

Chapter 640

What You Want Instead of What You Need

Jason had accessed the restricted section of the fighting dens with a payment that was outlandish to the rebellious youths packed shoulder to shoulder in the main area, but negligible to any mildly successful adventurer. The restricted area was the largest of the subterranean chambers, with four cages surrounded by chairs. It was less crowded than the open areas, due to the exclusivity, while still being relatively packed.

The clientele weren't any kind of city elite, based on what Jason could tell from their clothes, auras and the general presence of thugs. He suspected this was a place where the mid-to-high level members of the local underworld congregated. Jason made his way slowly and carefully, even using some of his aura tricks for moving through a crowd, although he was careful about that as well. He didn't notice anyone that would be able to sense his manipulations, but that didn't mean they weren't present and just better at hiding themselves than he was.

Jason's attention was drawn to a valash, which was a skinny sapient species not native to Pallimustus. The man was not just lean but downright skinny, with a stature even shorter than Jason's and a chihuahua-like head. He wore a pristine white suit, not in the local style but more fitted. Compared to the flowing, tapered lines of local elf fashion, this would have been more at home in a Miami nightclub in the eighties.

The valash slipped through the crowd with practised ease. He was obviously familiar with the environment and making the most of his small stature. Despite being diminutive, he was not pushed and shoved, or disrespected by the people around him. His silver-rank aura meant more than shoulders the size of a park bench, especially as it had no signs of core use. Arriving in front of Jason, he looked him up and down.

"How do, new meat? Did the burly fellows at the entrance tell you the rules, or just take your money and usher you through?"

Jason was surprised on hearing the smooth, deep voice that came from the tiny man, suddenly imagining him and Taika in a body swap movie.

"They didn't tell me anything but the price of entry," Jason said. "Which makes me wonder if they were negligent or if you're trying to lure me into a game that isn't real."

"Disappointed as I am that you're not the ever-pleasant conglomeration of money and stupidity, I'm afraid you really do have some issues you'll need to work through."

"I already have a mental health professional for that."

"Not that kind of issues," the valash held out a hand for Jason to shake.

“I'm Zolit. Zolit Kreen.”

“John Miller,” Jason said, shaking the man’s hand. “How did you pick me out as a first-timer?”

“There's only so many silver-rank auras floating around in here,” Zolit explained, “and I know all the others. Plus, they don't come in through the public entrance, especially without an entourage.”

“I should have people with me?”

“I told you about those rules, right? Rule one is that if you’re new, you either put up a fighter or you fight yourself.”

Zolit looked him up and down.

“Human, core user, but your body language tells me that you aren’t some wilting leaf. You know where the boot goes if it comes to it. Adventurer auxiliary?”

Jason nodded.

“Sharp eye. I’m the cook for a team passing through the city. They want in on the messenger fight.”

“Them and every other team in this town. You know where glory leads? A glorious death.”

“I know that better than most,” Jason told him with complete sincerity.

“So, a cook huh?” Zolit asked.

“Yep,” Jason said. “Cooking, grocery shopping. Knife skills.”

Zolit grinned, Jason was surprised at how easy it was to read expressions on the small man, despite his unusual appearance. He suspected that Zolit was very good at showing exactly what he intended, especially given the tight rein he had on his aura. Jason wouldn't be able to read the man's emotions without pushing hard enough that someone would notice.

“You don't have anyone with you, do you, Cook? That means you either need to get out fast or get in a cage. You'll need a fight organiser for that.”

“Which you just happen to be?”

“One of life’s funny little coincidences,” Zolit said with another grin.

“And what if I say no?”

“One way or another, you fight. Do you think you can carve your way out past everyone here, with those knife skills you mentioned?”

“No,” Jason lied.

“Then you need to secure a slot in the fight slate. Single-round elimination, matched by rank and collared so no one gets killed.”

“Do I get paid if I win?”

“You get a slice of the betting take, so you want to put on a good show. Silvers can take a lot of punishment and no one wants to watch two of them slapping each other pointlessly for an hour. But something tells me you've got something ferocious inside, even without your knives. To be clear, you can't take your knives.”

“Don't worry so much about winning. Some proper adventurers fight here; mostly locals but some outsiders looking to make extra cash. You manage to make a decent showing against one of them and you can make some good money, even on the losing end.”

“So, how does it work?”

“Sixteen fighters, four rounds, single-round elimination. You fight until you lose. Come with me and I'll get you set up.”

Jason was in a chamber underneath the cages. It was a changing room with a shower made of partly tiled-over brick. It also served as a waiting room for the fights above, with stairs leading up to a sliding panel that went directly into a cage. The only other exit was a heavy sliding door, also made of brick, opened and closed by a touch crystal on the wall.

With Jason and Zolit was an elf that worked for him. She was a silver-rank core user with plain, dark brown clothes and a big duffel bag.

“This is Bennie,” Zolit introduced.

“Benella,” she corrected with an annoyed shake of her head.

“Bennie will help you find your look since you don't want to fight in your regular clothes,” Zolit said. “Unless you want to end the night dressed in bloody rags, although maybe that's a look you want to go for. The savage brute who lives only to fight can be a good angle, especially for a walk-in like you. I'm not sure you have the size to sell it, though.”

“Let's try something else,” Jason said.

“Alright, then,” Zolit said. “Bennie?”

Jason was given a variety of options, pulled from Benella's duffel. Her offering ranged from gi-style outfits to things closer to regular athletic wear, as well as combat robes and flashy lucha-libre style costumes, complete with masks. There were far more clothes than would fit in a non-dimensional bag, which made Jason wonder why it was so big. He guessed that making it that large was less expensive, as opposed to the extravagant dimensional coat that Emir possessed.

Jason went for shorts and a top made from clingy, slick fabric that would resist being grabbed. The result made him look like a professional bicyclist. As he was changing, he did not miss the looks shared by Benella and Zolit when they saw his scars, but he kept the soul crest on his back out of their sightline.

“Okay,” Zolit said after he changed. “We’re going to head back upstairs and watch how you do. Just wait until that panel opens and head up through. You can figure out what to do from there.”

“What are the rules of the fight?” Jason asked.

“You’ll get stopped before anyone dies,” Zolit told him.

“The crowd usually doesn’t like eye-gougers unless things get desperate,” Benella added. “They have no problem with a little brutality, though. They want to see a fight.”

“Or a lot of brutality,” Zolit said. “Once the fight is done, the panel will open back up so you can come back down. Or get carried down, depending on how it goes. You can’t have familiars up there, by the way; the magic in the cage will sense them. If you have any, leave them behind in here until you come back.”

Zolit and Benella made their way to the large stone door that slid open or closed with a touch crystal set into the wall.

“Zolit,” Jason called out.

“Yeah?”

“I don’t like it when people run around asking questions they shouldn’t.”

“Is that so?” Zolit asked lightly.

“It inclines a man to start asking questions of his own.”

Zolit laughed, touching his face.

“You wouldn’t be the first to wonder what I am, Cook.”

“I know what a valash is, Zolit. My questions would be significantly more pointed.”

Zolit’s face went blank as Benella looked between the two men with curiosity. Zolit left, Benella in tow, the door closing behind him.

“A cook, my narrow ass,” he muttered.

For Jason, it was refreshing to practise his unarmed techniques against someone other than Sophie, who regularly disassembled him without hesitation or mercy. His first opponent was clearly a cage fight veteran, given his theatrically aggressive tactics and use of the space. The cage walls, as it turned out, were barbed chain links. As the other fighter slammed Jason into it, his flesh was gouged as the opponent pushed him along it.

Jason's slick, flexible clothes didn't rip, their frictionless surface helping him out as it slid across the razors, only his exposed arms and legs being slashed. For Jason's part, he played possum at the start, feeling out his enemy. He made the most of his silver-rank resilience to tease out his opponent's weaknesses, which quickly became evident.

From the way the man fought, Jason guessed he was more cage experience than trained technique. Of the two, the experience was the better to have, but he also had weaknesses that Jason was able to exploit. After taking the time to feel out his opponent and let the bets stack up against him, Jason began his counterattack.

The critical strength of Jason's fighting style, The Way of the Reaper, was the versatility that allowed it to be adapted to different circumstances and different approaches. Sophie used it in a domineering fashion, relentless hammering on an enemy's weak point. Jason took a very different approach, employing deception and baiting his opponents into exposing themselves to counterattack.

Soaking damage, Jason set up rope-a-dope counterattacks that inflicted damage that would have crippled an iron ranker and debilitated a bronze. Baiting his enemy into an overreaching lunge, Jason stomped hard on the side of his knee. If he was going to take down a silver ranker, it would take that level of damage over and over, which he proceeded to do.

It slowly dawned on Jason's opponent that his hits were landing less and less often, and not hitting as hard when they did. Jason was no longer letting himself get rammed into the cage, and the aggressive assaults were exposing opportunities for Jason to counter with brutal strikes to knees, elbows or bell-ringing head strikes.

The audience watched as the initially aggressive cage fighter became more and more cautious, as if he were fighting a trap golem instead of a man. He didn't realise that he was instinctively backing off as Jason walked slowly across the cage until he heard the jeers of the crowd.

Knowing he needed to turn the momentum back in his favour, the fighter resumed his aggressive attacks but, by this point, Jason had his measure. Experience had taken the man a long way, but his range of attacks was limited and Jason had read them all. That was not to say that it was completely one-sided as the man certainly landed hits, but they weren't hard or repeated enough to take down a silver ranker. Jason's counters, by contrast, involved bending wrists, knees and elbows in directions they weren't meant to, and hammering other joints to slow down the opponent.

Jason had to admire the man's tenacity to keep attacking, but by the culmination of the fight, it was like watching someone charge into an industrial wheat thresher over and

over, coming out more broken and bloody each time. Finally, it became a one-sided beatdown of a man broken in body but not in spirit, refusing to surrender. As he demolished the man, blood painting his forearms, Jason absently thought back to a time his actions would have filled him with horror.

“Yield,” Jason said coldly, getting only a snarl in return. He repeated the offer before he broke each limb, at which point the fight was called in Jason’s favour. The floor panel opened and he glanced at the other three cages before descending. He had been ignoring the familiar presence in one of them, even though it meant he had no chance of winning overall. The Nightingale’s grace, speed, beauty and expertise put every fighter to shame.

Jason shook his head and descended to where his familiars were waiting for him. He stopped in front of Shade, blood dripping from his hands.

“Am I broken?” he asked, more curious than fearful.

“Everyone is broken, Mr Asano, and anyone in that cage has chosen to be there. Life is about working around the damage. You don’t have the luxury of showing mercy to those who choose pride over wellbeing.”

“But I want to be the guy that does. I like mercy.”

“There is a reason I called it a luxury, Mr Asano. If you do what you want instead of what you need to, it all goes wrong.”