

Chapter 642

The Sex Magic Thing

Jason's second opponent in the underground cage fights had been capable enough, but suffered from a critical flaw in his fighting techniques. This was due to an absence of the essence abilities he normally had access to, and Jason completely sympathised. Combat styles interacted with essence powers on a spectrum, with one end having the fighting style as the skeleton, with the essence powers building off of it. This was Sophie's end of the scale, and such adventurers fared the best when deprived of their powers.

At the other end of the scale was Jason, whose essence abilities were the fulcrum of his combat style. He had developed his martial arts specifically to work around his powers, rather than his powers working around them. When deprived of his essence abilities, such as in the cage fights he was undertaking, he was forced to heavily adapt his normal style.

Jason had the good fortune to have enjoyed Rufus as a teacher and Sophie as a sparring partner, which meant he had the practise adapting his style. Rufus, as a magic swordsman, fell in the middle of the spectrum, where skill and powers both needed to be mastered in order to thrive.

Rufus had been adamant about preparing for the worst-case scenarios, such as being forced to fight while power-suppressed. Given that Jason had met Rufus in that exact situation, he understood why Rufus had been so emphatic about it.

The opponent clearly fell on Jason's end of the spectrum, but without his training at the hands of Rufus. He also lacked the time sparring with Sophie, who relished hammering every gap in Jason's techniques caused by the absence of his powers. After feeling out his opponent, Jason dished out the same treatment. When he was done he looked over at where Sophie had already finished her opponent and was watching him from her own cage.

"Took you long enough," she called out to him.

"I'm a lover, not a fighter," he called back.

"And how's that working out?"

"Well, I'm fighting so... not great."

Sophie let out a laugh that startled Jason with how free she seemed. Although she was using the Nightingale name again, as she had in the fighting pits of Greenstone, she was a world away from the prickly creature he remembered. He flashed her a grin and then walked down the stairs revealed by the opening floor panel, into the changing room below.

"You really do know the Nightingale, don't you?" Zolit asked.

"I already told you that," Jason said as he emerged from the shower with a towel around his waist, using a second towel to dry his hair. Zolit ignored his nakedness, but his aide did not, her eyes wandering over Jason's scarred torso. The lean, sculpted muscle was unremarkable for a silver ranker, but the permanent marring of his flesh was not.

"My eyes are up here, lady," Jason told her.

"I'm not looking at your eyes."

"*Bennie*," Zolit hissed sharply and she sullenly stalked off.

"You seem worried, Zolit," Jason said. More than his body language, there was a change in Zolit's aura since their last encounter. Someone or something had put a proper scare in the little man.

"I'm just nervous about your next match," Zolit lied. "Two rounds is enough to make sure no one is left standing through luck."

Jason's ability to read the complex emotions of people through their auras had rapidly grown over the years. On Earth especially, where most people had little to no power to shield it, he had learned to dig through the nuances of what their auras revealed. Jason had a feeling that Zolit had some inkling of either Jason's real identity or had become aware of how dangerous learning it could be.

Underneath that surface concern, though, was a deeper worry. He was repressing it well, leaving Jason with no sense of what it was, but there was a fear that any trouble coming from Jason would bring it to light. Odds were that it was just some criminal activity making Zolit nervous; the cage fights were literally underground, but not against the law. If there was something shadier going on as a side business, that would explain the small man's wariness.

Zolit left and Jason's familiars re-emerged, Jason's gaze lingering on the door that had closed behind the fight promoter.

"Do you think Mr Kreen is related to our real purpose here?" Shade asked.

"It's worth checking, but probably not."

"An outworlder might be more aware of how dangerous the messengers could be than the people native to this world," Shade suggested. "Such knowledge could make them more amenable to being an agent for the messengers, should they come calling."

"That's good enough for me. Have Stella look into him, but have her focus on the aide more than him. What did you make of her aura?"

"It seemed easy enough to read," Shade said. "You noticed something suspicious?"

"The thirsty vibes she was giving me seemed a little performative. I haven't been paying that much attention, focused as I've been on Zolit, but that may be the point."

"You think she is masking her aura and using Zolit as a distraction, so no one looks too closely at the ordinary elf standing behind him?"

"Anyone with halfway decent aura senses will mark him as an outworlder, and that draws attention. It certainly drew mine. But I think whatever spooked Zolit may have worried her a little and she overcompensated. I'm not saying that means she's what we're looking for, but she seems a better candidate than Zolit. I think that guy really is just an outworlder who found his calling as a small-time crook."

"Do you want me to surveil her?"

"Let's hold off on that for now. If she is masking her aura, then she's very good at it. And if she's that good with her aura, she might spot you. Let's give Estella time to do some professional spying before we make any more moves."

"Are you implying that I'm an amateur, Mr Asano?"

"I'm saying that I'm an amateur and you're stuck with me."

"Very astute, Mr Asano. Self-awareness is the path to enlightenment."

"You are terrible at giving compliments, you know that?"

"I work with what I have."

Above them, the panel at the top of the stairs slid open.

"Alright," Jason said, looking up. "Time to go beat up a girl."

Jason groaned as he moved to get up, only to have a foot on his torso shove him back to the floor.

"You know," he croaked, "I could probably keep this up for a while. I'm in a lot of pain, it's true, but being in pain is kind of my thing."

"You're a masochist, are you?" the woman looming over him asked. She was an unusually tall elf, muscular, like Neil, but she wore it a lot better, at least in Jason's opinion. Proportionally she was similar to other elves he'd seen but fifteen percent larger, like looking at her through a zoom lens.

"I prefer to think of myself as open to new experiences, but looking back I can see how—"

Jason yanked on the leg pressing into him as his hand pushed the back of her knee. His body spun like a top and flipped away from her in a display of acrobatics only available to silver rankers or people bitten by radioactive spiders. His opponent was already moving, a foot catching him in the gut as he landed on his feet.

Jason let the momentum carry him, softening the blow as he started a one-handed backflip but then shoved himself into the air. She had predicted the backflip with her follow-up lunging kick that hit nothing but air. She threw out a punch as Jason pivoted in the air, twisting to catch her in the chest with a kick. It did no damage, having been launched from the air with no leverage, but it shoved her away long enough for him to land.

Jason held up his hands.

“Can we just pause for a moment to appreciate how awesome this fight is?”

He failed to block her straight punch to the face and he reeled back.

“No,” she said and kept coming.

The level of the training and experience his opponent possessed was thoroughly imprinted on Jason as the fight continued, lasting well past Sophie's match. In most cases, a drawn-out match was not enjoyed by the crowds, but this fight had the audience fully engaged. The elf's relentless, efficient attacks clashed with Jason's shifting styles and tricky counterattacks. There were wild acrobatics and frenetic exchanges of strikes, punctuated by lulls as they felt each other out. Jason attempted distracting banter in such moments, usually followed by his receiving a sharp blow to the head.

Jason had trained to adapt his skills for when he didn't have his powers, but the results were not flawless. Slowly but surely, the elf picked him apart, the way Jason had done with his previous opponent. It was just a much longer and more even affair where Jason landed more than a few brutal attacks of his own.

Both combatants were heavily pummelled, but Jason's stamina was the first to give out. Even so, he desperately clung on, used to fighting on the ragged edge. He even managed to surprise his opponent, who had managed to break apart every trick and tactic Jason had thrown out and baited her into.

Back to the wall and giddy from a merciless pounding, Jason's not entirely lucid mind put him into fight or flight, drawing on old experiences. The cage fight didn't have much in the way of rules, but he had still been treating it as a sport, albeit a brutal one. The savagery that came from Jason entering survival mode startled the elf.

Taken aback, a fist to her face included a knuckle to the eye. Jason yanked her arm straight and twisted it before bringing his elbow down on hers, bending it the wrong way. Jason almost turned the fight around through raw aggression before she countered. His onslaught was vicious but also sloppy, both from the mindless approach and his still-exhausted body. Even so, he didn't stop until she hammered his body so badly it would no longer move. She stood over him, staggering, blood dripping from her mouth and fists.

The door to the change room opened, admitting not Zolit but Sophie. Jason was already healed, largely due to the recuperative powers provided by Colin. He was still painted red, however, having not yet taken to the shower.

"I can't believe you cheered for the other person," he groaned.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she said innocently.

"I heard you yelling 'kick him in the bits, random lady!'"

"That could have been anyone."

"Uh-huh."

"She was pretty okay, I'll admit. It took me a lot less time to handle her than for her to handle you, but still, not bad."

"Oh, that's how it is?"

"You couldn't even make it to the final round."

"Oh, you want to go find a mirage chamber and see how that goes?"

"Absolutely."

"Ugh, I forgot I was talking to someone who kicked me in the face the moment we met."

"I could have kicked you in the face again today if you hadn't lost to a girl."

"You're a girl."

"I'm a woman."

"So was she, believe me."

Sophie narrowed her eyes.

"How is the sex magic thing going?"

"It's mostly been me getting the crap kicked out of me."

"That wasn't the first time?"

"It was not."

"How about the other thing? Stumbled across anything yet?"

"I might have something. My promoter's aide tweaked my spider-sense."

"Your what?"

"Never mind. Estella will look into it."

"Then you're free to come drown your sorrows. All the arena big-nobs are throwing a party for the fighters who managed to avoid embarrassing themselves."

"And that includes me?"

"No. You kept getting punched in the face midway through a pathetic banter attempt. But I can get you into the party."

"What do you mean by pathetic?"