

ENFORCER NIGHT

Sandy Falls

CHAPTER 1

Drip, drip, drip went the sound of Night's company. An unseen pipe in the hall kept time with his pacing as he stalked around the dark cell, eager and trying not to be. He would be out soon. *Not soon enough.* A grunt loosed deep in his throat. Night's bed of hay crunched underfoot. Five paces across. Five paces back. The space seemed to shrink as time stretched on. His nose had gone blind to the smell of his shit bucket, but it was there, present. He would be free of its haunting soon. *Not soon enough.*

Heavy footsteps approached. Night stopped his pacing and watched the iron door, bidding it open with his gaze until Master unlocked it. He filled the doorway with his horned bulk. Torch-light burned back the darkness of Night's cell.

Master led him through dim sweating tunnels. Night breathed deep the musty smell, clearing his nose from the stench of his cell. Few torches adorned the rough stone walls to light the winding chasms. Cold rocks stabbed Night's bare feet.

They passed many cells where others lurked unseen behind their iron doors.

Opponents.

His heart beat rapid in his chest. *Focus.* He needed focus. Being overeager could earn him a loss. His first loss would be his last. Night fixated on the back of his Master and steadied his breathing as they started up the stone steps hewn into the chasm.

“One match for you today,” rumbled Master, his voice echoing off the tunnel walls.

Sounds from the roaring crowd reached beyond the gate, growing louder as Night ascended. Beckoning him. *Soon.*

Master’s heavy footfalls faded to soft crunches as his boots went from stone to sand. Swords of light peeked around the corners of the thick iron gate. Master ignored the lever on the wall and grabbed the bottom instead, heaving the iron portcullis open. Sunlight flooded the cavern.

Night blinked against the brightness, his eyes stinging. He didn't need to see the ring of the arena to know it. He stepped onto sun-soaked sand. Its warmth seeped up through him, thawing away the cold damp of the dark tunnels where he was stored. The gate crashed closed behind him.

“Your champion, Night!” said Faceless Master from unseen places in his clear, resonant voice. The high smooth-stone walls and benches of the arena surrounding him became clear as his eyes learned the light. Demons of all shapes and sizes leapt from their seats, hands over their heads, their roars flooding their champion. Their chants pumped life into him. Wind from the blue sky over the open arena brushed against his skin.

Finally.

Night raised his fist in answer, pacing a circle for the featureless crowd. He only needed their voices.

A spot of bright color, a fair face among the monstrous, drew his attention. Caught him, froze him. A face he knew from earliest memory. His father.

Night had not seen him since the day his father had given him to the arena long ago. The hair stood out first, neat and pale blonde; then the eyes, golden to match. His nose, jaw, and chin were sharp. He wore a yellow silk vest over a white shirt. He dressed rich enough to be a Master, sitting straight and refined.

Night looked nothing like him. That lack of likeness could be one reason his father had given him away to kill or be killed. Night waited for his father to see him with anticipation like that before an opening strike, a weightless suspension. He continued to wait while his opponent entered through the opposite gate.

His father did not look. He talked to two others seated with him. Had his father come to talk? No one came to the arena to talk. They came to watch.

Some in the crowd gripped their hair, horns, long ears, and some pointed in urgency, shouting his name, urging Night to watch his back.

Night focused on the fibers that made him. His senses both muted and expanded. Everything changed to silent awareness. The breath of the air, the scope of a moment, the flexible fibers of his being; all these were held together by a consciousness made fluid as a river of thought. He became a body free of confines. He became phasing mist.

His opponent's opening strike stumbled through where Night once stood. Night formed solid again behind him.

His opponent for this match was young as Night, lean and solid built. He wore only a loincloth; the Masters did not expect him to take easy damage. He had natural weapons in a speared tail and raking claws for fingers.

Lightning quick, Night's opponent recovered his feet and faced him in a stance ready for defense and attack. They circled each other, watching, waiting. Opponent would be Night's company

for this match. The firm set of Opponent's gaze said he had killed, he had won. The fear in the stiff set of his shoulders said it had not been often.

When Night had learned what he could from the wait, he moved first, moved fast.

Not fast enough.

Night's fist flew through empty air instead of his opponent's face. Night stumbled off balance, glanced up in time to see a kick arcing downward toward his head. Night ducked back to avoid that heel to his skull.

Opponent teleported into the path of Night's dodge, claws out to impale. His claws found mist instead.

When Night re-materialized, his fist solidified inside Opponent's lower back. He gripped Opponent's intestines and pulled, gifting him a new fleshy tail of gore. Excrement escaped the Demon's disturbed bowels in a sudden downpour as he stumbled, weak from shock. Demons did not bleed, so Night had found other ways to provide spectacle.

The crowd hooted and cackled, some doubled over from their laughter. Fresh cheers and claps surged from them.

It was a favorite move.

Night's eyes flicked up to the stands. His father's conversation partners were entertained, but Night's father wasn't even watching.

A lethal pointed tail lunged for Night's brow. He dodged to the side just in time, letting out a growl. *Focus!*

Opponent trembled, red in the face, his soaked loincloth dripping with piss. But the Masters did not slack on training anyone. A pink wet rope of guts streamed behind him as he teleported despite the pain: to Night's left with a slash of his claws, behind with a stab of the tail, below with a swipe of his legs.

With a bob, a duck, a jump, Night answered. Before Night's feet touched the ground, Opponent appeared above with claws raking for Night's head.

Night managed to catch the death blow with his hand instead of his face. The combatants hit the ground under the weight of momentum from Opponent's lunge. Night was pinned under with one set of claws clasped in his grip. With his free set of claws, Opponent tried again for Night's head.

He struck through mist, claws stabbed into the sand.

Materializing, Night gripped the protruding entrails from behind and ripped out the rest, save for the last stubborn bits.

Opponent's scream cut into a gurgle.

The crowd fed off his pain. Night fed off the crowd.

Before Opponent could recover, Night pinned Opponent on his back, foot stomped on his tail. With an added flourish, he tied off Opponent's wrists with his own guts.

Opponent found Night through his shock and pain. He phased for half a moment, almost disappearing, but could not find the power now. The pain and exertion had drained him. The end-fear had come. His eyes leaked, beseeching whimpers escaped his lips, he shook his head against his fate. He found a word with a voice that seldom spoke. "Please," he said, squirming.

Night's father wasn't watching.

He misted his fist inside Opponent's chest, solidified his grip around the heart, and ripped it out.

Opponent's scream turned shrill. Night muffled him by shoving the heart down his throat. Opponent's jaw broke to accommodate fist and organ.

The massees roared, riveted as Opponent choked and gagged.

Night's father did not look.

With a grunt, Night ended it. Skull and brains exploded around the fist suddenly materialized inside them. Gray and white matter splattered. Opponent went still at last.

The crowd's roar grew deafening.

Night stood. His bare chest heaved, heart beating in time with the chant rising from the stands.

“Night! Night! Night!”

All joined but one.