PUCKSTER, BIRD-MAN, SCHULTZ, & PEG are meeting with SLATE in his domain. It is effectively a white void, with the exception of a rectangular stone table, around which the five are seated, placed outside of an arena marked by a large circle.

SLATE is a human in a pure-white robe and a black mask, through which only his eyes are visible; he fights with a longsword, which is totally unremarkable except for the white glow of its blade. The protagonists are seated around his table, being treated to a meal -- some sort of oatmeal/jelly which is bland, but not disagreeable.

Slate. The Keymaster promises to fulfill man's every desire in the Shift-Plane.
But you know as well as I that the people of this world are foolish -- trapped under the spell of sickening vices.
I believe we should aspire to something more. A world free of meaningless sentimentality, where clearer minds can prevail.
The path to perfection is straight, yet narrow. There were once many men here, fighting to purge the earth of uncleanliness...
...I remain.
The rest, one by one, succumbed to wickedness and debauchery, as if they had forgotten everything.
It's clear to me that people are fickle, and will not adopt the righteous path, unless it is forced upon them. If I am the only one left who will control the new world in this manner... then so be it.

Peg. Nonsense! The world is a vine of sweet sensory delights, waiting to be plucked. I think you ought to... loosen up a little.

Slate. Quiet.
I will not take instruction from a mange-ridden sewer rat.

Sch. *His goal seems noble, but he insults my friend so gravely! Even if he is a little unusual...*

Peg. *"Mange-ridden sewer rat"... 'tis me... hee-hee-hee.*

Puck. *Wow!! This guy's as cool as a cryogenic cucumber on the crux of a crooked crag... so full of ambition, and yet perfectly level-headed... he must be a legendary warrior.*

Slate. And what of you, clown?

Puck. W-what? I am *not* a clown, you idiot!!
...
Forgive my funny face, friend. I used to be a servant in the court of the Dragon King -- but I always wished to be a great and powerful hero.
The Grand Key represents all that I despise. My only wish... is to crush it.

Slate. Destroy the Key! Ha.

Sch. Our mission is to put an end to the Shift for good.

Slate. You must be out of your mind! What sort of creature wishes for an end to a world of absolute serenity?

Sch. A world in which there is nothing left to achieve is no different from death.
I have seen it with my own eyes.

Slate. Hm.
You believe in destiny, perhaps?

Sch. I cannot help it. Every member of my race is fitted with one, from the moment they come of age.

Slate. It is not *destiny* to do what you are supposed to -- that is mere self-preservation. Evil wins when everyone plays by the rules.

You must forge a will of tempered iron, free of selfish attachments, to whittle the world into shape. *That* is destiny; everything else perishes with you.
Gentlemen, you have been wonderful guests, but I am left with no choice.
I only ask that you fight with fairness, and face me one-at-a-time; I am just one man, after all.
Beginning, perhaps, with you. [gestures to Puckster]

Sch. No, I don't think--

Puck. Alright! If you insist on a duel, let's duel.

Slate. Good.
Fear not -- when I'm finished, it will be as if you were never here.

Puck. *Never here... never here...*

Puckster appears dazed for a moment, before grasping his weapon with resolve.

Puck. *I know what it is to be nothing. A laughing-stock ruled by circumstance. A scattered series of events, too meaningless to even be miserable; that's the life of a court jester!*
And now, just as I have been re-assembled by the organising hand of fate, I am to be plunged into the gaping abyss once more -- by a righteous warrior. The thought sickens me.
...
No! It cannot be true! Not after all that I've fought for. If that is delusion, then let me be delusional!!
You don't know me, warrior. This life hasn't been mine for long... and I won't let it go gently.

Slate. We shall see.

SLATE and PUCKSTER have begun their duel; SCHULTZ, PEG, and BIRD-MAN watch on from outside Slate's arena, stood behind a stone barrier. Schultz readies his gun, focusing intently on the fighters.

Peg. The kid clearly has a death-wish. Let him face the consequences of his actions, won't you?

Sch. Somebody's got to look out for him. Until he's strong enough...

Peg. I've told you before -- he's crazy. A traitor to his species. And not particularly good at it, either.
There's no better cure to these delusions of nobility... than a good thwacking.

BM. Just watch.

Puckster employs his usual defensive strategy, valiantly parrying Slate's attacks while he searches for an opening -- but, unusually, he fails to find any opportunity to strike whatsoever.

Puck. *I can't believe it! He has a response for everything! How can it be that a fighter has no weaknesses at all? There's no room for habit... no space for exploitable passion... he just strikes, like he's practiced every move a million times over, with that cold, calm expression in his eyes.*
How is this happening...?

Slate. You don't see it?
It seems to me you've chosen to fight inefficiently.
That staff is obviously too big for you to carry -- and covered in useless decorations.
When you think like I do... defeating show-offs becomes second nature.

Puck. I'm not showing off...
This is the only weapon... I can bring myself to fight with.

Slate. And why is that?
Compensating for something?
Because... perhaps... you know yourself to be weak, and you need something to blame when you fail, to keep that delusional vision of destiny afloat?

Puck. No-- it's not true!!
It can't be true!
But he's right.
This staff is my one true possession. The symbol of my entire struggle. And look at it -- a dead-weight that shames me and fights me at every turn.
And yet, I insist upon it. Because... I want to play the scrappy underdog who comes up from nothing.
But that's all I am. An actor.
...it really is too heavy.

Exhausted, Puckster takes a desperate swing at Slate, which he blocks easily. Puckster lets the staff fall to the ground, unable to lift it anymore.

Slate: Hm.

Slate raises his sword above Puckster's head, the shadow splitting him perfectly in half. Puckster stands completely still, frozen in terror.

Peg. Well -- he's done for.
...are you going to take the shot?

Sch. ...

Peg. Schultz!!

Sch. [eyes closed] *Cut in half... cut in half... cut in half...*

Slate. You have another choice, now.
I am always searching for others... to attend to my vision.
Clearly, you have much to learn. But if you say the word, I will teach you what it means to be a true warrior.
Otherwise, I promise to make this quick.

Puck. ...
What am I doing? He's about to finish me! Just say "yes"! ...and yet, something's holding me back!!

Slate. Nothing?
The decision is yours.
What a shame it is... to see a creature speared on the tip of his own needless passion... full of pride and spite to the very end.
And yet, how deliciously karmic.
You have condemned yourself to this fate. And I, Slate, am its executioner.
Good-night, jester.
Even now, he doesn't seem to be listening.

Puck. [focused, with eyes shut] *If this is to be the end... let me go out on a meaningful memory.*
Think... think...

A scene plays in Puckster's mind, from some time earlier: he and Bird-Man are standing in an ornate garden, observing peacocks.

BM. What a dazzling display.
Forgive me if this takes time, Puck. A peacock is not a simple animal to draw.

Puck. *Bird-watching? I'm about to be cleaved in two, and all I can remember is bird-watching?*

Make it stop! The last thing I want right now is a pretty picture...!
Please! Please!
please...

Puck. Hey -- there's a white one, over there.

BM. It stands out to you? Why's that?

Puck. Hm? His lack of colour, of course... it's serious. Sober. Dignified.
He looks like a wise outcast.
Maybe the others rejected him at first. Because his colour-less-ness made them wonder... if one day, their own colours could fade to nothing, too.
But the heckling only made him stronger.
...and now, he lives all alone in the tallest tree, and he's smarter than all of them, and they plead for nuggets of his infinite bird-wisdom...

BM. That's odd.
First, I've never known a bird to hold a grudge.
But, also...
There's no such thing as a "lack of colour". Put a prism to a white sun-beam, and you'll see it's made up of every colour of the rainbow.
All it takes is a little glass shard... to bring all those shades out.

Puck. I don't see what difference that makes.

The flashback ends. Slate's sword continues to hang over Pucksters head.

Puck. *There's no such thing as a lack of colour.*
There's no such thing... as a lack of colour.
Can you really be as cold and untouchable as you look?

...
I think not.
I can tell you're disgusted by me.
So... you feel one thing. And perhaps not much else.
There's your colour. That's what your years of training have made.
A shrunken, shrivelled-up shell.
...
Now that's something I can understand.
Here comes the shard to the sun-beam!!
You... wretched... FAKER!!

Everything goes white as a mighty "clang" is heard. Pucksters has lifted his staff with new-found strength, blocking Slate's sword mere inches from his forehead.

Peg. Gasp!!
Sch. I... can't believe it.
BM. Smashing.

Puck. I *know* there's something to you! Something I can get a hold of!
Slate. Hm.
Puck. This plainness sickens me!
Because it's pretend! All PRETEND!!
You can't be as pointless as you look! You think you can take control of a desire by burying it?
No! It festers while you're not looking... and becomes stagnant... rancid... uncontrollable!
Just waiting for the right stimulus to come out and tear its victim to pieces!
Slate. Try all you like, worm; I am impenetrable.

Puck. [grinning] Allow me to show you some tricks I picked up in jester school.
It's a joy to fight with something so big & unwieldy.
Because once I get it moving, it doesn't stop.
I set the weight in motion, and then... it starts to carry me, all on its own.
It used to be terrifying -- flinging around this merciless piece of steel. I wanted to control it. Change it. Minimise it.
But it's all I had to work with.
Watch this.

Puckster picks up his staff and begins to spin wildly, until it carries him by its own force. He brings it down with incredible might... and is parried easily by Slate.

Peg. He's spinning!
You told him not to try those spin-moves anymore!
Didn't you?!
Sch. But... something's happening. I can sense it.

Slate. That was terrible!
Puck. ...
Yes. And I've got more just like it.
Hi-yah! [leaps into the air]
I didn't swing anywhere near him! I would have been a sitting duck if he'd just stood still, but he stepped in to parry my attack... purely out of spite! So that I'd feel like nothing!
A noble warrior, indeed! And it's time to put your nobility to the test!
I wonder if you see the crack in that sword...

One. Two. Three.

Peg. A SOMERSAULT!!
I can't look.

Slate. *He's suspended in the air... wide open... flaunting those garish colours...*
I'll show him. I'll show him what happens... to a fighter who loses his composure.
Quit... taunting... me...!

Slate makes a hasty thrust towards the airborne Puckster -- but he saw this coming. He makes a well-timed hammer swing, which connects with the tip of Slate's sword.

Slate. Wait--!!

The sword gives off an enormous white flash as it shatters... into dozens of glass-pieces, reflecting rainbows onto Slate's robe. He falls to his knees.

Puck. Hah... hah... hah...
Do you see?
You are defeated... because you were blinded by passion.
Slate. No... no...
CURSE you!!
I spent *years* disciplining myself! Training for every possible situation!
And my reward for all that hard work? Being undone by some big-talking clown with a blatant disrespect for the art of battle!
Puck. It's true -- I got lucky.

I defer to your expertise.

Slate. I see it now.
Perfection... is doomed to failure by liars, and cheats, and swindlers.
And I am an utter fool for believing in it.
But... I am the last fool standing. The greatest of all who have ever tried.
Doesn't that count for something?

Puck. Your temperance is admirable.

Slate. You're weak. Fragile. It disgusts me.
You claim to have won... but you failed to understand the game we were playing.
But -- no matter, no matter.
All that remains now is strength and weakness.
...perhaps that's all there ever was, outside of this game I concocted.
I feel... a great sense of release.
Buzzing all over.
That's unusual.

Puck. Come with us, and destroy the Key.

Slate. ...
I have a better idea.