

Rat Trap

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome back to the greatest show on television: Rat Trap! Now, put your hands together for fan favourite, Contestant 42!”

The applause followed an eerie cadence as every audience member in the stadium rose to their feet, chanting with a dull, mindless rhythm, in time to the swinging of the announcer’s booth that hung over the field.

“Forty-Two! Forty-Two! Forty-Two!”

Laggardly, she emerged from the pit in the centre of the arena, a platform displaying her like a hunk of meat on a silver platter. She was twitching, foaming at the mouth with animalistic eagerness, and her dark hair, tangled and matted with blood and ichor, fell in front of her face. As the bright spotlights hit her, she let out a shriek, covering her eyes with scarred hands.

“Today marks the fifteenth anniversary of our favourite contestant’s first trial, leading to her iconic death in the tar pits!” The announcer proclaimed. *“Sold to Sunshine Broadcasting by her parents at the delicate age of four, we’re all excited to see how she grows as she reaches adulthood!”*

The black walls of the maze, splattered with red stains, old and new, circled her. On the dusty ground laid massive mouse traps, wound to snap at any minute. They were packed together, unavoidable, set, and deadly.

“You all know the rules; if she makes it alive to the golden button...”

“She’s out of here!” The audience called out in unison.

“That’s right! A chance at freedom for the lucky button pusher! With that, let’s start the countdown!”

“Three!”

“Two!”

“One!”

A buzzer blasted through the building, leaving the girl’s ears ringing and her senses overwhelmed. Immediately, she broke into action, flipping and bounding through the fatal obstacles surrounding her. Each one snapped shut in turn, just barely skimming her as she performed her gymnastics act. Within moments, she had reached the entrance to the rest of the maze, landing crouched in front of the failed traps.

“Would you look at that! A true expert at work! Looks like our resurrection technology won’t have to be used today!”

The contestant ran, skidding around the corners of a carefully memorized path; left, left, right, left, right, right, right...

Suddenly, she dug her heels into the mud, stopping herself just short of a massive ditch, filled near to flooding with bubbling acid. A swerving set of monkey bars loomed above it. It was just high enough to scorch the legs of a participant in the pool.

She wasted no time grabbing the first rung, grunting as she managed to haul herself up with her scrawny arms. Unbalanced but determined, she began her crawl, carefully wrapping her fingers around the chilled, titanium bars.

“Inching across the top on all fours! That’s not a move we’ve seen since 2132! I guess we have to... heat things up!”

An agonized yelp echoed throughout the stadium, sending waves of “ooh” and “ahh” through the crowd. Launching herself, the girl sailed through the air, just barely missing the acid and tumbling onto the opposite bank. Though her sight was blurred by tears of pain, she could make out the blisters and burns on her bare hands and feet.

“Ouch! That’s gonna leave a mark!”

Sniffing, she began to run again, treading delicately, this time, for her raw feet; right, left, right, right, left, right, left...

She left a trail of blood behind her as the rough ground cut away at her tender skin. Still, she kept running, knowing that, if she stopped, the consequences would be horrific. However, she came to a screeching halt once more as a roar broke through the air, too close for comfort.

The audience went dead silent.

Pressing herself against the nearest wall, she took a deep breath and shut her eyes tight. With a hard gulp and a reluctant whine, she stepped around the corner.

Golden eyes stared back at her.

The beast's tail twitched, like a bowstring being flicked by its archer. Claws emerging from the spade-like paws dug into the ground, gouging the dusty dirt. Its teeth were bared, snarling, and shockingly white in comparison to the aureate fur of its mane.

"With a running speed of eighty kilometres per hour and an average mass of about one hundred seventy kilograms, the endangered African Lion is nothing to take lightly."

As if on cue, the animal let out another deafening roar, sending the audience into a fit of vacuous cheers.

The girl took a deep breath, puffing up her chest and holding her arms out wide, staring the animal down and doing her best to stand fast. It pawed the ground, letting out a gruff growl.

It took a step forward. So did she.

The spectators were on the edge of their seats, despite having seen hundreds, if not thousands of mutilations in their day. But it was how they were born, how they were raised, whooping or jeering at every opportunity.

In a trice, the lion was charging, baring its teeth as though attempting a sadistic smile. Every nerve in her body told her to run, but she held her ground, raising her arms higher and caterwauling. Her shriek was shrill and nearly as overpowering of that of the beast and her limbs flailed wildly.

Stunned, the lion veered off, passing her, slewing around the corner. At her first chance, she ran, racing through the massive chamber, leaping over bones, gnawed to the core, and excrement that left a stomach-churning odour in the air. Behind her, the enraged cry of the lion echoed.

"Looks like we have a game of cat and mouse!"

Right, right, left, left, right, left, right...

She could hear the creature coasting around the corners behind her, thudding into the walls as its massive weight dragged it farther than it had bargained for. Though her feet and hands still throbbed and tears spilled down her cheeks, she refused to give up. She was so close, she could taste freedom.

Time slowed as she turned the last corner. The golden button sat on a marble pedestal, tantalizingly close. In the last stretch, she sprinted, her arm outstretched. The shadow of the pouncing lion eclipsed her as her fingers just barely skimmed her key to freedom.

Immediately, the ground around her rose, rapidly, to the sky. As much as the lion clawed, it slipped, falling to its death.

"She's done it! Contestant 42 has done it!"

The platform flew up, fitting delicately into a hole cut into the floor of the announcer's booth. A boy stood in front of her at the microphone. He was clean cut, his clothing and manner pristine, but scars covered every inch of his body. His eyes were alight with excitement.

"You did it..." He whispered. "I can't believe it..."

Startled, she scuttled away, hissing at the boy with her claws bared. He put his hands out, as though to calm her.

"It's okay." He said. "Don't worry. You're safe here. No more fighting to stay alive. No more waiting to die. No more of being treated like an animal. The food up here is first class, and the beds are heaven in comparison to the concrete you sleep on down there. You're a human being now.

"All you have to do is talk."

The next week, the announcers sat in their booth, ready for their next event. As of late, there had been two. A woman now narrated alongside the usual man, but no one could recognize her. A dress flowed from her figure and her dark, well-groomed hair fell delicately around her bare shoulders. Though her face was caked with makeup, giving her the appearance of a porcelain doll, the more observant would notice disfigurements poking out and winding down her neck, chest, and arms.

The platform rose from the centre of the arena, revealing a small girl, who couldn't have been more than four years old. Her skin was unblemished and her hair and clothes unbloodied. She was the very image of purity.

“And here’s Sunshine Broadcasting’s latest acquisition, the brand new Contestant 42!”

The audience applauded in their mindless way. Their feet stomped one after the other in unison and they chanted,

“Forty-Two! Forty-Two! Forty-Two!”

“And today in the booth we have the honour of hosting the late, great contestant of the same number. “

He glanced over to her, “Ready to see your replacement?”

The new announcer’s voice had a tone of eager callousness to it, like she was looking forward to watching someone else suffer for once, *“I’ve never been more excited in my life.”*