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## Chapter 1

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RAJ WAS no stranger to being hit. He'd spent enough time pitted against savage opponents in the Ring that he couldn't be, and before he'd found this place, he'd been in more fist-fights in his somewhat misspent youth than he could count. In truth, he didn't really mind it; he was so used to shaking off pain that it took someone special to actually make him feel the hurt when they managed to land a blow. The secret, he'd discovered, was to make sure he hit them back hard enough that they thought twice before doing it again.

To a certain proportion of the fierce, aggressive fighters that the Ring attracted, his size—over six and a half feet tall—made them view him as more target than threat; for one, they thought they'd be fighting some kind of slow, lumbering brute, and for another, there was always the draw of wanting to be the one to bring down the biggest man in the Ring. "Just means there's more space to aim for," he'd heard someone boast jokingly once before entering a bout with him. He'd hit the man especially hard to make up for the disrespect, not stopping until the guy had to be carried to the Ring's resident doctor on a stretcher.

His werewolf abilities gave him no special edge as a fighter here, either, since the Ring had a firm policy of no shifting and no magic, and almost all the fighters were werewolves anyway—most of the Mystic City packs had a training scheme in place, following the centuries-old—and admittedly now, almost completely obsolete—tradition of keeping all their pack members of fighting age ready for a skirmish or invasion, just in case. So, they wound up with a bunch of well-trained fighters with no way to utilise their skills other than grappling with packmates, and a small proportion of those ended up somewhere like the Ring, showing off their skill to a mostly criminal audience and getting paid for each fight won. And they were good fighters, most of them.

Raj was, as his current winning streak demonstrated, better.

He had the advantage of his size, but other than that, very few of the benefits he was accustomed to in werewolf fighting—he could only fight in his human form, no teeth or claws allowed. All he had were his experience, his fighting instincts, and his fists, and somehow that made it all the more satisfying to be able to bring down an opponent. It was powerfully gratifying to know that just he, Raj as a man, without involving his wolf, was still one of the most formidable fighters the Ring had ever seen.

They called him The Librarian, because he'd foolishly let slip to someone that that was his day job, though most of the crowd that attended the fights probably just thought that the name had been allocated to him so they could follow it up with a variety of terrible puns about checking out books and paying fines. The people who watched his fights weren't exactly of the crowd that the library attracted, so he wasn't particularly worried about being recognised by any of them at work.

Tonight, he was fighting a wolf who was almost his size, though not as fast as Raj had ruthlessly trained himself to be. This one, referred to in the Ring as "The Professor" ("Time to get taught a lesson!"), was relatively new to the fights, but from what Raj had seen, he was ruthless in the way he fought, brutal and efficient to the point that his opponents were often taken to be looked after by the doctor who was paid a ridiculous amount to care for the victims of the underground fighting with the required discretion.

While the crowd roared and jeered, Raj stood in his position across the Ring from the Professor as they sized each other up, looking for potential advantages they might have missed. This was the part that Raj lived for—the adrenaline, the rush as his body prepared itself for brutality. The setting aside of societal norms and sinking into something more primitive. There was no pretension in the Ring, no layers of inference and implication, none of the political manoeuvring he was now used to as Beta of the Blue Crescent pack. It was almost unsettlingly easy for him, after all this time, to sink into the simpler, more brutal, instinctive version of himself—almost as if he was becoming his wolf, without actually shifting. Once the fight had begun, there was no thinking, no questioning, no uncertainty. Only winning, and losing, and pain.

And there was a part of Raj that relished the pain.

The anticipation of the fight blossomed in his chest as he surveyed the massive underground space that the Ring inhabited. It was a huge, excavated cavern, hidden beneath a warehouse complex that was perpetually under construction. The walls were raw rock, as were the tiers of seating that rose like an amphitheatre into the smoky darkness above. The Ring itself was raised on a platform that stood about three feet above the floor, a canvas-covered circle bound by ropes, and it was the only part of the cavern that was lit. The

crowded tiers disappeared into the darkness, providing only the vague sense of rows of people packed together, smoking and drinking, money and far less legal things changing hands deep into the darkness of the crowd. The desire to bring pain reverberated through Raj as he watched his opponent playing to the spectators. Raj stood still, knowing that silence would momentarily fall.

The Ring's organisers, two sharply dressed men named Rod and Abram who Raj could only assume had a lot of experience with Mystic City's criminal underworld, climbed into the centre of the Ring and the anticipated hush fell over the crowd.

"Hello, friends," Rod and Abram said together, as always, their voices magically amplified to echo through the rough-hewn space, which then rang with cheers from the amped-up spectators. This time, it was the taller of the two—Raj still didn't know which one was which—who continued to speak after their joint introduction to the biggest fight of the night. They seemed to decide which of the two of them would give their customary speech with no pattern that he could discern, not alternating, but without one taking the speaking role noticeably more than the other. The speech was basically the same every time the Ring fight night was held, each time a few of a limited collection of phrases repeated just infrequently enough for the crowd not to get bored of them.

"Thank you, everyone, for your attendance at another of our informal gatherings!" Rod-or-Abram declared, a smile audible in his oily voice, and the spectators roared. "Another night of brutality and debauchery. A night for the strong to show what they are made of and the weak to fall to their superiors. Are you having fun, my friends?"

Again, the crowd screamed. Fuelled by adrenaline and alcohol and the witch-spelled pills and powders that were

traded in high volumes at this event, they were desperate for this final, and likely most brutal, fight.

"Tonight, for our champion fight, we have something special for you," Rod-or-Abram continued. "A meeting of minds. Two lovers of learning, here to teach each other a lesson... or at least, to try." The sarcasm of his comments about their Ring names made his voice sound even smarmier than usual. "Our returning champion—you know him, you love him—the Librarian!"

The crowd yelled again, and Raj acknowledged their response with a nod. It felt like a veil had slipped over his vision, allowing him only to focus on his opponent and the fight ahead. Tension built in him, tension that he knew from experience would only dissipate after he'd bloodied his fists and taken some blows, relished the pain even as he shook it off like water from his wolf's coat.

"And tonight's challenger, the Professor!" Rod-or-Abram yelled, and Raj's opponent played to the crowd's answering roar, raising his arms and snarling at them as though he might imminently shift into his wolf form.

"Enjoy this night, my friends," Rod-or-Abram said. "You won't see a fight like this anywhere else."

There was another enthusiastic roar from the crowd, and then the small man who acted as announcer was back in the centre of the Ring, listing each of their fighting records and calling out final betting odds. Raj ignored him. His blood started to pulse in his ears, and he shifted from foot to foot, his muscles coiled for the moment he was unleashed.

Finally, the announcer stepped out of the Ring. There was a final hushed moment of anticipation, and then the bell rang. For once, Raj didn't wait for his opponent to make the first move. He leaped at the other male, his fists ready, and drove a blow straight into his jaw before the Professor could move to defend himself. The crowd roared, but Raj blocked

out the sound. He didn't have room in his brain for the watchers, only for the man before him, who recovered with lightning speed and threw a punch at Raj's stomach. Raj punched him in the jaw again while he was distracted, copping the blow to his belly and blocking out the pain of that, too. The Professor, who seemed completely unfazed by the fact that Raj had just given him two blows that each, individually, would have been enough to lay another man out completely, spat blood on the ground and dove at Raj, tackling him to the floor. Raj took blows to his face and torso, moving and writhing in an attempt to get the smaller man off him, but he was well-braced, and Raj's position was hardly an admirable one. The announcer of the fights was usually fairly lax about ringing the bell that ended the fights, allowing them to go on much longer than a legal fight would have allowed—after all, people were here to see blood and pain—so Raj wasn't worried there would be a swift end to the match. He wasn't pinned—he was still striking the Professor as well as he could from this position—and he definitely wasn't finished. The next few minutes were a blur of fists and elbows and knees, of pain and satisfaction, smashing his forehead into the other man's nose, reaching for his eyes as if he'd claw them out right onto the dirty canvas. None of the rules of civilised fighting applied here; he could do whatever he wanted, as long as it wasn't irreparable damage, and with the benefit of the Ring's warlock doctor, there was very little that counted as irreparable. His blood pounded in his ears as he released the primal part of himself that was always just beneath the surface, howling to be let loose. This, it had quickly become clear, was not a fight he was going to win easily.

But hell if he was going to lose.

Raj had been attending lessons on how to fight both in his human and werewolf forms since he was a pup. And he'd

been training, if you could call routinely getting into fights "training", for almost his entire life. In some ways, the lived experience was better than the careful sparring practice of Pack training. In those years of unofficial fights, he had learnt to fight the way he did now, without care for how much damage he was doing his opponent—or himself. He wasn't going to let one man with an absurdly high pain tolerance get in the way of the results of over twenty years of training. The Professor would not leave the Ring as victor.

The roar that left him as he finally managed to pin the other man to the ground was almost beyond recognition as human. Blood from a long cut on Raj's face was dripping onto his opponent even before he began pummeling him with all his considerable strength. He felt bones break under his blows, felt the man trying desperately to reverse their positions, but he held the Professor down under his weight, his knees pressing the other man's upper arms to the ground so he couldn't even try to land a blow of his own, and a single coherent thought managed to penetrate the animalistic haze that ruled his mind. *Who's getting taught a lesson now?*

The bell rang, loudly enough that even Raj, in his altered state of mind, could register it, and he climbed off the other man, swiping at the blood streaming down his face. It would heal soon enough; werewolves were lucky like that. One of his eyes was starting to swell, too, and based on the force of that blow, he'd be lucky to be able to see through it tomorrow if he left it.

He rarely went to be seen by the doc after his fights, unless he had a particularly obvious bruise that wouldn't heal within a day or two even with his werewolf capabilities, or he'd broken something and needed the warlock to magically mend the bone. It felt like a kind of cheating, to receive wounds like these in a fight he'd chosen to participate in, and then have them magically healed moments later. The cuts

and bruises he received were like temporary badges of honour, and as long as they weren't going to be visible in the clothes that he wore for work or training, he kept them. As far as he was concerned, medical attention at the Ring was reserved for serious or obvious injuries only.

This black eye, though—he'd need to have that dealt with. He was already incongruous enough as a six-and-a-half-foot-tall, male, werewolf librarian, and somewhat intimidating to library users who just wanted to ask where they could find a book. Coming into work with a massive bruise on his face would not make him any less menacing to children trying to locate their favourite book of fairy tales.

He dragged in a deep breath, scenting blood and sweat and the heavy, thick scent of the large group of people currently cheering his victory or bemoaning their lost wagers, and... something else. Something... else. He couldn't quite put words to it—even he, a man who had words for everything even when they weren't wanted. It was... warm. It smelled like... like a fire burning in the fireplace on a cold winter's night when you were wrapped up in a blanket on the couch, safe and warm; but also, sweet, but at the same time, not. It was... safe.

And for some incredible, completely illogical reason that he had no hope of understanding, it was kind of turning him on.

He was literally standing over the bloodied body of a man he had just beaten to a pulp, only just coming out of the animalistic fury that had come over him when he was punching the Professor into what looked like borderline unconsciousness, and this completely incongruous scent was starting to make him worry he was going to get hard in a way that would be all too visible to the Ring's spectators in his loose workout shorts.

He stepped away from the man on the floor, and the



crowd thought he was pandering to their cheers, so they got louder, whistles and hoots coming from all around. The scent got stronger as the medical team approached, and after shooting a vague grin and a nod at the spectators so they'd think he cared what they thought, he looked over to see what he'd done to the Professor.

And in that moment, he saw her.

Her.

The tiny woman was kneeling by the beaten man on the floor, who was struggling to pull himself into a sitting position, though he was badly injured enough that he was practically leaving an outline of himself in blood on the floor of the ring. His face was already almost swollen beyond recognition. She was trying to keep the Professor lying down so they could put him on a stretcher, but he was having none of it. He kept trying to drag himself upright despite her protestations, even though she was trying to keep him in the position on his back that he'd been left in when Raj was through with him. As careful as her movements were, the words that drifted to him from her mouth were anything but.

"Stay down, you bloody idiot," she was all but yelling. "You might have damage to your spine, you dickhead, and I'm trying to keep you from making it worse. Fuck!"

"I'm fine," the Professor was insisting as he tried to sit up. "It's all just surface injuries."

"He's almost definitely fractured your cheekbone and at least a few of your ribs," the woman reminded him. "I saw your head snap back when he hit you. Just stay on the floor and let the doctor look after you."

When he tried to sit up again, she growled—actually growled, as though there was a little bit of wolf in her even though she was clearly human—and pressed on the side of the man's torso. He flinched, let out a groan, and stopped trying to get up.

No, this wasn't one of the assistants who usually helped Doc—the only name by which the other people who frequented the Ring knew their resident medical professional—with management of the injuries acquired in the fights. They were usually quiet and unassuming, helping with the basics of the healing process while purposely fading into the background. This woman was... *magnetic*. Even if he was wrong, and the scent that felt like it was filling his body with more adrenaline than the start of a fight *wasn't* coming from her, he would have been interested in her. But something was telling him that he wasn't wrong. Despite everything else in this room that should have overpowered any single scent, he was all but positive that it was her.

Maybe it was some remainder of the primitive state he had gone into during the fight, or maybe even his wolf coming closer to the surface than had happened unintentionally in years, but as he stared at her from across the Ring, watching as the Professor laboriously climbed to his feet despite her warnings, Raj was certain of one thing only.

He needed to know her.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Olivia sitting in one of the bleachers surrounding the Ring. She looked proud, a savage grin stretching across her beautiful face. Any other night, he'd have been happy that the woman he'd been seeing was accepting of the kind of fighting he did in the Ring. Initially, he'd been scared that the revelation of his somewhat brutal—and very illegal—hobby would horrify her, and he'd have to let the witches who protected the Ring reinforce the secrecy spells that magically prevented discussion of the Ring with the uninitiated. But Olivia had actually seemed to enjoy watching the initial fights. He'd sat with her through the first few, before he had to go and get ready for his own, and she'd picked a fighter to support in each bout and even considered placing a bet on one. She seemed

completely okay with his secret, and normally, Raj would be thrilled by this, not to mention ready to expend some of his leftover adrenaline from the fight by dragging her into one of the back rooms of the facility and fucking the living daylights out of her.

Instead, despite her proud grin and the way she raised an eyebrow at him as though they shared a salacious secret, all he felt was... indifference. Suddenly, all he could think about was the doc's assistant who smelled like safety and sweetness and sex all in one.

In that moment, Raj knew he had done it. After all these years of hoping, he had found his mate.

And he was somehow going to have to explain that to his girlfriend.

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Magnolia Gawler was a law-abiding person—well, other than her frequent jaywalking, which, in her opinion, didn't count if you did it sensibly. She didn't always take being told what to do particularly well, and she was highly independent, but she almost always followed the actual *law*.

Which made it particularly strange that she was here tonight, in an illegal, literally underground fight club, assisting Jeremy in magically healing the multiple injuries that had been dealt to this madman by the psychopath waiting outside the room to be treated himself.

There had been a number of times in Maggie's life when she'd looked around and wondered how on earth she had wound up in the situation she was in—the time she'd spontaneously booked a last-minute flight to Hawaii and found herself on a plane the next morning, for example, or when she drank too much at a college party and wound up in a room full of near-strangers being offered LSD with the *lais-*

sez-faire attitude one might have when offering sugar for someone's tea. At this point, this situation was looking like it was going to go straight on that how-did-this-happen list.

She'd only been seeing Jeremy for a couple of months—long enough that she was no longer surprised to see him next to her when she woke up after he stayed over, but not long enough that she was ready to look particularly far to the future of their relationship. He was one of the doctors at the hospital where she worked as a nurse, and those pairings didn't always go well. Even though they were in completely different parts of the hospital—he was a trauma surgeon, and she was currently in the cardiac ward, so they rarely crossed paths at work—there was a power imbalance inherent in doctors dating nurses, and Maggie wasn't particularly good with being the less powerful one in that combination. Not to mention the fact that he was a powerful warlock, capable of magic that even most of his own kind could only dream of, and she was just a regular human. But Jeremy had never treated her with anything but the utmost respect, never acted like he knew more than she did just because he had "Doctor" before his name, so even though their interests tended towards different things, and his unassailable confidence and near-manic energy and occasional highhandedness sometimes bothered her, and she wasn't sure there'd ever be a future for them, she'd allowed their dalliance after a night at the pub to grow into something more.

And then the other night when they were eating dinner, he'd announced that there was something he hadn't been able to disclose to her until now. A secret that he'd been hiding from her. And he'd explained about the Ring. How the illegal fight club had needed a doctor, and he'd known one of the organisers, so they'd asked him and told him he could name his price—the Ring had an entry fee and got a cut of every bet the spectators made, so it raked in a lot of

money. To have a doctor who could be relied upon for both his skills and his discretion, was so valuable to them that they'd pay him anything he wanted.

He'd been trying to pay off his sister's medical bills at the time, he explained—Maggie knew she'd had a car accident, though, from Jeremy's reports, it sounded like she was fine now—as well as his tuition from university, and it had seemed like too good an opportunity to pass up. He'd named a ludicrously high price, and they'd accepted it without blinking. So, on the night of the new moon every few months—they apparently didn't have a regular schedule, so they were less likely to be found out—he went down to the Ring and healed the injuries of the fighters who beat each other senseless for large amounts of money, and made a comparably large amount of money himself.

She was sitting there at the table, speechlessly staring at him, for a long moment before he added, "Since I finished with Nerida's bills and my tuition fees, I donate a big chunk of it to charity. I'm not just some greedy asshole."

"Jeremy," Maggie had said slowly, "you know you could lose your medical licence if anyone finds out."

"They're careful," Jeremy explained. "There are protection spells in place. They prevent people from talking about it with anyone who doesn't know—I had to wait this long to tell you because I needed to get an exemption made to the spell."

"And the people there are just... just beating each other up for fun?"

"And for a shit ton of money," Jeremy said, clearly trying to make light of the seriousness of the situation. He saw the look on her face and sobered. "Yes, for some of them, I think it's just the thrill of the fight. Nothing that brutal is allowed in regular boxing or martial arts matches."

"That... brutal?" Maggie asked tentatively.

"That makes it sound bad," Jeremy backpedalled. "What

I meant was, there are fewer rules in the Ring. The fighters are allowed to get a little more... primitive. And sometimes, that leads to injuries, so they keep me on staff in case anyone gets properly hurt."

"And in case one of these "primitive" fighters just goes on a rage? What do you do when someone starts beating someone else to death?"

He met her eyes evenly. "Maggie, I'm a surgeon. I could stop someone's heart just by spelling the right nerve if they got out of hand." Seeing her eyes go even wider, he added, "Not that I would. Unless there was an emergency. But that's not important." He looked a little wild-eyed for a moment, trying to work out how to keep her on his side. "Honestly, it's mostly healing bruises and minor breaks, to maintain the Ring's secrecy. People start asking questions if someone keeps appearing with black eyes or broken fingers."

"And when it's not just that—not just black eyes and broken fingers?" Maggie asked.

Jeremy shrugged, looking uncomfortable. "Well, sometimes, it's something more serious. Never anything I haven't been able to manage on my own, but I usually have an assistant or two to help with the physical part." His expression changed, as though he'd just thought of something. "Maggie, why don't you come and help me out next time it's on? I could use a qualified nurse. Most of the people I work with are just low-level witches looking to make a quick buck. I could really use your skills. You'll see it's not that bad, and you'll get paid well. Then you'll understand why I keep going with it—they need someone like me, and I can help them. If I wasn't around to heal the fighters, some of them could be stuck with proper injuries that need medical attention. And it's not as bad as you're thinking."

Hesitantly, and mostly, to her shame, thinking of the mortgage payment she had coming up, she'd agreed. She'd

come along tonight, and it had turned out he was right. It wasn't as bad as she'd been thinking. It was significantly worse. The other fights, the smaller ones leading up to this all-guns-blazing finale, hadn't been awful; as Jeremy had said, it was mostly healing minor breaks and bruises that were going to become noticeable.

And then she'd seen what the Librarian had done to the Professor. Two ludicrous fighter names, but who was she to judge? She was here, wasn't she? His massive fists delivered blow after blow even when it became apparent that the other man was completely incapable of fighting back. Clearly, Jeremy had been right when he told her that regular boxing or martial arts matches didn't allow this level of brutality. They didn't even ring the bell for the end of the match until the Professor looked like he was inches from being beaten to death.

Her first concern had been for the man's spine, though he'd made it clear by refusing to hold his position on the floor that he didn't share her concern. She could see why Jeremy had been keen to have a trained nurse as one of his assistants in healing these people; the other assistant, a man who smelled strongly of old sweat and introduced himself as Ace when they met, might have had some training. Still, he was far from being a medical professional. He didn't even think to brace the Professor's spine, just helped him to the room where Jeremy, whom everyone at the Ring simply called Doc, had been ensconced all night, healing the broken noses, fractured fingers and black eyes of the other fighters.

Jeremy had clearly been preparing for some more significant magical healing to be required from this fight; she'd watched him race through the last of the minor injuries from the earlier bouts in the lead up to this finale match with none of his usual finesse. Her frustration at the lack of care both

Jeremy and Ace seemed to be taking had boiled over at Ace as he allowed the Professor to get to his feet.

"Are you nuts?" she spat at the other assistant. "He could have a cervical spine fracture. We need to keep his neck immobilised."

"If it's damaged, Doc will fix it," Ace replied, unaffected by her ire. "He's already beaten to hell; what does it matter if he gets a little more broken by walking to the medical room? Doc will fix it. They don't pay him this much to sit around and look pretty." His gaze flicked down over her, slowly enough that she figured she was supposed to notice it, even if he hadn't intended the rise of a wave of disgust that rolled through her in response. "I'm sure they would with you, though, if you offered," he said, grinning and raising an eyebrow, and she tried not to gag at the idea as she pushed past him into the medical room.

Jeremy was busy magically scanning the Professor's body for injuries—the battered fighter appeared to take the doctor's insistence with far more grace than he had Maggie's, because he was lying silently on the medical table as Jeremy worked.

"If you have a spinal injury," she told the beaten man bitterly, "I'm going to say I told you so."

"Whatever it is, Doc can fix it," the Professor replied, then started coughing. Jeremy placed a hand on the man's chest and the coughing eased. "You should see some of the shit he's had to heal in the past," the fighter continued. "The Librarian is not a man to fuck with. One time Doc had to regrow half of one guy's teeth, because he just knocked them right out."

"Then why the fuck did you want to fight him?" Maggie asked, feeling like she already knew the answer.

The Professor shrugged, then winced.

"Stay still, please," Jeremy said in a voice Maggie recog-



nised from the few times she'd seen him in doctor mode in the hospital. "Nurse, could you please get the Professor some anaesthetic so I can get to work on some of these breaks?" She was a little taken aback by how distantly he spoke to her but figured it was to avoid letting the man between them know they had a personal connection.

She took the Professor's limp arm and inserted a needle into his vein, then injected the anaesthetic.

"Glory," the Professor said with a faraway smile stretching his battered, swollen face. It took her a moment to realise he was answering her earlier question—why would anyone fight the Librarian if he was such a savage? "Imagine if I'd won. I'd be a legend."

Jeremy made eye contact with Maggie and sent her a rapid nod as well as the universal hand movement for *keep going*. She assumed he was about to heal one of the Professor's broken bones and wanted her to keep him talking while the painkillers got to work, so Jeremy could stop magically blocking the man's pain and get to work fixing his injuries.

"He's that good?" Maggie asked, at a loss for what else to say.

"You saw what he did to me," the Professor said with something that could have been a laugh if it hadn't been as hoarse and rattling as his breathing. "I gave him all my best moves, I've been training for this fight for months, and I've been fighting for years, and he still put me on my back. I think it was last year... or maybe last month... a while ago..." Well, clearly the painkillers were kicking in and putting the man in a daze. Or rather, more of a daze, even as Jeremy was able to stop magically anaesthetising the man and focus on healing his injuries. She tried to subtly take his pulse, just in case.

"A while ago, anyway," the Professor continued unevenly, after a silence he didn't even appear to notice, "the Librarian

had a bout with this fast little guy, can't remember his name. Running Robert or something like that." He snorted derisively, then coughed again. Blood flecked his lips. Maggie sent Jeremy a worried look, which he missed because he was focusing on the Professor's exposed flank, his hands moving as he worked his magic.

"So, everyone's betting on the Librarian, right, because this guy is little, looks like he'd go flying the second he got hit. But he's quick, that's his thing, fast enough to duck... and weave and... duck." The dazed Professor took another deep, rattling breath. "He's running circles around the Librarian, sneaking in fast enough to hit him then backing away and ducking and weaving again. Guess that's why he has that name." He chuckled and winced. Maggie wondered if she could give him any more painkillers, or if that would be dangerous. She tried to make eye contact with Jeremy again, but the warlock had his eyes closed, his hands now pressed to the Professor's chest.

"Goes on for a few minutes... a long, few minutes..." He faded away for a second, then blinked and seemed to come back to himself. "And the Librarian gets sick of it and lets the running man get a shot in, then sticks his arm out so the little guy smacks into it like a pole when he tries to run around him. Just *coat hangers* himself. The Librarian slams him down on his back and then it was on. The big guy had him pinned in half a second and just starts hitting him, face, chest, belly... now that was some damage. And that's not even unusual when you go up against this guy. What I got out of this fight was nothing compared to what the little guy took out of that other one. Doc could tell you; he was working on him for hours after."

This time when Maggie went to catch Jeremy's eye, he was looking at her, a trace of guilt on his features. "Black eyes and bruises, huh?" she asked acerbically.

"Mostly," Jeremy said quietly, then went back to the Professor. "All right, buddy, I've fixed your rib and the lung it punctured, but the bones in your face and all these bruises are going to take a minute. I need you not to talk while I'm working on your nose and cheekbones, all right? There's a hairline fracture in your jaw, as well, but that'll only take a second to fix."

Maggie took a step away as the hum of magic in the air increased, making her skin break out in goosebumps. She'd always been especially sensitive to the use of magic in her vicinity, and while it didn't make her uncomfortable—it would have been hard to work at the hospital, where someone was always being magically healed, if it did—she was always very aware of its presence. Even the protection spells that her best friend Della, who was a witch, regularly cast on her, since Maggie sometimes caught public transport home after night shifts and Della insisted she needed to be protected, always had a part of her almost... tingling. It was how she could tell when they needed to be renewed, though she hadn't told Della that part, since she didn't really think they were necessary. Maggie might be small, but she could take care of herself. It just meant that part of her was always aware that there was magic around her. At its usual low level, the vague psychic tingling was easy to ignore, but when someone like Jeremy was doing magic of this calibre in her vicinity, she felt it like pins-and-needles in her mind.

The Professor obediently maintained his silence as Jeremy worked on his battered face. The swelling and bruises were the last to go, but Maggie never got tired of seeing the evidence of physical injury fade before her eyes. Perhaps it was because, as a human, she'd never be able to heal someone this way, but she'd never lost her fascination with the speed, ease and reduced pain with which witches were able to fix damage to someone's body.

After a while, the Professor's battered face began to resemble a normal person once more, and Jeremy moved on to the bruises covering his torso and limbs. Maggie stood by the wall, presuming he'd call on her if he needed her, and watched as the quickly discolouring patches faded to the shade of the man's surrounding skin. The Professor was quite clearly still a bit loopy from the painkillers, occasionally attempting to engage the doctor or Maggie herself in conversation, but neither lasted very long. Eventually, he just lay there with his eyes closed as Jeremy healed him. She came around to stand beside the warlock.

"His spine?" she asked quietly.

"Minor fracture. Nothing serious. It's dealt with."

"I told him to keep his head still so we could stretcher him, but he insisted on walking," she said, feeling slightly validated. "Don't you have cervical collars in this place? Surely, you need them pretty regularly."

Jeremy actually cracked a smile. "These guys wouldn't be seen dead wearing a collar. They just assume I'll be able to fix whatever the damage is, so it doesn't matter if they make it worse coming in here."

"He could have wound up paralysed!" Maggie protested, forgetting to keep her voice quiet. The Professor opened one eye and went to turn his head, but Jeremy warned him to keep still while he finished the healing process.

"Wouldn't have been irreparable damage, with a little fracture like that," Jeremy said quietly. "I would have been able to fix it. I'm a pretty good doctor, you know." He sent her a smile that she didn't return, and she went back to her position by the wall. Such callous carelessness over worsening someone's injuries was completely antithetical to the way she'd been taught to practice medicine. The fact that Jeremy, of all people, displayed it this way was concerning, to say the least.

In truth, most of what they'd done tonight had been exactly what he'd described—healing bruises and small breaks, cosmetic issues mostly. While she didn't particularly like the Ring, she might have been able to set aside her qualms and continue working there just because of the amount they were paying her if not for two things.

The first was the baying for blood of the spectators. They might have pretended they were there just for a night on the town, that they appreciated the sport of the people in the Ring beating each other senseless, but she'd heard the way their cheers changed when someone was beaten drastically, when an obvious injury was inflicted rather than just the regular fist-to-face action. They *liked* the brutality of it, the animalistic nature of the conflicts, putting down bets on everything from who would win to how many bones would be broken in a fight, and that alone made her feel sick to her stomach. She'd stopped watching barely an hour into the night of fighting, right up until this final bout, which Ace had assured her was something she shouldn't miss.

And that... well, that was pretty much the entirety of the second reason right there.

The way the Professor and the Librarian, both with such respectable academic titles, had sunk into a deeper, more primitive animalism than she'd seen even in the other fights. The utter brutality with which they'd gone at each other, with no hesitation or concern that they might be irreparably injuring each other, no acknowledgement that this violence was by its nature unnecessary. The beating that the Librarian had delivered at the end, even when it was clear that he had the other man pinned and that the match could end there with an obvious winner. Whoever made the calls over when the Ring matches concluded had *wanted* to see the Professor violently injured, had allowed the beating to continue. A fracture to the cervical spine? It could have been so much

worse. Even a warlock as strong as Jeremy could only do so much.

She'd seen the look on the Librarian's face as well, as he pounded his fists into the other man's unshielded face and torso over and over. He'd been relishing the violence of it, the pain he was inflicting. He'd *enjoyed* what he was doing.

They'd told her he was a werewolf, but she had plenty of werewolf friends who would never imagine sinking to that kind of blatant, brutal animalism, especially if it involved hurting someone for no reason. Was he some kind of psychopath, then? A man who so clearly took pleasure in the pain of others—a sadist, in the most brutal sense. A man who enjoyed inflicting injuries which, without magical intervention, could have killed his opponent. The Professor had had a punctured lung, for goodness' sake. If Jeremy hadn't been there, or even had been worn out from the rest of his work during the night, the Professor could have died from an injury like that.

The callous approach to pain and suffering, risking one's life for something as minor as the glory of beating an opponent, the joy taken in inflicting injury, was completely alien to Maggie. The very air of the facility was starting to make her feel sick, even knowing that the spectators were beginning to collect their money and leave, and the Ring was emptying. She needed to get out as soon as possible, before she threw up all over the patient bed.

With the Professor's healing complete, he looked like a normal man again. He sat up on the bed and swung his legs over the side, then gave her a smile that might have been attractively flirtatious under other circumstances. In this situation, it just made her nausea worsen.

"Thanks, Doc," he said to Jeremy, who was now washing his hands in the sink on the opposite side of the room. "Feels good as new." He took a deep breath as if to show off just

how healed he was. "Perfect. And thanks for your help too, Nurse..." he trailed off, as though waiting for Maggie to tell him which moniker she'd chosen to stand alongside names like Doc and Ace and the Professor. And the Librarian.

"Don't worry about learning my name," she said quietly, starting to clean up after the man's healing. "I won't be back."

"Our loss, I guess," the Professor replied easily, standing up and stretching. He turned to Jeremy, who had moved to drying his hands. "Should I tell the big guy you're ready for him now? You might not have to do much. I don't know that I even did that much damage to the bastard tonight." He seemed now to have completely come to terms with his loss of the match, even giving Maggie a self-deprecating shrug as he spoke. "Have to train harder for the next time I'm up against him." He flexed a bicep. "No harm in good motivation, I guess." He tried to make eye contact with her, but she purposely looked over at Jeremy.

"Just give me a minute to get this cleaned up," she said to them both, and started wiping down the surfaces with anti-septic spray.

Jeremy walked the Professor to the door, clapped him on the shoulder as he left, and stood there for a moment talking to the man waiting outside for treatment, explaining that she was just cleaning the room before they could treat him. The Librarian, the sadist who had taken such pleasure in decimating his opponent—was she supposed to stand by and make small talk to distract him while Jeremy healed his wounds as she had with the Professor? Tonight, had felt like a bad idea from the very start, and somehow, none of it had felt as bad as the idea of seeing this man up close, knowing what he was capable of.

She finished cleaning the room and called out to Jeremy, "All right, ready when you are." Ace, who had been standing

outside the room while they tended to the Professor, looked in as Jeremy and the Librarian entered, but made no move to come inside. *Lazy bastard*, she thought, but got into position on the far side of the bed in case Jeremy needed her.

The Librarian was a massive man, at least a foot taller than she was, dark-skinned and dark-eyed, with hair and a beard so black, they were almost blue, just slightly too long to look professional. Those eyes seemed to immediately shoot to her as soon as he entered the room, and she thought she saw his muscles bunch briefly when he registered her presence, before he came and took his place on the bed. Clearly, he'd done this before; he knew what was expected of him. The light caught his eyes as he moved to sit, then swung his feet up on to the bed, and for a second, they looked almost silver. His teeth were blindingly white as he shot her a smile, then winced. His response to the pain was a good distraction from having to sort out her own expression, which she thought might show her apprehension at being near this man.

"Yeah, we're going to need to sort out that cheekbone, as well as your eye," Jeremy said comfortably, as though the two men were lifelong friends. "From the looks of those hands, you might have taken out a few fingers as well, so do you think you can sit still for that long?"

The man nodded. His grin, though slightly reduced, was unflinching despite the pain that had made him wince before. He directed the smile to Jeremy. "Yeah, thanks, Doc."

"You and the Prof had matching breaks tonight," Jeremy commented. "Lie down, and I'll scan you properly, make sure he didn't do any other serious damage."

"The fucker packs a punch," the Librarian said in agreement. He was so tall, his feet hung well off the end of the bed as he lay down. Maggie stayed by the wall, figuring Jeremy would call her if he needed her to do anything. Their patient seemed to have transitioned to studiously not looking



at her, as though he knew the mingled fear and disgust that his performance had brought up in her. As though he knew she'd have to force herself to treat him as clinically as she would any other patient, having seen what he cheerfully did to the Professor with that visceral, cruel enjoyment on his face. In her years as a nurse, she'd treated everyone from violent criminals to CEOs, including all kinds of supernaturals, but something about this man put her on edge. She'd never feared a patient before, but the air of barely constrained tension around this one made her almost afraid he would shift into his wolf form. Like he was actively restraining himself from leaping at her at any moment.

She shook her head to get rid of the weird thought and, at Jeremy's request, went over to the anaesthetics trolley to draw up some more pain medication before he started healing the man's broken cheekbone.

"Don't bother," the Librarian said, meeting her eyes for the first time in what suddenly felt like hours. She froze for a moment, feeling like she could fall right into those deep pools of silvery darkness and never feel the need to resurface. She blinked and looked back down at the tray, but not before she noticed his fists clenched into tight balls on the bed beside his body. "If I can handle the pain of getting the injury," he continued, "I can handle the pain of it being healed."

"Sorry, I forgot about your tough guy tendencies," Jeremy joked, running the fingers of one hand over the Librarian's swollen cheekbone and making a complicated gesture with the other. The patient's *many* muscles briefly went tense, but he seemed to relax into the pain, almost welcome it. Maggie found herself looking at him closely now that she wasn't at risk of being seen doing it. He was fine-featured despite his size, his slightly crooked nose indicating that it had probably been broken at least once and not magically reset. His hands were the size of saucepan lids,

currently curled into fists despite the relaxation of the rest of his body even with the pain of having his broken bone healed. This was a man with a pain tolerance so significant that punching him would likely have the same effect as punching a rock. It was no wonder he was such a favourite for those who frequented the Ring; surely, only someone of equal size and strength would even be able to come close to taking him down, and even then, they'd need to be as light on their feet and quick to respond as this man had shown himself to be.

Without warning, his eyes snapped open, looking even more silver than before as they met Maggie's own. She found herself frozen under his gaze again, caught in the process of examining him. Her hands still rested on the edge of the anaesthetics trolley, and she told herself she should look away, but she couldn't break the connection of that gaze. In his eyes, she saw the wolf he could turn into, the savagery and animalism that had come out tonight not even holding a candle to the kind of damage he could do in that other form. And yet, for some reason, the fear and disgust and borderline horror she'd had of this man when he entered the room seemed to melt away as their eyes held. Suddenly, she felt like she could also see beyond that, to the man he might be when he wasn't in this environment that idolised brutality.

Jeremy took his hand away from the Librarian's face, and the connection of their gazes broke. Immediately, she was aware of the tension that had crept into their patient's body during their stare-off, noticed the visible injuries that marred his bare torso and intersected some of the tattoos there, and the feelings that had evaporated while their eyes met rolled back in. How was it that all it had taken was a long stare from this man and she'd forgotten what she'd seen him do? What was she doing, allowing herself to stand out to a man who was so clearly savagely violent? She didn't want his

attention. She should be trying as hard as possible to fade into the background and hope he didn't notice her.

Unfortunately, she felt like it might be a little late for that.

Jeremy moved to fixing the man's two broken fingers, then healing his bruises—the Librarian preferred that he only heal those specific bruises, he explained to Maggie as if it were a joke between them, which would be visible in business or training attire.

"I earned them," the Librarian said quietly. She felt like she could physically *feel* his eyes on her, though she'd studiously fixed her gaze on Jeremy's hands as he worked, to avoid getting lost in those silver-black eyes again. "It would feel like cheating to get rid of them all. And besides, they're hardly visible on my skin."

"Can't have you showing up to work with a face like you've got on the bad side of your Alpha, though," Jeremy said easily, then added to Maggie, "that's why we don't let any of the fighters leave the Ring with breaks or visible bruises. Have to preserve the confidentiality."

"I thought the spells meant you couldn't talk about this place to people who don't already know about it," she said quietly.

"Yes, but that doesn't mean they wouldn't get suspicious," Jeremy said. "And if someone starts digging, there's only so much you can do to keep a secret this big." He stood up from his position leaning over the Librarian. "All right, I think you're just about good to go. See you next time if you can't stop the next opponent from mangling your face again."

"I'll do my best," the man promised, sitting up from his position on the bed and swinging his legs back down to the floor. Even sitting, he was taller than Maggie was standing, and his height when he stood made her feel like she was the size of a doll. At a loss for what else to do, she started cleaning up.

"Thanks, Doc," the Librarian said as he walked towards the door. "And thanks for your help, um... Nurse."

"You're welcome," Maggie said, again refusing to look up from what she was doing even though she could feel him looking at her. The touch of his gaze on her felt like someone was tracing fingertips over her skin, even after he left the room.