventually his thoughts took him to the same fond old memory he liked to rerun over and over in his mind, like a favorite song or fragrance he enjoyed experiencing again and again. A missed opportunity perhaps, but yet, not so terribly long ago that all was irretrievably lost; to a place in time when his Faction Overseer, Ilek Von Gubberot, gifted him with an unprecedented vacation to the mountainous planet of Iddigo. There he had met the attractive and pleasant young woman Astellia who had the saddest eyes that would light up whenever he spoke. It seemed as though just about anything he would say left her enchanted and laughing uncontrollably at his nonsensical jokes, making him feel as though he mattered. As though he mattered beyond the brute and brawn he took to the arena. Sure he mattered to the Faction he represented. He had won them countless victories during the nine cycles he had fought for them. He mattered to the rabid fans as well he conceded, but only as a curiosity and never did they regard him as anything more than just the combatant who somehow always found a way to win in the arena. Now here was a young woman, he thought, who believed he mattered in ways beyond which he had ever experienced before. He was sure that what he felt those few short days while with her was love. The time they had together was wonderful, meaningful and very precious to him. Her last words “Don’t die Jexx, come back to me!” – His response “I will, I will” He was as determined as ever. Always the platonic gentleman Jexx hated to return home as the three days he was given came to an abrupt end. Returning reluctantly to Tertius VII he had but one desire, to survive and once again return to her. That was nearly two

full cycles ago. He repeated again in his mind "I must return to Iddigo and be with Astellia" and this was the hope and dream that would sustain him. One more contracted fight and he would be allowed to retire for good. He would return to Iddigo to live out his days making the sad yet delightful young woman happy…. And soon he was fast asleep.

His meetings with Overseer Gubberot never lasted more than what was comfortable. In, out, with the work up sheet for his next match opponent in hand, it had become dull and routine over the nine cycles he had been involved. He figured this meeting would be more or less similar. Perhaps he would be given an honorable and safe send off into retirement? He really hadn't any clue since no one ever lived long enough to retire from this horrid existence. He was however in a unique position. ***Perhaps*** he thought, ***Gubberot will release me from my final obligation or at the very least match me with a lesser skilled malefactor from one of the Prison Factions as a way of saying thanks for the nine cycles worth of victories I have given the?*** Whatever the case, he wasn't ready for what greeted him as he entered the meeting hall. Not only present was his Overseer Gubberot, but also the 127 other Overseers from every Faction throughout the System proper.

The directive they gave had left him uneasy and fidgeting in his seat as he rode the TransPod back to his living unit. Their words still reverberated in his mind "We have all decided to come together as one and challenge the Uber-Guild in an all or nothing Combat. And we name you, Jexx Ulay as our Unified Champion". ***Unified Champion?*** That could mean only one thing… He remembered feeling detached from his body, like he was in some strange twisted dream. How could this be? **"*That's a death sentence!*"** He protested, **"*Not only for me but for all of you as well*!"** "We know." Came the sullen response. "But it is necessary. Jexx, we humans are a dying race. There are reports of widespread starvation throughout the system, humans are being used as chattel to serve the UG. We need a rebellion, we need a return to human autonomy. No longer can we be slaves to the Machines! Still feeling bewildered by all this, Jexx managed a weak but sincere reply. "***But how will my death and yours change anything***?" Their response was honest, if not grim "Unfortunately your hopes rely entirely upon your ability to defeat the undefeatable! If you win, we all win. However, we are realists and don't expect a victory. Yes, it is our plan, our hope, that with a call for widespread executions of all Faction Overseers that chaos will erupt, quickly turning into revolt. It is risky, but it is a potential sacrifice we all agree to accept. There are groups now, ready to take control of key areas throughout the system. But we need more people. There are too many that are complacent enough to not get involved. It is our desperate reasoning that with this type of catastrophic event, they will lose that complacency and join the fight to free ALL humanity from the Machines".

But who knows? You're a great combatant, the greatest humanity has seen in over ten centuries! Nine Cycles Jexx Ulay, that's what it takes to enter a qualified challenge against the UG. You are humanities greatest hope in over a thousand years!"

"Yeah sure", he mumbled as he rode the magnetically driven TranSpod back home. ***"Yeah, humanities former greatest hope had lasted an entire seven seconds against the Metallic. HATRED wasn't human, he was a monstrosity, a METALLIC!"***. Jexx shuddered while lost in his thoughts… "***Their plan really stunk."*** And something else was bothering him as well. His mind became awash with the rumors that had been circling about recently. Rumors of long range Faction ships being loaded with supplies. If he didn't know better, he would have thought that all the Faction Overseer's were getting ready to flee the system. He muddled things over in his mind - ***Perhaps it's just as they said and this was simply strategic preparedness for the revolt that was brewing. But what revolt?*** He had never heard of such a thing until he met with the Overseers. ***Of course, I'm not in their loop, I'm just an Arena Combatant. How, why should I know?*** But long range Faction ships congregating so close to UG Headquarters didn't fit with what he had just been told. If they were preparing to overthrow the UG with rebellion a few days from now, why the long range ships? ***If only***, he thought, ***I could be back with Astellia on Iddigo…***

The following days were unlike anything before. The build up of frenzied expectation for this fight was colossal and epic. Ancient VidChip recordings of humanities first and consequently last arena combat against the UG Champion HATRED were replayed again and again on every network throughout the system. Analysts and commentators talked at length in terms of strategy, strengths and weaknesses of both the combatants. Ten centuries had passed, surely HATRED was a pile of scrap by now or stored away in some UG museum as a testament to Machinekind's superiority. Certainly something newer and perhaps just as hideous and deadly would be produced by the UG for the upcoming battle. At any rate, no human currently living had ever seen a Metallic in person or for that matter even a member of the UG. The anticipation, dread and curiosity grew and grew as the day of battle approached and by the time Fight Day arrived things had nearly turned chaotic.

After a long night of fitful, restless sleep Jexx arose groggy and bleary eyed. ***"Not the best condition for fighting off a Metallic bent on crushing you with a steel staff***" he thought. ***"Hell, not the best condition for fighting an old woman coming at you with a broom!"*** He jokingly told himself. The lack of sleep left him feeling weak and shaky as he dressed and ate his customary pre-fight breakfast of oats and toast before heading out

the door to catch the TransPod to what he almost certainly believed would be a most quick and painful end to his life.

The 90,000 plus seated in the Arena were pulsating with energy, caught up in the euphoria of the moment. The High Resonance Personified Band played like never before with fabulous performances from their fine repertoire of pre-fight music that incited the crowd to revel and caused the Duhlmari' Priests to whip themselves into an increasing fury of chants, trances and various intricate assortments of spasmodic bodily movements.

With all present in tumult, grand music blaring and thick, lung choking incense filling the air, Jexx Ulay entered out onto the arena floor walking tall and waving to the crowd with his staff. Over the arena's sound system and broadcast throughout all the system a booming voice announced "Here he is! Survivor of Nine Cycles of Death Match Combat! Here to fight for human autonomy, here this time to represent us all! Humanities Champion… JEXX ULAY! The High Resonance Personified Band then broke into an awesomely arranged fanfare piece, quite fitting for the occasion. But it was nearly drowned out by the ninety thousand plus screaming spectators as Jexx positioned himself near the cremation pit while continuing to salute the crowd as he soaked up the ambience of the moment. As he acknowledged the crowd he couldn't help but notice that every Overseer's Arena Suite was empty. He sighed under his breath "There is no revolt coming. - The bastards sold us out".

Suddenly the floor of the arena shook as the high-pitched whine of servo mechanical gears meshing and moving followed by the loud sound of heavy footfall thudding against the ground filled the arena. One by one the members of the band abruptly discontinued their play as the crowds' once frenzied din died down abruptly and only murmuring could be heard. For there stood the most fearful and ominous looking sight they had ever seen. Standing three meters tall with dull red plating covering its bipedal humanoid endoskeleton, was HATRED.

A rough simulacrum of a human but lacking any graceful features HATRED slowly raised its blunt oblong cranium to survey the arena. Its pseudo face nearly featureless but for two laser targeting eyes glowing an eerie green hue, their beams cutting through the haze of burning incense as they swept to and fro throughout the arena. All in attendance were suddenly given a startling fright as its mechanically driven, deep and gravelly stentorian voice thundered throughout the arena: **"CEASE WITH YOUR CELEBRATIONS. TODAY YOUR CHAMPION DIES."**

Sheer terror passed through Jexx like a wind as he stood staring at the unholy thing across the arena.

"Seven seconds" Thought Jexx.

With a full tilt sprint of ferocity and purpose HATRED rapidly closed the distance between Jexx and itself, a mixture of growling and hissing combined with the high pitched drone of machinery running at top speed, the noisy streaking bulk of mechanized destruction attacked with tremendous force. Jexx was barely able to dive aside to the ground and roll as HATRED's staff whirred past his head missing him by mere centimeters. Continuing to roll on the ground to increase the distance between himself and the Metallic, Jexx sprung to his feet and into defensive posture. HATRED spun with blinding speed squaring its shoulders toward Jexx, the regulation sized steel staff in its grasp looking almost comically small due to its immense stature. The crowd still stunned by the sudden onslaught and mesmerized by the shear spectacle that was HATRED could only sit in mouth gaping silence at what was taking place before their eyes.

Even at nearly three meters away Jexx could feel and smell the heated ozone seeping from the exhaust ports in HATRED's sides. The attack came again and Jexx was barely able to thrust his staff into the oncoming path of the Metallic's weapon in time, even so, the power and force of the hit caused Jexx to lose his balance and his weapon as it was torn from his grip and sent flying across the arena, landing over 25 meters away. Stunned by the blow and suddenly off balance Jexx felt a terribly painful burning sensation coming from his leg. Looking down he could hardly believe what he saw; his leg had been severed completely just below the right knee.

Bleeding profusely and quickly going into shock, Jexx managed to some how separate himself from HATRED by making his way to the opposite side of the cremation pit. Acting hastily he jammed the end of his severed leg into the fire in an attempt to crudely cauterize the wound. A new level of pain was experienced as the raw severed nerves and arteries of his leg were charred into a melted stump of flesh. The bleeding had been stopped. But HATRED was still in pursuit, a rapidly approaching inhuman site of clamoring steel and hydraulics, it quickly rounded the cremation pit chasing Jexx who was frantically trying to crawl and roll around the pit in a desperate struggle to outpace the metal monster, but HATRED was closing the gap fast. Vomiting profusely, his lungs burning and arms weak from crawling, Jexx had to stop. HATRED was upon him and he no longer had the will or strength to flee as the Metallic raised its staff high over head to deliver the most certain of deathblows.

Sometimes it was in the form of a simple stumble or over extension. Sometimes it's simply your own time to die he thought as he stared at his severed leg on the ground. His

leg on the ground ---. Quickly grabbing his own detached limb, Jexx willed himself up into a one legged squat, springing upward he thrust the sharp jagged bone of his bloody severed leg into a gap between HATRED's neck and cranium while letting out an ear piercing primal spit spewing wail of rage he drove his leg bone far up into the Metallics' central processing core. HATRED sputtered and froze still, then his eyes dimmed and went dark.

For a very brief moment all was silent but for the rustling of some banners. Jexx fell unconscious to the ground as the High Resonance Personified Band broke wildly into a triumphant song of victory. As Jexx was carried off the floor by arena med-techs, the Sanitation crew was already near HATRED, scratching their heads and asking themselves "What the hell are we supposed to do with this?"

It would be days before Jexx had recovered enough to leave the hospital. But his thoughts were not on his current situation but upon the lovely Astellia of Iddigo.

The honorary dinners, the congratulatory ceremonies would all have to wait. Jexx was already arriving on Iddigo the day after his release from the hospital. If he could run, he would, but he still made haste as he headed up the walkway that lead to Astellia's residence. Memories flooded back into his mind, his heart leapt with joyful anticipation nearly weeping with happiness and relief as he arrived at the door, which was already open.

Peering inside he saw the formerly neat unit now partially empty with objects scattered about as if someone had left abruptly. "Excuse me, are you seeking quarters?" Turning around to greet the weak craggy voice he saw an old woman holding many key cards in her frail hand. ***Uh no I was looking for the woman that lived here do you know what happened?*** "You mean Mrs. Gubberot?" "***Mrs.?"*** Yes, she and her husband Ilek left with all the other Faction officials. Quite hastily I might add, left a mess. This latest revelation had Jexx's mind swimming with confusion as he absent-mindedly headed for a nearby chair and collapsed into it. "You don't look so good, can I get you something?" The old woman asked. But her voice fell on deaf ears. Jexx sat there staring at a file folder that was left open on the table. It read:

Project: Champion

Subjects Name: Jexx Ulay

Situation: Combatant has survived seven cycles, we need him to survive nine.

Course of Action: Wife of Overseer Gubberot will masquerade as single woman showing interest in Combatant. This will be done with the purpose of generating a strong will to survive in the Combatant. With a strong will for survival and a perceived hope of being with the woman, Combatant will strive harder for victories increasing his chances of surviving nine full cycles of death match fighting thereby attaining qualifying status to enable match with the UG.

The awful plan of the Overseers was all spelled out. He could hardly bring himself to read it, he could hardly believe what it said. They never intended to risk sacrificing themselves for the good of the human race. It was he who was to be the sacrifice, a distraction while they boarded their ships and fled the system. In fact, they meant to sacrifice the entire human race so as to make good their escape! He was never on a righteous sacrificial mission to free humanity! He was a pawn in their plan of deception.

Jexx couldn't know it at the moment, but soon the entire system would be enraptured with celebrating his victory over the Metallic named HATRED. Back home nearly every sentence spoken would be of him and what he had done with elaborate parties being given in his honor. A statue of him would adorn the Grand Hall, he would be a Hero of Heroes. He had won freedom for all of humanity.

He felt like killing himself, but he couldn't bring himself to do so. He knew that he must find the strength to return home, to find a way to overcome this sense of grief and betrayal. He would simply have to find a way.

> With shattered dreams a missing leg and an overwhelming sense of loss now permeating his soul, Jexx Ulay headed home. A Champion.