

## Chapter One

The Pits. An illegal fighting arena where people of all ages fought for money and fame. The massive building sat in the middle of a barren field and had a dilapidated looking exterior. However, that was exactly what The Owner wanted it to look like. Inside the double doors were seats around an arena that was constructed in a hole in the ground, and “high roller” boxes above the stadium to give the best view of the matches below.

The ring changed every few months, with varying modifications such as elevated sides or a different overall shape, occasionally giving different challenges to the contestants during their bouts. No matter what the shape or design, it was symmetrical to give a balanced match to the fighters, and a new and different show to the unscrupulous spectators.

The overhead floodlights cast its hot gaze upon Jace’s shirtless body, which was sculpted from the countless hours of training, and the many fights he had endured throughout his life. He wore nylon/cotton stitched shorts that went just above his knees to allow decent mobility, as well as durability. He was barefoot, and his hands and ankles were wrapped in reinforcing tape.

He had been going to The Pits for more than 7 years. Ever since he was taken to the Sanctuary for Orphaned Children on his 6th birthday, Jace had constantly gotten into fights. Sometimes, they were multiple times a week. He could still remember his first fight—the day after he arrived, when an older bully named Keith jumped him in the boy’s bathroom to steal his backpack. Ever since he arrived at the orphanage, fighting was all Jace knew and lived for.

His opponent walked onto the opposite side of the oval arena. They were about the same age, with similar attire and wrappings on their hands and feet. He had short blonde hair, but the large bottom lip caught his attention. Jace didn’t recognize him, but he didn’t really pay attention to the kids in the orphanage. He kept his distance from everyone. It was for their own safety, as everyone Jace had grown close to had been “adopted.”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” an announcer said over the intercom. “Bets are now closed for match Y2-6. Gladiators, fight until knockout or tapout. Get ready.”

A single hit of a bell rang through the large space, and the crowd cheered at the pending fight. The Lip brought his hands up to defend his face and stepped toward the middle of the oval arena.

Jace ran his fingers through his chin length brown hair, then casually strolled toward the middle of the ring. As he approached, Jace studied his opponent.

Left foot forward. Right handed, so keep left guard up. No scars on face. Planted feet. Not used to fights. Sweat on brow. Twitchy eye movements. Nervous and scared at the match. Thin but toned frame. Forced training but underfed.

He sniffed and rubbed the tip of his nose with his thumb, then bobbed his shoulders as if to relax them. Then he went into his fighting position. The sooner this was over, the sooner he would get paid.

The two stood off motionless for a few heartbeats with Jace waiting for the inevitable first move from The Lip.

A quick right hook came at Jace. He barely ducked in time, the side of the arm hitting the top of his head. He countered with a jab of his own. It hit the boy's stomach. Jace started to go high with his left but felt a sharp sting against his right eye. Immediately, anger flared with the pain, and he threw a right. His fist connected at the same time he felt his left arm block another blow. He threw a follow up punch but hit only air. The Lip staggered back a few steps and fell to the floor.

Jace closed the distance, ready to kick his downed opponent across the face. The Lip scrambled back on his hands and knees, eventually getting to his feet.

Another brief standoff. The Lip stood near the far edge of the oval arena. Jace blocked him from getting back toward the middle of the ring.

A kick came in. Jace accepted the hit to his stomach and he caught the leg. He yanked back, bringing The Lip close to him. Then he went in for a tackle. The two went over the side of the arena and landed hard on the dirt floor, Jace on top. Jace sat up and, with gritted teeth, gave a series of hard right crosses against the boy's face. He stopped, seeing the blood from the boy's nose and mouth. The fight was over.

His heart raced, and he slowly came to his senses. As his adrenaline wore off, the fuzziness of the fight faded. Shouts came back into his ears when he started to once again become aware of his surroundings. He walked around the stage and toward the doorway out of the arena.