

“You’re up.” This arbiter is short and squat. I stand and wait for the women to leave the cage. One has a broken arm, the other long gashes on her face, and it takes a man each to keep them from continuing to pound on each other. The young man with the mop does a quick clean up, and I step in.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” a deep voice resonates through the warehouse, “your eyes aren’t deceiving you. There’s been a last-minute change to the schedule. The first of our returning fighters is a man who has surprised us all over these last months. He has won and lost, but he always comes back to entertain you all. He has won his last three fights, which means that if he wins both of tonight’s fights, he will become our new champion, beating the Judge Jutro, who had four consecutive victories when this man defeated him three weeks ago.”

The voice pauses and the warehouse is silent. I know what’s coming, so I’m stepping toward the center of the cage.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I give you, Black Fist Derick!”

I stop as he says my name, and raise my right fist in the air to the crowd’s cheers and boos. The first time this happened, the volume almost knocked me off my feet.

The first time I came here, I wore black gloves to hide my hand. My plan had been to fight with them on, but the people running the fight wouldn’t let me. If I hadn’t needed the money so badly, I would have left rather than take off the gloves. Back then I was still worried a casual glance at it would tell them I wasn’t human.

No one had even blinked at my black hand. They’d examined both hands, feeling the skin to make sure I didn’t have anything under it. I only got two comments on my hand. One was surprised at how uniform the ink was, and another thought it was a waste for me to have gone for black, since my skin’s brown. Over multiple fights, and with Robert’s help, my black hand has become my trademark.

“As always, Black Fist is full of energy.” I’m used enough to the voice to recognize the sarcasm in it now. “But don’t let his dour expression fool you; he will give you a great show this evening. His opponent comes to us from the other side of the city, and he’s here because he has a bone to pick with Black Fist. This is Judge Jutro’s best friend, here to take some revenge on Black Fist for putting the Judge in the hospital. I give you, Georges Gentry!”

The crowd cheers as the man enters, but nowhere near as loudly as they did for me. Georges slams a fist in his open palm.

“I’m going to rip you apart.” He rips his shirt off and throws it out of the cage. He only wears loose pants and shoes. His skin is the same pink as most people in this city, his blond hair short and messy. He moves about, raising his hands and yelling at the crowd. I turn in place so I keep facing him.

I smile.

“Fighters, to the center.”

I take a step back, and Georges steps before me.

“You know the rules,” the voice says. “I want a clean fight.”

Georges swings before the words stop reverberating, hoping to catch me by surprise since the fight hasn’t officially started yet. I saw him put his weight on his back leg before he pulled his arm back. I wait for the fist to come at me, then crouch slowly.

Slowly for me is still fast enough the swing goes over my head. I punch him in the stomach, just hard enough for him to feel it. I roll back, then get to my feet out of his reach. The hardest thing in these fights is to move slow enough to appear normal, to hit softly enough no one notices my strength, and to keep my skin from reacting and giving myself away.

Georges snarls and throws himself at me. He’s fast for a human, but I get out of the way easily. He lands next to me and his fist is already moving. I let it connect with my shoulder, and let the impact push me off balance. He presses with another punch, which I block and respond with a fist to his face, but he dodges it.

I step back and we face each other. Roberts likes for the fights to last between ten to fifteen minutes, but all I want to do is punch him and keep punching until there’s nothing left of him. I force myself to stay calm, and I step forward and launch a punch at him.

He moves to block, but instead of hitting his arm, I open my hand and grab it. I turn and

throw him over me, against the cage.

The crowd cheers.

Georges shakes his head, and droplets of blood fall to the floor. He rushes me, catches me in the chest, and I'm the one slamming in the bars. My head hits them and rings. My vision blurs. I see something come at my face, and I kick Georges's legs out from under him.

He hits the floor and grunts. I step away, giving time for my vision to clear. He's back on his feet, bouncing from one to the other while I step sideways slowly.

He takes a few steps forward and his arm goes back. I prepare to block. I don't notice the shift in his balance in time to avoid the kick—all I can do is move with it to reduce the strength of the impact. Lights still explode in my vision when the foot connects with my head. I stagger, and another kick comes at me. I block it, but now I'm on the floor.

I kick out and catch his leg again. He joins me on the mat.

I'm unsteady as I stand. Blood is flowing down the side of my head. His kick shouldn't have hurt that much; his shoes aren't made of the fabric they look like.

I growl as I give him time to stand. We exchange blows. He hits me, I hit him. He tries for feints, but I'm no longer watching his limbs, I'm watching his entire body, reading it, seeing ahead to what he's planning, and none of it catches me unaware.

When he kicks again, I grab his foot and push him off balance. He falls on his back and I'm in a perfect position to snap his tibia in two. I tighten my hands on his leg, and for just a moment I can see myself doing it, but I manage to hold off. There's still two minutes to go. I pull the shoe off his foot and throw it between the bars. It lands at Robert's feet with a metallic sound.

I drop Georges's leg and give him a vicious smile. I don't mind that he cheated; I'm used to it by now. Humans lie and cheat—it's how they are—but this gives me the right to no longer go easy on him.

By the time he's up, I'm in his space. I punch him in the stomach. I grab his arm, pull him to me, and hit his shoulder. He screams as it pops out of the socket. He tries to knee me in the groin, but I've stepped back, letting go of him.

He curses under his breath, hand on his shoulder.

I smile. "Do you want help getting it back in?"

With a roar, he runs at me. I glance at the clock. The ten minutes are up.

I catch him, add my strength to his momentum, and slam him face-first into one of the bars. The entire cage rings with the impact. Georges bounces off and turns, trying to stay on his feet.

I'm surprised; this should have knocked him right out. Still, it's easy to correct. I punch him across the jaw. He spins twice, then crumbles to the floor. I step out of the cage before the unseen voice proclaims me the winner.

Robert joins me and directs me to the woman in a suit. "He cheated!" He throws the shoe on the table, the fabric his peeled off to reveal the metal underneath.

She looks at it, then at Robert. "What do you want me to do? Take away his loss? Your fighter won."

"I thought you checked for those things?"

"We do. He must have changed them just before the fight."

Robert glares at her before guiding me to a chair. "Let me look at your head."

"It's not that bad."

He dampens a cloth with antiseptic and dabs at the wound. "It stopped bleeding, that's good."

The unseen voice sounds throughout the warehouse, letting the crowd know who the next fighters are. The crowd cheers. I don't pay attention to either.

I'm fortunate that I don't heal so fast people can notice. I'll have to avoid Robert for a week, otherwise he'll wonder where all my bruises have vanished to, but hopefully after tonight I won't feel the need to pound anyone else into the ground for a while.