

“Derick is now even with Jutro at four consecutive wins. Give him a round of cheers.” The crowd does as told. “Well, believe it or not, Gentry has decided—”

There’s a commotion among the bleachers. There’s a roar, and one of the men guarding the door lands to the sound of breaking bones and slides until the stairs stop him. It’s Wall.

“Everyone stay calm,” the unseen voice says, “panic will not help us right now. Medics, see to the injured man.”

Another roar. I’m on my feet. It doesn’t sound like a demon, but it also doesn’t sound human. A man approaches in the space between the bleachers. The people close to him gasp or scream. One tries to get away and trips.

Once he’s clearly visible, I can see he’s eight-feet tall, his skin is so pale as to be white. He doesn’t wear a shirt, and his muscles look to be too big for his frame. “Black fist!” he looks around. “Where’s Black Fist!”

Robert looks at me. I shake my head. I don’t know who that is.

“Fight me!”

I study him. Definitely strong.

“She can’t be serious.”

I look where Robert is looking. The woman in the suit is looking from me to this brute speculatively.

“Ladies and gentlemen, if you can remain in your seat,” the voice speaks. “We’ll resolve this and get back to our scheduled entertainment. It will just be a minute.”

Robert goes to her. “No. absolutely not. He hasn’t even been looked over by the doc. There are rules.”

“This is the challenge round. Any fighter can challenge another.”

“He’s never fought here before. Look at him, he—”

I put a hand on his arm. “It’s okay.”

“What? You can’t be serious.”

“I’m fighting him.” I have trouble keeping my excitement from my voice. I will be able to fight harder with him. Hit harder, make one of them pay like I’ve been wanting.

“Derick, you can’t fight that; it’s one of those experiments I’ve heard about. That thing could kill you.”

I look him over again. His white dome of a head reflects the light. Now that he is closer, I can see the striation of his muscles under the paper-thin skin and how his mass has ripped open his red pants at the thighs and calves.

Amanda never told me of other experiments, but then again, as I discovered the hard way, she told me very little about anything, even me. Still, it is a big world, and demons are a problem for humans throughout it; the news makes that clear. She created me in an attempt to fight them. Others must have been looking for their own ways of doing the same.

“I’m not worried.” No matter what they did to him, he can’t be tougher than a demon, and I’ve taken enough of them down not to be afraid of this human.

I head for the cage, but Robert grabs my arm. “Derick, are you sure? We’ve already made good money tonight. You don’t have to prove anything.”

“I want to fight him, Robert. I need to fight him.”

Robert curses under his breath. “Okay, then make this fight quick. Put him down with one punch if you can.” He looks me in the eyes and curses again. “Don’t play games with this one.”

I won’t play games. I will fight; by the looks of him, I’ll be able to let loose more than with the others. It’ll be good.

“Alright,” the announcer says, “this is unorthodox, but we do have our next fight. Has anyone considered how he’s going to enter—”

There’s the sound of metal against metal as one of the cage’s walls is raised on pulleys.

“I guess that takes care of that.” The announcer says.

The tall, muscular man ducks under the raised wall, and with one hand yanks it down. Rope snaps and it falls back into place. He grins at me.

“Well, we don’t know anything about this new fighter; I guess will find out after the fight. So this is—”

The man is on me before I can react. I don't have the time to wonder how it's possible that his arms are around me. His fists are on my spine and he tightens his hold, pressing them in with enough strength it reminds me of the demon I fought.

I have a free arm so I punch him in the face, putting enough force in the blow to knock him out. He grunts and grins at me. That blow should have made him let go, at least staggered him. I hit him harder and cut his lip open. Pale blood oozes out from it, but he still squeezes me.

I put all my strength behind the next punch, and my fist impacts with a loud thwack. His head reels back from the hit. He staggers back and finally drops me. I back away, not understanding how his head is still attached; I've broken training robots with such blows. No human could survive it.

He regains his footing, spitting that pale blood and a tooth on the floor. He looks at me, wiping his mouth with the back of a hand. He looks at the blood left on it, and his grin widens.

He runs at me again, and even expecting him I barely step out of the way. I kick at his knee, but soften the strike at the last instant out of reflex to avoid ripping his leg off.

He falls to the floor, but I don't hear the breaking of bone, and he's immediately back on his feet, as if I didn't do any damage. I was wrong—this is like fighting a demon. Did Amanda make this one too?

I dodge the incoming fist, only to be struck with the other one and sent flying to the other side of the cage. I roll and get to my feet. He's nothing like I am, but Claws and I destroyed her research. Maybe this is what she came up with? She said she wouldn't bother hunting me down, but she lied about so many other things.

I block the fist, and the strength of the blow makes me slide back. My arm hurts as a result of it. I dodge the next strike, and barely do the next one. I step forward and uppercut him. He staggers back, shakes his head, but remains conscious.

He swings at me. I dodge, and dodge again as the next blow comes. It's the third time he uses the same move. I let him swing at me again. Dodge and dodge. Exactly the same, as if he doesn't know how to adapt, how to change tactics.

I block and slide back.

He isn't one of Amanda's. She wouldn't create something this brutish, this limited. She prided herself on making soldiers, not machines. I didn't read about them, but she told me about the three that came before me.

This time, when he swings, I drop and sidestep, punching him as hard as I can in the side. He howls. He turns, and I stay at his back. He pauses to change direction, and I kick him in the kidney as hard as I can. He stumbles forward and hits the cage, making it shake and ring.

The human I was before she made me this, was in the military. She'd have picked another like him, no matter what process she used now. She wanted us to have the training, the instinct to fight, so we would eliminate demons for her. For everything she took away of the man I was before, she left me that.

He shakes himself and turns to face me. The grin is gone. The anger in his eyes reminds me of the demons I've fought; there's even a hint of the red light in his eyes, but he doesn't smell like them. He smells human.

He runs at me, arms wide. I stay in place. When he closes his arms to grab me, I move. I grab him, turn, and throw him over me into the cage.

Someone else made him. Robert wasn't surprised he existed, just angry he was here. I need to ask him after the fight.

The man rights himself and stands. He looks at me and roars.

If he wants to behave like a demon, I will treat him as such. Only one thing is effective against demons when I'm unarmed: massive head-trauma.

He rushes me again. This time I let him grab me. As I expect, he raises me off the floor and squeezes. When I punch him in the face, this time I use my right fist, with my skin hardened as much as it can without showing signs of the change. I put all my strength into it. He staggers, but doesn't let go. I hit him again, three, four, five times before he backs against the cage. His face is a mess of pale blood, but he still squeezes.

Six, seven, eight, nine. Pain shoots up my back. Ten, eleven, twelve, thir— I fall to the floor

and have trouble staying on my feet. He's on his knees, swaying. I hit him again.

He falls sideways, and I push him on his back with a foot. I straddle his chest and hit him three more times in the face. He's still breathing, but he is going to be unconscious for a long time.

I stand, and only now notice the silence. People in the stand are looking at me, at the mess I made of the other man. I want to scream, to roar. I raise my fist and they erupt with cheers.

The announcer says something, but the crowd is too loud to hear him. The door to the cage is locked. I almost kick it out; I can barely feel the worry about revealing how much stronger than them I am. I bang on it until one of the security guards opens it.

I head for the exit, ignoring Robert calling after me.

The bouncer outside takes one look at me, at the blood on my clothes, and steps back. I make it around the corner before the shaking becomes too much. I punch the metal wall. I punch it again, my fist becoming harder. I scream my anger. This was supposed to help. I was supposed to feel better now, but all I want is to go back in there and fight every other fighter.

I wish I could go back to Amanda. I wish I'd never left. I got worked up back then, but not angry. I didn't have to force myself to calm down; I was calm, centered. I had my purpose, and that was enough. Now I have nothing. I don't care it had been a lie. I'd go back to it to feel that level of calm again.

I want to know what I am, what's expected of me.

"Are you okay?" Robert asks.

I spin in his direction, and for one instant I can see myself ripping his head off his shoulders. I shake my head, not trusting my voice.

"I never asked, but you have experience fighting them, don't you?"

I glare at him and he steps back. "Hey, it don't matter to me. But the way you fought in there, you've fought things bigger and stronger than you before."

I nod and close my eyes, and take a deep breath. I focus on thinking, instead of being angry. Robert remains silent until I open them.

"It's lucky you did. I think he wanted to kill you."

"I very much want to go back and kill him right now," I growl.

"Hey, I don't think anyone would stop you. Not after that fight."

I lean my head back against the cool metal wall. "This isn't what I was—" I shut up.

"I know, but you're human. It's normal to be pissed off when someone tries to kill you. That you didn't just break his neck once he was down proves you're a good fighter, a good man. Not whatever he is."

He hands me a thick envelope. "Your winnings for tonight, minus my cut. I'll have your share of the bet winnings in a few days." He sighs. "I'm happy you lived through this, but the downside is that no one is going to believe you can lose a fight after this. The bet-takers were already talking amongst each other about if you've been throwing fights."

"I thought they knew. You said we all do it."

"Sure, they knew, but now they know. It was one thing when you were playing the game, you know, losing a decent number of fights, entertaining the crowds. They could claim they didn't actually know. Now? They've seen proof. No one's going to want to fight you anymore." He curses. "I doubt they're even going to let you try to find a challenger. I'm sorry."

I look at the envelope. I don't know how much is in it, but the way I eat, at most it will last a few months. My share of the bets will last a few more.

Robert curses again. "I can't even take you to one of the other fighting rings in the city. Some of their scouts were here tonight, and they are going to spread the word. Before the sun's up, everyone who matters will have heard about your fight.

"I can go to another city. I have nothing keeping me here."

Robert smiled. "I expect that's true, but another city isn't going to be enough. You'll probably have to go to another district to find a place that won't have heard of you after this." He sighs. "I can't do that. I can't uproot my daughter."

I nod.

"Look, don't leave just yet. Let's wait a few days. I'll talk with them; the crowd loves you.

Maybe there's something we can do to keep you fighting here. If you're okay with it, maybe they can find more like that one for you to fight." Robert thinks, then smiles. "You know, maybe there's something there."

I bring up the envelope. "This, and what you'll give me, is going to keep me covered for a few months. I don't need to rush out."

He stares at me. "A few months? What do you do with the money? Burn it for heat? Derick, I've seen where you live, remember? That place costs nothing." He stops, then studies me. "God, you're one of them." He rubs his face. "Well, that explains how you won, but hell, how did you ever manage to pass the drug tests?" I open my mouth to reply, but he raises a hand. "Don't tell me. I really don't want to know that."

I wait to see if he'll expand. Has he really not seen all the pictures and videos of me fighting demons? they have to be all over the place. When he doesn't say anything else, I say, "Text me when you want to meet." I walk away, keeping myself from running until I'm out of the lights. I push myself as hard as I can to burn this anger that's still inside me. After a time, I try to scream it out too.