

THE CIRCLE SQUARED

The cell bars were still there when I opened my eyes that morning. I sat blearily up and wiped the dried blood off of my lips, trying to keep my head from ringing like a gong. The jail smelled of rat droppings and industrial cleaners, the kind they sell by the barrel. It made me want to throw up all over again.

Slowly, with great delicacy, I stood up from the cot and took in my surroundings. How did I get here? There had been some money... a bar... an intake of gin that would have killed most breeds of livestock. The bottle was just about empty when the trouble started. A guy — a big guy — all bent out of shape. Something about a hat I crushed? A song I kept singing? I wish I could remember why he was so pissed... or whether I gave as good as I got.

I rose to my feet and noisily relieved myself in the toilet. My brain did its best to protest the move, but it had very little say in the manner, no matter how loudly it pounded against my forehead. I really shouldn't drink so much. I've been pretty good about it since... since Sarah and the accident... but the urges are still strong. I can't fight them forever — not without a good bender every now and again to take the edge off. Still, it's not a healthy habit. I get sloppy when I drink, and a night in the cooler is the least of what can come from it.

The door to the cell block creaked open as I stumbled back to my cot. A grinning cop with flat nose poked around the corner and fixed me with a cheerfully hateful stare.

"Front and center, rummy. You got a visitor."

I wiped my mouth again and moved over to the bars, wrapping my hands around the cool metal to steady myself. Drunks don't get visitors, especially transient drunks with moth-holes in their pockets and the carefully cultivated look that says "I was dragged behind a truck for six miles." Was this trouble? That cop looked awfully smug. Could they have found out who I was? There were no worries about fingerprints, nothing like that, but if they dug too deep, they would learn more about me than I wanted anyone to know...

The door opened wider and my guest stepped in. Not NLEB, nor the Central City PD, but that was small comfort. He stood about seven feet tall: modestly thin, but full of enough wiry muscle to give him some bulk. At 9:00 am, he was dressed to the nines, wearing a black-on-black tuxedo marked only by a single white carnation. His black bowler derby sported a thin white band, and matched the rest of the ensemble almost perfectly. But it wasn't the hat that drew my attention. It was the Halloween mask below it.

A gaunt. Oh Jesus.

His skin was gray and leathery, like all of his kind. Pointed ears stuck up from a hairless pate, twitching ever so slightly in the cool jailhouse air. His nose was nothing but a pair of cadaverous holes below eyes that were black and hollow as a shark's. Pointed teeth flashed from his mouth, while the digits that emerged from his silk shirtsleeves were nothing but

clawed talons. Already, I could feel the effects of his draining: the vampire-like aura that all gaunts possessed, sucking the life out of everything around it.

The cop shot another gleeful look my way — I was quite the punchline, apparently — the closed and barred the cellblock door. The other cubicles were devoid of prisoners; whether accidentally or by design, this was a private audience.

"My name," the gaunt began, "is Jack Drago."

"I've heard of you," I replied. "You're taller than I thought."

"My friends in the press have never quite captured my stature. You should have seen the pictures after the Lombard massacre."

"Bet they caught the blood on your tie well enough."

"Well, they do what they can." He flashed another toothy grin. The pounding in my head was back and I could feel myself beginning to lose my footing. His aura was having a very bad effect on my hangover.

"So tell me," I countered sharply, trying to hide my growing discomfort, "what's Central City's biggest scumbag doing in a drunk tank at this hour?"

"Bright boy, listen to his questions." Drago produced a cigar from his breast pocket, then neatly clipped the end using his incisors. He spat the tip into the center of my chest. "You want to ratchet your tone down a spell; it bothers me." A flare of the match, and smoke began wreathing a halo around his derby hat.

"You wouldn't be the first gaunt I've rubbed the wrong way."

"No, but I will most definitely be the last." His free hand flicked out in a blink, catching my cheek with its nailed claws. The blood welled freely and I could smell something beneath the talons — raw hamburger, maybe several days old.

"The precinct captain is on my payroll. I could gut you like a trout and walk out of here scot free with your innards sprayed all over my chest. Boys in blue would mop up your corpse and not one of them — not one soul — would raise a word of complaint."

"Is that supposed to scare me?" I struggled to contain my rising gorge.

"If you have any sense in your palooka head it would. But maybe you don't. Maybe you're dumb enough to take the bull by the horns like you did last night. And that's why I need you."

He turned around and blew another smoke ring, then sniffed the air through membrane of his skeletal nose.

"Some of my boys saw your little circus act," he continued. "You took a guy apart without breaking a sweat. Big guy, too. Big hands. Must have outweighed you by forty, fifty pounds. My boys said you've got the moves — you used to box professionally I'm betting — but there was something else. Something that meant your playmate's in the hospital right now instead of cooling his heels with you."

"You got a nasty core, kiddo," Drago turn back towards me and looked me right in the eye. "You got a streak of mean in you ten miles wide, and that's exactly what I'm looking for."

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I run a club down near the Switchyards. Private gentlemen, high class all the way. At certain times, we are compelled to put on a show for them: boxing matches and the like which don't fall into the bounds of strict legality."

"Gaunt-human matches," I muttered.

"The very same. You'd be surprise how much people will pay for a little casual bloodsport. There's just one problem: the normals I put into the ring haven't been faring too well against my fellow gaunts. The last one's in a convalescent home with permanent brain damage. The others are dead. It's a bad precedent. Guys don't want to get into a ring with a gaunt, pretty soon people don't want to pay to come into my club no more."

"That is a tragedy," My heart sunk as I could see where he was going.

"Isn't it? I thought I was going to have to shut my little enterprise down. And then I heard about you, battling out of your weight class."

"That was different. I was... I was drunk. And the other guy wasn't a gaunt."

Drago smiled his nasty smile again. "Fighting is fighting. And you my friend, know how to fight. So here's the deal: you go into the ring tonight, you give me three rounds or more against my number one bull. You do that, and you can walk out of here scot free."

"That doesn't sound like much,"

"No? Turn it over in your head and see what comes leaking out," He suddenly thrust himself forward, his ugly mug just inches away from mine. "We did some checking on you. No name, no history, no job records, nothing but a rented room signed out under a John Doe. That means you're running from something, something you don't want found. You do this for me, and my boys keep your past buried where you like it. You don't..." his voice trailed off menacingly

My knees were weakening, the dizzy spells increasing, but I still looked him right in the eye. "That's still not much."

"Yes it is," his black eyes twinkled with glee. "Guys like you place a high priority on anonymity. I'm prepared to let you keep yours if you do this little favor for me."

"I could still say no, take my chances with the cops."

"You could. But then you'd make me angry, and you don't want that."

"You think I'm afraid of dying?"

"Oh you don't have to die. The police could find a panel truck of stolen cigarettes outside that flophouse of yours. Or a dead hooker in your bed. And then *they* start asking questions... and they won't stop like we did."

He had me and he knew it.

"Think it over," he smiled cheerfully, then stood up. "You have until noon. Just tell the man on duty that you're ready to play ball and he'll take care of the rest. Me, I've got to get this suit pressed and change into something more casual. The ball game starts at one, and I've asked His Honor to cheer on the Switchmen with me."

"You have a rest, smart guy. I'll see you tonight."

I could only watch him go. Thank God he was out the door before my legs finally gave way.

Drago was right. I did know how to fight. Back before time began, boxing was all I could think about. I was no Rugged MacReady, but I had good form and could pay the bills with a steady stream of undercard bouts. Twenty wins, eight knock-outs, six losses. An entertaining little pug who could keep the crowd amused.

Sarah never understood what drove me to keep climbing into the ring. Sarah with her crooked smile and her laughter in church bells and her soft hands on the back of my neck. I would come home from the gym, my fists throbbing like raw steak, and she would tend to them like an angel of mercy. She chided me and teased me: "You're never going to fight with the best of them," she would say. "You're not that good." And she was right. I was never good enough, despite all the training and all the skill and all the rage welling up in my breast at the start of every round. Whatever it was that defined a champion, I simply didn't have it.

But I wanted it. Wanted it so badly I would have done anything for it. And in those days, I always got what I wanted.



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I held out almost five hours before calling for the guard. I would do what Drago wanted. What choice did I have? Laughing Boy came by and opened up my cell door with another of his point-and-snicker routines. I signed out for my belongings — using the “John Doe” handle, which they never looked twice at — and made my way as quickly as possible out the door. The sunlight beat down mercilessly onto the streets of Central City, and the wind from the lake blew in a living wall of humidity. There was an evil smell to it, a dark gassy stench that rolled through the streets in great invisible clouds. People moved away from it, ducking through doorways or clambering up fire escapes. But they couldn’t escape. The smell was everywhere.

I took the elevated train to my apartment and packed up my things. Regardless of how this went down, I would need to move on. I slipped past the manager who sat behind his desk, fixated on the Switchmen game coming from the radio. I still owed him for a week. As far as I was concerned, I could go on owing him. I thought briefly about heading to the train station and making a run for it, but soon dismissed the idea as suicide. Jack Drago wasn’t the sort to let an insult go unpunished... and there wasn’t anywhere I could go where he wouldn’t find me.

As if to compound the matter, a sleek black sedan was waiting for me when I reached the street again. A pair of goons — one gaunt, one human — stood flanking the rear door, holding it open as I approached.

“Get in buddy. The boss wants you all clean and scrubbed for your big night.”

I eyed them warily, then consented and got in.

The car was cool and air conditioned, in stark contrast to the stench outside. The human gangster tossed my suitcase in the trunk, then shoved himself in after me, while the gaunt got in on the other side. Yet the back seat held the three of us comfortably, and the upholstered leather was soothing against my knotted back. At an unspoken command, the driver pulled into traffic, leaving my flophouse far behind.

Ten minutes later, they tossed me out in front of the club, with my suitcase in a sad little heap next to me. The looming brownstone seemed to glare down, pinning me to the sidewalk like a bug on a card. The neighborhood was decorated in early refugee, with a corner liquor store the only business that seemed to be thriving. Up the street a tired-eyed woman who might have been a waitress staggered towards her apartment, shuffling a little more quickly when she caught my gaze. Somewhere close by, a train whistle echoed. It wasn’t too late to cut and run...

The club itself occupied the first story of the brownstone. At first glance, it looked no different from any corner bar. But then I noticed wooden Venetian blinds that kept prying eyes from peering inside and the massive front door giving a look that said “scram” in big block letters. With the sound of a bolt turning, it swung open silently for me. Giving one last glance at the abandoned street, I stepped in.

The room I found myself in was a world away from the lower class desperation outside. Oak-paneled floors gleamed from the soft light of crystal lamps, spaced evenly around the area to provide maximum illumination. The bar was made of mir-

rors and brass, and it didn’t look like it carried any of the watered-down brews it was advertising in the windows. A female bartender in a man’s tuxedo shirt stood quietly polishing glasses, while the hulking bouncer who had opened the door glared menacingly at me.

“You the guy what’s boxing here tonight?” he rumbled.

“I guess I am.”

“Downstairs.” His finger jerked towards an ornate elevator standing next to a wide set of polished oak stairs heading down.

The basement was scuffier, but it had its share of charm. Tables covered in white cloth surrounded a stout-looking boxing ring, the canvas floor illuminated by a single spotlight. A pair of archways presumably led off to locker rooms, while a set of swinging doors opened on to what I could only assume was a kitchen. In a few hours, it would be filled with bigwigs eating steak and lobster, goosing their mistresses, and waiting to see a man get beaten to death by a hulking monstrosity.

“You’re here. Good.” The voice was Drago’s, echoing from behind the ring. He stepped out into the light, his black suit now a more pedestrian cut. “How you feeling?”

“Hung over. And cranky.”

“We’ll fix that.” He handed me a bottle. “Bromide. To clear up the cobwebs.”

I took it wordlessly and tipped it back into my mouth.

“So who’s the leatherback I’m facing?”

“Leatherback?!” I’m offended, Mr. Doe. A pugilist has to overcome this terrible disease, this gauntism, and you’re hanging nasty labels on him.” He clucked his tongue disapprovingly.

“Right,” I sighed. “So who is he?”

“No one of any particular consequence. Stand up guy on my payroll named Hilarion Jones.”

“HILARION JONES?!” My face went pale. “But he’s a heavyweight!”

“WAS a heavyweight. He took a fall for us a few years back in the title bout. We’ve been looking out for him ever since.”

“Wait, you don’t understand. I’ve never fought higher than welterweight. He’ll massacre me!”

Drago smiled reassuringly. “You’ll do fine. Just like last night.”

“No, you can’t! I’ll—”

“You’ll do what you’re goddamn well told!” His sudden fury boomed in his voice. “I want you in that ring, so in that ring you will Fucking. Well. Go!”

“I can’t beat him, Drago. I can’t.”

“It is not your JOB to beat him! It is your JOB to remain standing for three lousy rounds while he works out on you! It is your JOB to take his pounding like a man, and give my customers the show they paid for! Don’t you get it, you miserable little pipsqueak?! This isn’t a boxing match, it’s a bloodletting! And you’re the lamb on tonight’s menu!”

I backed away slowly. Drago’s eyes glittered as he fixed me in their sight.

“There’s guards at every exit, kiddo. You try to leave, they’ll shoot you down. Then I finish my detective work on you and hunt down anyone you ever might have cared about. You got a sweetheart out there, champ? You got a sick old mother?”

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My hands began to shake. "Please. Please, Mr. Drago..."
"Please is for Sunday dinner, punk! You play your cards right, you might live to have another one!"

His hands clenched into fists and for a moment, I thought he was going to pound on me himself. Then he seemed to contain himself.

"Look kid, it's easy. You just stay upright, hit back when you can, and dance around long enough to whet the crowd's appetite. Put in your time, and you can take a dive whenever you like. Then you're out of this mess.

"But I want it looking good. No flinching or ducking, no going all knock-kneed like you did back in your cell. You got a good build, you're still in shape. That should keep you around long enough for Jonsey to do the real work."

He walked slowly past me and up towards the stairs.

"There's equipment in that locker room there. Suit up around six, do whatever you gotta do in the meantime. But when that bell rings, smart guy, you better pony up and pay the piper. It's not like you have another option."

The locker room was quiet and a set of trunks was all laid out for me, along with gloves and a decent set of wrappings. I would probably have to prep myself, but that was the least of my worries. It set my suitcase down on the stone floor and put my head in my hands. A few minutes later, an eerie calm settled over me. I could feel the adrenaline ebbing away. Quietly and without lifting my face, I began to review my options.

Escape was not possible, not even if I could get out of the building. The time for that would have been back at my apartment. Neither could I simply refuse to fight. They would toss me in there like a Christian to the lions and Hilarion Jones would gobble me up.

Christ, Hilarion Jones.

I remembered his last fight, the one where Drago claimed he took a dive. He had weighed in at two hundred and forty pounds, and lasted eight rounds before his opponent put him away. How much longer could he have lasted, had the fix not been in? Ten rounds? Fifteen? Or would he have clocked his opponent before that, sending the other gaunt sprawling to the canvas in a gush of blood?

And I had to stand against him for 540 seconds. With six fewer inches and a hundred fewer pounds.

Gaunt-human boxing had been outlawed for years, ever since gaunt heavyweight champ Rugged MacReady killed normal champ Royal Murdock in the ring. Gaunts had the edge in size and endurance, and although weight class wasn't a problem, the gaunts' unholy aura was. The draining normally took time, but in close quarters, it tended to accelerate. Fight with a gaunt for a few minutes, and you start to feel dizzy. A few more and your vision went all gray. A normal human who could spend six rounds in the ring with a gaunt was a paragon of stamina and endurance.

Despite the illegality, gaunt-human boxing was still a popular attraction in underground clubs like this one. They took pugilists on their way down, hot-heads without the discipline

for legal fights, or just local thugs. Normally, a human would be pitted against a gaunt in a lower weight class, to give the fight some semblance of fairness. All too often, however, it would be even weight — the idea being to make the human more of a rooting interest, as well as increasing the chance of seeing a serious injury.

But this, this blew them all away. This was murder plain and simple.

There was a way out of this. I had done it before. But I wouldn't do it again. I couldn't. Not for my life or anyone else's. A sudden image sprang unbidden of Sarah. My sweet Sarah howling in agony, the bones of her fingers shattering like china as her hands deflated into misshapen lumps...

Anything to get ahead. Anything at all.

"No," I whispered. "Never again."

I would take my medicine as best I could. Keep my guard up and find a way — any way — to survive the punishment that that animal would dish out on me.

I was dressed and prepped by 8:00 and two more of Drago's baboons came for me at 8:30. The undercard was a brief little warm-up act with a couple of flyweight gaunts; seasoning for the meat grinder of the main event.

At 8:55, I walked towards the ring, flanked by the baboons. It had been awhile since I was in any kind of formal match, but even this cheap fraud brought back echoes of the old rush.

You could do it. You could take him down. All you'd have to do is—

The crowd had arrived and dined in style; almost five hundred of them packed into the basement like tuxedo-clad sardines. Fat corpulent businessmen sat with girls twenty years their junior, girls who paid no attention to the wedding ring on their sugar daddy's finger. A group of young sharks with the air of City Hall about them sipped brandy and puffed on cigars as they watched me approach. Bodyguards and goombas flanked the obvious players, their jackets bulging with extra artillery. And in front of me, dancing in the ring, was my opponent.

He was shorter than Drago, but a whole lot meatier. His arms pumped up and down in rapid shadowboxing motions, muscles flexing beneath his taut gray skin. His jaw jutted out in a gruesome underbite; the lower fangs curled up over his lips in a reptilian sneer.

Did I say he was big? The bastard was a goddamn battle-ship.

Easy as pie to finish this in round one. And no one would ever know; no one could even SEE it if you did it right—

I closed my eyes and forced myself to focus. Had to keep a clear head in the ring, remember my training, and use my speed to find an edge somehow. On the other side of the ring sat Jack Drago, back in his penguin suit with a fresh flower in the lapel. He smiled wanly and clapped as I stepped into the ring, eager as anyone to see the show begin. The announcer read our names to the crowd, but I was already thinking, anticipating his first moves and how I might avoid them. Getting into the rhythm. Sensing the ebb and the flow of how the fight might proceed.

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Jesus, he was a big bastard gaunt.

But it wouldn't matter if you played this smart. Not one bit.

"I said no!" I muttered, drawing a raised eyebrow from the ref. He stared at me for a moment, then ordered us over to our corners. A baboon was sitting there in his shirt sleeves, with a spit bucket and a couple of sponges at the ready.

"Boss says I just gotta keep the blood out of your eyes. He don't want this over too quickly."

"Then he should have found me a smaller playmate."

The baboon flashed an ugly gap-toothed grin and helped me pull off my robe. "That's funny. You're a funny guy. I'll be sure and collect your teeth for you between rounds."

Jones was looking over at me with a mask of pure hate on his face. A jagged tooth caught his upper lip, causing a razor thin leakage of blood to spill down over his chin. He licked the cut with a black tongue, and I swear I could see his eyes go wild with the ecstasy of it.

Then the bell went off and the time for thinking was done.

He bridged the distance almost before I could blink. I sidestepped an oncoming jab and danced back into the middle of the ring. Jones didn't have his guard up and I made him pay for it with a right cross up the middle. Punching him was like punching a concrete wall. He just looked down at me and then countered with a flurry of blows that I could barely see. The second caught me just behind the ear. I saw stars and when I came to, he was looming in my sights all the larger. Quickly, I threw up my arms to block another assault. Each jab shuddered through my body, rattling me down to the core.

Fifteen seconds into round one.

I jabbed at him again and managed to catch him in the throat; the Marquis of Queensbury wouldn't approve, but I didn't see him in the crowd that night. He bellowed and paused a moment to catch his breath, giving me the opportunity to work his ribcage a little more. That clearly wasn't going to work, but at least it looked like I was putting up a fight. Then he shook his head, as if to clear it and swung 'round with a vicious haymaker. It caught me square in the jaw; I felt my teeth rattle against each other as blood sprayed from my upper lip. Before I could think he followed it with a left to the nose. Crimson marked his glove where he had made contact and I could feel the hot mess of it bubbling slowly down my chin. I hit the canvas flat on my back and heard the referee starting to count.

Luckily, I was close to the ropes and used them to pull myself up before he reached "5". Jones snarled like a wild beast and charged towards me, but left an opening through

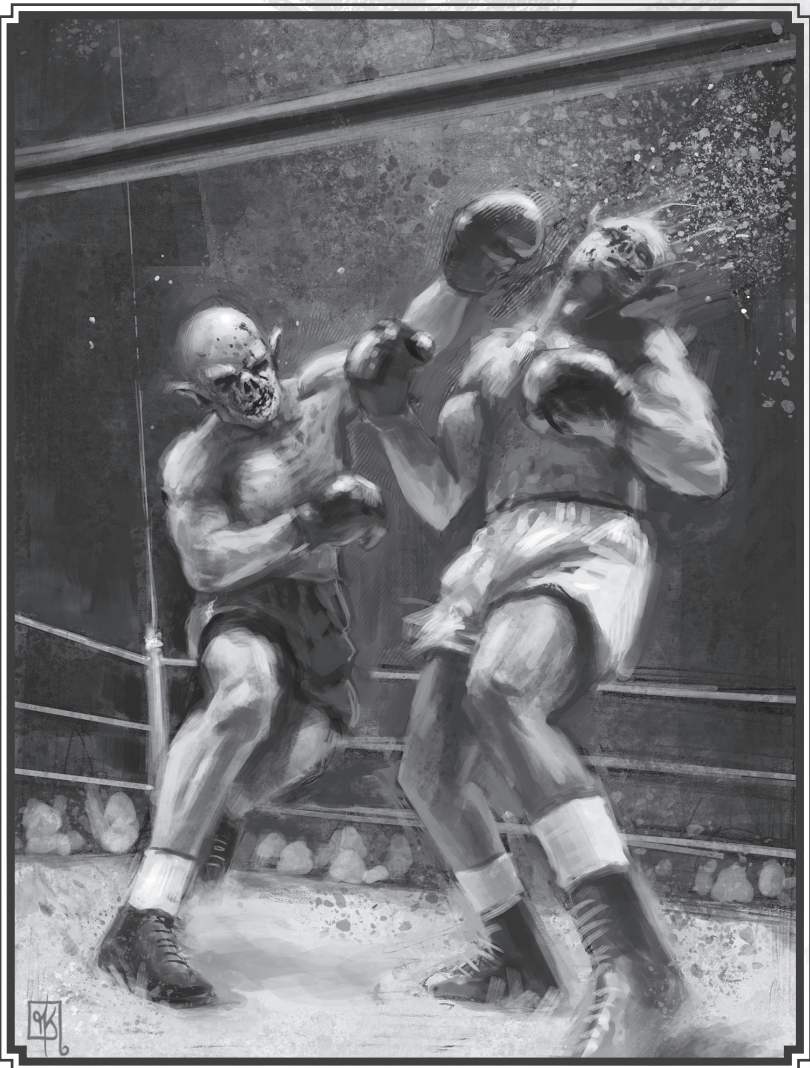
which I could easily duck. I danced around him for a few more seconds, ignoring the pain in my head, starting to feel the rhythm of the ring. I was getting into form now, thinking more clearly. I began to see a pattern in his technique, too, making it easier to-

WHOOOOOOFF!!!

His right caught me in the gut, driving the air out of my lungs. I staggered a step and barely got out of the way of his follow-up, a left uppercut than might have sent me into the nearest tables. The crowd roared and Jonesy lunged forward while I struggled to get my guard back up. It felt like an elephant had sat on my chest; tears filled my eyes as I struggled for air, staggering backwards in a desperate attempt to hold him off. The bell rung, signaling an end to the first round and giving me a momentary reprieve.

This could be over in a second, you know. The thought clung with me as I stumbled back to my corner.

The baboon held out the spit bucket and I emptied about a quart of blood into it. Then he rammed a Q-tip full of coagulant into my nose and I could almost smile. Nice to know they cared.



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"You just cost me fifty bucks," he whispered in my ear. "I didn't think you'd make it to the second round."

"Life is full of little disappointments," I slurred the words in what I hoped was a manly fashion.

"Get back out there, champ. Your dance partner is waiting."

The bell went off again and I was on my feet. This time, Jones wasn't fooling around. He came straight at me and unleashed another flurry of blows that I no longer had the strength to avoid. I threw my arms up again and managed to absorb the brunt of them, though it pushed me back against the ropes and started the blood flowing from my nose again. I swung weakly at him, grazing his shoulder in a knock that a small child could have shrugged off. The canvas rolled beneath me and my vision dimmed for a moment. His aura was starting the affect me.

He came at me again and I weaved drunkenly aside, ducking a haymaker that would surely have knocked my teeth right out of my head. I landed a blow to his lower kidneys, which drew an excited gasp from the crowd as if it would actually have an effect. He grunted, as if having to exert himself for the first time, then bore down on me — those hollow shark's eyes calling for an end to it.

Change the rules. Change them, or you're going to die right here.

No, I can handle this. We're almost halfway through; just one more round and then I can take a dive like a good little pigeon.

Then he swung again and the rules changed for good. The blow hit me right in the chest. I felt something crack and when I took in a breath, this ragged clawing pain followed up my windpipe. I fell to my knees, my hands on the canvas, which was when Jonesy — sweetheart that he was — landed another blow on the back of my skull. I slumped down to the canvas, and the ten count started again.

I needed to get up. I had to stand. Drago would kill me if I ended things here. Somehow — to this day I can't say how — I pulled myself up to a standing position by "8," holding off defeat for a few more precious seconds. If I could just get to my corner... if they would just let the end of the round come.

The end of the round's not coming. Jonesy's going to finish you off right here.

I could see the big leatherback as if in slow motion. Time became a crawl as he drew his fist back for one final punch, the one that would crush my chest like a chicken's egg and leave me in a shuddering bloody mess on the floor.

Just like Sarah.

Do it. Now.

I can't. I won't. Not like last time. Not like what I did to her.

Sarah isn't here. The only people around are the ones who paid to see you suffer.

No! No-no-no-no-no...

Those cracked ribs are poking into your lungs, Jonesy's aura is starting to really grip you, and you're going to drown in your own blood if you can't stop that broken-

Alright.

I whispered something beneath my tongue — a complex mathematical formula of the kind you never see outside of rocket science — and brought my fist up to counter his blow. As I did, the material of my glove hardened to the consistency of steel. We connected with full force and he shrieked in surprise and agony as his fingers crumpled. In a flash, the effect was over and my glove returned to normal. But the cat was out of the bag, and there was no use denying it now.

He swung his uninjured hand towards me. I fixed it with my gaze and envisioned another formula — this one dealing with kinetics. The energy flowed around him, struggling to connect (for some reason, magic can't affect living flesh easily) before finally fixating on his glove. He shrieked again as his fist slowed down, allowing me to sidestep it with a minimum of difficulty. The crowd hadn't caught on — they saw only a heroic rally — but Jonesy sure as hell did. Magic use is like battery acid to gaunts, and he had clearly felt its effects before. I had to move quickly.

Reversing the formulae I had just invoked, I swung my fist around in a haymaker. Its velocity increased to inhuman proportions as my glove once more became as hard as concrete. It caught his jaw and sent him sprawling backwards, a blow that would have felled an oak tree. I followed it with another, and then another one after that. Each one sent daggers of pain into his body, compounding the concussion of the blows themselves into something transformative. He started to surge forward again, but then I adjusted the consistency of the canvas, which sent him to the floor. The pain in my ribs slowly faded, replaced by the all-consuming obsession of those equations, which now flowed freely and easily through the corridors of my mind.

Magic. Banned in every corner of the country. Subject of fear and superstition. Destroyer of lives and homes, and the worst kind of addiction you can ever envision.

But damn if it doesn't even the odds something fierce.

Jonesy realized what was going on, but he was helpless to stop it. All he could do was squirm a little more and hope he could put me away before I finished him. Fat chance. I tore into him with everything I had, my pain and fatigue chewing at me, but dimming rapidly in the face of the power I felt. Images flashed in my head — Sarah and her hands, Drago and his ugly mug, the anonymous back alleys where men taught me to warp the laws of physics and change the boxing ring to my own personal lab — but I just used them to fuel the inferno. I kept it up for a full minute to keep the crowd from letting on. I didn't want it to look like he was just taking a dive, that wouldn't be kosher, but I know the impression I was giving. I had given it in a dozen matches, most far more rigorously enforced than this farce, and it slipped back around me with the comfort of old slippers. I had been playing possum, the crowd thought. I had lulled him into a false sense of security, then let superior technique and a blazing will take him down. That was the most obvious explanation, which is the one most people inevitably swallow. No one thought a palooka like me was smart enough to learn magic... no one since Sarah.

Two more left-right combinations and bruises started appearing on his flesh. Two more and his left eye had swollen shut. I worked the lather up good and when I thought I had

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everyone buffaloed, I finally dropped him. When he hit the canvas, I found another formula and kept the weight of a full grown elephant on his back. Just to make sure he didn't get up.

The referee was holding my glove up in triumph when my body remembered how damaged it was and the room suddenly faded to black.

When I came to, I was lying on an old army-issue cot, staring up at the linoleum tiles on the ceiling. The firm grip of white plaster swathed my ribs, while an oversized bandage lay across my nose. I sat up slowly, only to see Drago perched conversationally on a chair at the foot of the bed. A loaded gun lay pointed in my direction on the table next to him.

"Not too quickly, smart guy," he spoke in a low tone. "You ain't going anywhere."

I groaned and lay back down against the blankets. Drago continued.

"You know, I had half a mind to shoot you right there. You made my bull look awful stupid; if we hadn't carried him outta the ring, I would have thought you two were in cahoots. Little punk."

"Where are we?" I managed weakly, my fingers softly clenching against the side of the cot.

"Safe house. A place my boys go whenever they need resting up. You looked like you could use it."

"Should I be thanking you or looking for the fire escape?"

"Your choice," he smiled. "The second option will hurt. A lot."

"Good point." I eyed the gun on the table. "So why am I recuperating here at the Gangland Ritz instead of lying in a shallow grave in the woods?"

"Call it a whim. I get those sometimes." He stood up. "I've got to hand it to you kid, you're the first boxer I've seen smart enough to use magic... and you're the first who was slick enough to win a fight with it. It's a good hook. A hell of a lot better than paying guys to take a dive. And the crowd ate it up with a spoon."

"So?"

"So I want to put you on the payroll."

My eyes widened. "What?!"

"A fighter like you could be real handy," he went on. "A new wrinkle on an old favorite. You come to work for me, and I'll throw you a steady diet of palookas who you can take apart just like you took apart Jonesy."

"No."

"You use that word an awful lot. We gotta break you of the habit."

"Look, what I did against Jonesy was a one-time deal. I wasn't thinking straight."

"And now you are," he picked up the gun casually. "Which is why you'll see that it's really in your best interests to agree."

"What about the NLEB? The crystal ball squads? People are looking for me."

"And that's different from every other warlock in the world... how? People will always be looking for you kid. Stick with me

and they'll never find you. I pay folks to look the other way. I've built an empire on hiding the obvious in plain sight. You think you're the first fella I've made disappear?"

I gazed at him thoughtfully for a moment. "I'll disappear?"

"Like a ghost. You show up for your bouts, that's all. Hush-hush stuff, under the table, in front of fans who have too much to lose if they start asking questions."

"And the money?"

"Enough to keep you in painkillers for as long as you like. You're a natural longshot, kid. I can clean the bookies dry with you. And I'll cut you in on every payday."

"What if I don't agree?"

Drago sighed. "You're a broken record, kid. Don't waste my time with questions I've already answered."

I closed my eyes, then opened them again.

"No more than four fights a year. I use the John Doe name on all of them. And I want you to send all my profits in non-traceable bills to the Child of Heaven Health Ward in Gateway. There's... there's someone there who could use the money."

Drago snorted indulgently. "I think that can be arranged."

I held out my hand. "Then you've got a deal."

And that's how it started, my career as a warlock boxer. Everything Drago promised came true. I fought gaunts and unsuspecting normals in underground clubs all over the city. None of my opponents knew about the ace up my sleeve and they never complained about the results once Drago and his goons explained things. I had a nice place to live and a few boltholes to hide, and I eventually learned to stop looking over my shoulder for the next torch-bearing mob. All I had to do was use my magic like I had always trained to do.

That's really what it all boiled down to. I took Drago's offer to keep him from killing me. I took it to gain a fresh start. I took it for the safety, and for the security, and for the money which I sent faithfully to the ward where Sarah will be spoon fed oatmeal for the rest of her life. She'll never know where it comes from and maybe the accommodations will be better now because of me.

Yes, I did it for all those things, each reason a good one, each one helping to soothe me at night when the demons come slithering out of my subconscious.

But mostly I did it because I wanted to.

Breaking the laws of physics is a rush unparalleled in the whole of creation. Feeling for the loopholes in the unbreakable system, and sliding through them the way a fish slides through a drainage pipe... it fills you with energy, it makes you feel truly alive. For the briefest of moments, you can sense the worlds beyond this one: worlds without guys like Jack Drago, where good people aren't chewed up and spat out with quite so much regularity. I tried to fight it after Sarah got hurt. I told myself about all the trouble I would get into, and how the government would come for me, and how I'd end up shot dead by a crowd too fearful to let my abilities out of control. But sooner or later, in some form or another, I was coming back. Why?

Because magic is power. And power is the only reason anyone has for stepping into the ring.