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ZEROBOXER



FONDALÉE

PART ONE
RISING STAR

ONE

Carr Luka woke from a nap three hours before his fight. He ate two hardboiled eggs, a handful of raw almonds, and a bran muffin, then drank a bottle of water and spent twenty minutes stretching on the floor of his single-room apartment in the inner ring of Valtego Station.

The Moon's desolate, pock-marked dark side loomed large across the upper right corner of his wallscreen. Beyond it, the sunlit blue and white marble of Earth hung suspended in the vast black infinity of space. It wasn't a real view of course—probably not even a live feed, just an old recording. The real views belonged to the expensive premium suites, reserved for Valtego's high rollers. They were betting 3:1 against him, as of yesterday.

He didn't usually follow odds, but Uncle Polly had fake-casually dropped that tidbit on him, angling to amp him up, get the *I'll show those bastards* juice flowing. It had worked all right—not because he cared that some bettors thought he might be a flame-out, but because he hated to think that, after the disaster of his most recent match, Uncle Polly might secretly agree with them. Other promising young fighters had been broken by an early loss; he certainly wouldn't be the first.

Carr stood, shaking out his limbs and reaching for his warm-up clothes. He didn't need to be reminded of the stakes. He'd been on the city space station for a year and a half. This sixth and final fight in his contract would determine whether he landed a new deal or found himself on the next flight back to Earth, relegated to fighting in orbital dives reeking of pot, where the vacuum plumbing regularly gave out and big bubbles of pee floated in the bathrooms.

He made a face; not about to happen. He was no planet rat.

Carr tapped the cuff-link display on his forearm to play something high energy—the neo-urban skid music that was popular earthside these days—as he packed his bag. Gripper gloves and shoes, cup, mouth guard, fight shorts, a towel, a change of clothes for the press conference and after-party. He zipped up the bag and slung it over his shoulder. After a final look around to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything, he stepped out of his room and navigated the halls of the apartment complex up to the main thoroughfare and into Valtego traffic.

The streets were crowded, echoing cavernously with the noise of people and music and cars. Well-dressed couples, families, and packs of young men and women spilled onto the main concourse. When Carr looked up, past the reddish simulated evening light, through the enormous sky windows and into the docking hub, he could see that even more ships had arrived since yesterday. Half a dozen Earth-Mars cargo cyclers, a few private solar-sailing yachts, and plenty of commercial passenger craft. It was one of those times when summer in Earth's northern hemisphere coincided with dust storm season on Mars, inciting residents of both planets to travel. Super high season on Valtego.

He caught the city-station bus as it pulled up with a pneumatic hiss, its silver body flashing the usual promotional banner: *Valtego: It's More Fun on the Dark Side™*. Carr didn't bother to sit down; he was only taking it a few stops. He stood near the door, closed his eyes, and let the burble of voices from the other passengers float around him. He heard English in American, British, and Martian accents, Mandarin, Mars Hindi, Spanish, and German. In his mind, he turned the hum of conversation into a growing swell of cheering, a thunderous crowd calling his name.

His cuff vibrated and a rising chime played in his ear. He glanced down at the display on his forearm, then smiled, shut off the music, and took the call. "Enzo," he said. "Are you going to watch my fight?"

"No, I happen to be hiding in my closet with my screen, under a blanket, for no reason. OF COURSE I'm watching!" Enzo's voice, transmission-delayed by a couple seconds, sounded, in Carr's cochlear receiver, as if the boy was shout-whispering an urgent secret. "My mom is going to go fusion if she finds me." He gave a wheezy, excited cough. There was a pause, and Carr winced, picturing the boy sucking hard on his inhaler.

"Aren't you supposed to be in school?" Carr asked.

"Whatever. School is useless. You barely went."

"Sure I went," he lied. "And I was tutored." Which was true, if you could call Uncle Polly helping him fudge through remote study modules "tutoring." "Besides, *you've* got to make a living using your brain someday."

The boy gave a long sigh. "It's so unfair." He sounded as morose as he had when Carr had first left for Valtego. Carr felt a pang of worry. Now wasn't the

time to question the kid, but Enzo was small, he didn't have many friends; who was watching out for him, spending time with him, now that Carr was living in deep orbit on the far side of the Moon? Carr wouldn't trade his place here for anything, but Enzo was one of the few things he missed about Earth.

The bus left behind the rows of densely packed apartment-entrance tubes provided for Valtego's less wealthy residents. It passed shops and restaurants catering to visitors from the planet before turning and sliding to a stop at the gravity zone terminal. The doors opened onto a wide platform bustling with people and lined with colorful holovid ads promising the best deals on theater tickets, spacewalks, hotels.

"I wish you could see this place," Carr said. "It's something else. I'm going to bring you up here someday and show you around." *If I'm still here after today*, came the unwelcome reminder.

"Would you? That would be so stellar," Enzo whispered. "Oh shit, I think my mom is home. Okay, I just called to say good luck! Make him float!"

"Thanks, little man."

The connection clicked out as Carr stepped onto the terminal platform. Uncle Polly and DK were waiting for him, looking comically mismatched standing together—old, pale, and lean, next to young, dark, and muscled. DK clapped Carr on the back. Uncle Polly put his hands on Carr's shoulders and broke into a slow, approving smile that made his left eye squint. "You're a hundred percent ready," he said.

On fight days, Uncle Polly underwent a magical transformation. Every other day, he could chew Carr out in practice, find fault in every detail, cuss at him if he wasn't pushing hard enough, but on fight day, he was optimism incarnate. Carr felt himself grinning, buoyed.

"Where would you rather be right now?" Uncle Polly demanded.

"Nowhere, coach."

"What would you rather be doing?"

"Nothing, coach."

"You ready to fly?"

"Hell yeah."

“Get in the car.”

He strapped his duffel bag into the overhead compartment before climbing in. Once everyone was seated, the harness straps tightened and the doors closed. The vehicle shot down the freeway tube—one of several that connected Valtego’s rings with the central zero gravity complex like spokes of a wheel. Carr ran an appreciative hand across the smooth tan upholstery of his seat. He took the commuter bus to the zero-g complex every morning, but the routine trip was far more enjoyable in a private car. Another special fight-day perk.

Streets and buildings shrank as the view of Valtego spread out around them in all its slowly turning immensity, the bright lights and artificial gravity of the city’s habitable rings receding as the freeway sailed the car into a breathtaking expanse of space. Carr craned his neck against the mild g-force pressure, looking past the shadow of the Moon and catching, for a few seconds, a glimpse of Earth—a real view, not a projection. The planet always looked smaller in real life than on the wallscreen.

Uncle Polly ran through the game plan once more. “What are you going to do in the first round?”

“Stay out of his grab zone. Wear him out, frustrate him.”

“He doesn’t like to climb. Make him climb. Second round?”

“Hit him from the corners. Use my fast launches and rebounds.”

“Good, good.”

“Third round, spin him hard and finish him off.”

“You got it. What’s your strength against him?”

“My space ear.”

“Always fear the better ear! You’re ready.”

Uncle Polly was not really Carr’s uncle. He wasn’t even old, maybe sixty-something, but he was scrawny and bent-backed from a career spent on mining ships and in orbital gyms during a generation when zero gravity alleviation therapy wasn’t what it was today and so many years in space took a heavy toll on one’s body. He had a full head of short gray hair and a permanently grizzled jaw. But he moved and spoke with the fire of a younger

man, and when he slapped his hands on his thighs, he radiated confidence like a solar flare.

The zero gravity complex, recently renamed the Virgin Galactic Center, loomed ahead of them. As the vehicle slowed, the familiar transition to weightlessness tugged at Carr's stomach, pressed his chest against the harness, and drew his limbs upward. They glided past a group of tourists on a beginner-level spacewalk, the suited figures cycling arms and legs slowly and awkwardly as their guide coaxed them along with gentle bursts of his thrusters, like a shepherd leading a herd of nervous farm animals.

The car docked in the parking hold. Carr drifted up to retrieve his bag and pushed it ahead with one hand while unclasp his belt tether and hooking it around the hallway guide-rail with the other. It was an irritating requirement; he could easily climb this place free-floating and blindfolded, but there was a fine if you were caught untethered, even if you were a Valtego resident. Management didn't want anyone setting a bad example for the tourists and seasonal workers, who might hurt themselves crashing into things or get stranded in the middle of a room and create extra work for the maintenance folks who'd have to rescue them.

DK tethered himself and tilted his head to one side, listening. "You hear that?"

Already, the low thrum of a crowd was growing over the steady whoosh of vehicles docking, one after the other. Distant loud music began pulsing through the thick walls of the parking hold. DK smiled, showing small, brilliant white teeth against tropical bronze skin. "Full house tonight, I'll wager. All here to see you, kid."

That wasn't exactly true; the headline fight was between Danyo "Fear Factor" Fukiyama and Jorge "Monster" Rillard, but DK had told Carr that his match had the most hype he'd ever seen for the undercard. Of course, maybe DK was just saying that to pump him up. DK was not a large man—a natural feathermass—and he looked slightly rodent-like with his big ears and fists, large eyes, and small nose, but he exuded a gregarious charisma that was rare in this sport. He was also one of the best young zeroboxers anywhere. His full name was Danilo Kabitain, but no one called him that. He was DK to his flymates, "Captain Pain" to his opponents and the media, and a hell of a man to have in one's corner.

They climbed along the hallway using the evenly spaced rungs, turned right, and passed through the athletes' entrance. The locker room and adjoining warm-up space were empty except for two men. One of them was seated on a bench, feet hooked under the stabilizing rod, elbows on knees, broad shoulders hunched forward. He looked as if the universe had just ended.

"What's the matter, Blake?" Carr asked.

"My fight's canceled." Blake Murphy didn't look up. "The other guy tested positive for endurance-enhancing nanos. Bastard."

"Damn. Sorry to hear it."

Blake's trainer glanced over from where he was furiously shoving his fighter's gear into a bag. "You'll be up early then." He pointed to the small wallscreen that showed the evening's two commentators, Xeth Stone and Jeroan Culver, up on deck. Carr swiped the volume up and Xeth's energetic voice filled the locker room: "... change in lineup, it won't be long now before we see one of the most anticipated matches of the night!"

"That's right, Xeth," Jeroan replied in a straight-man monotone. "Carr Luka is still something of an enigma to this crowd. He burst onto the ZGFA scene last year, gained a strong following when he racked up four impressive wins in a row, and then choked in his last fight against 'Death' Ray Jackson. Now he's going up against the third best zeroboxer in the lowmass division, and the question on everyone's mind is, does he stand a chance of coming back against Ferrano?"

"I think he does, Jeroan," Xeth enthused. "I don't think Luka is a flash-in-the-pan like some people have been saying. I've been doing this a long time, and I tell you, it's been a while since I've seen a guy, born on Earth no less, with the kind of instincts he's shown in the Cube. That kid can *fly*. Did I mention he's still *seventeen*?"

"Sure, he can fly, but Ferrano is an expert grabber. How's he going to do against that?"

Zeroboxing commentators liked to speak of fighters as "grabbers" or "fliers." It was rather artificial, Carr thought, since any good zeroboxer had to be both, but there was some truth to the distinction. To inflict any bare-handed damage to a person in zero gravity, you had to establish a brace or a point of

leverage—preferably a vulnerable part of your opponent’s body—to keep them from floating away while you hurt them. Or you had to treat space itself as a weapon, using the infinite angles of movement to strike and rebound, strike and rebound, faster and harder than the other guy.

“Luka is an ace flier,” Xeth agreed, “but his grabbing game is solid, and it’s getting better with every match. I think we’re going to see—”

Uncle Polly slashed his hand across the front of the screen to turn it off. “You heard ’em, you’re up early! Get changed and warmed up!”

Carr untethered himself, then stripped out of his clothes and handed them to DK, who stuck them to the magnetic locker pegs and passed him his shorts. Uncle Polly hurried off to find the ZGFA official, a dour bulldog of a man who inspected Carr’s gripper shoes and gloves and watched as DK wrapped Carr’s hands. He flashed a retinal reader across Carr’s eyes, checked his vital stats off his cuff—heart rate, blood pressure, and temperature—then gave him the go-ahead. “Forty minutes,” he said.

“I need to take a leak,” Carr said.

“Make it fast,” Uncle Polly warned.

Carr climbed over to the stall and dug his feet under the toe bar, streaming into the vacuum funnel for what felt like an eternity. Everyone said that for a young zeroboxer he was remarkably composed, never visibly nervous before fights, but his bladder knew better. Maybe that was a good sign; he hadn’t been nervous enough before the last match.

The wash dispenser squirted a bubble of soapy water onto his fingers. Blake emerged from one of the other stalls and pulled himself over to the neighboring dispenser.

“Rotten luck,” Carr said to him, feeling obligated to put in a few more words of sympathy. “You’re bound to get another fight soon. At least they caught him. You wouldn’t want a loss on your record because the guy cheated.”

Blake looked up, his eyes like two pale blue gas fires. “Who says I would’ve lost?”

Carr hesitated, wiping off the water with a towel, not sure how he’d somehow given offense. “No one. But even if you won, the guy doesn’t

deserve to be in the Cube.” It made Carr angry that some people tried to fool the system, to take shortcuts around years of time and effort. It was mentally weak.

Blake’s mouth sagged a little, his eyes cooling, losing their ferocity. You never could tell with Blake. Most of the time, he was one of the most polite and soft-spoken guys Carr had ever met. But in a fight ... well, he wasn’t nicknamed “the Destroyer” for nothing. As he turned to leave, he looked back at Carr and said, “Good luck out there. Stay out of those corners, yeah?”

Corners. They had never been a problem for Carr, not until his last fight, when “Death” Ray Jackson had flown him hard for two rounds, then trapped him in a corner in the third and ground it out to win in a split decision. Carr did not take losing well (who did?), especially since he was certain he could have won and had only his own overconfidence and ill-preparedness to blame.

Uncle Polly had given him hell, and he’d deserved it. He could barely look at his coach after the fight. For days, he’d felt so low he couldn’t bring himself to leave his apartment. Uncle Polly had shown up on the fifth day. His face had been severe, but his voice had been kind. “It’s good for you to know what it feels like on the other side, for once. Now you know. It’s shit. So—you planning on whimpering back to Earth for a planet-rat job, or are you going to get off your ass?”

He’d gotten off his ass. It had taken time, though—weeks—to shake off the malaise, and he suspected the loss would stay with him forever, like a benign cyst under the skin.

Carr clambered back out to the warm-up area, shaking his head to clear away the unpleasant memory and refocus on the present. He had another chance—that was what mattered. DK helped him pull on and bind his gripper shoes. Carr wiggled each of his enclosed toes and gave a thumbs-up. He took off his cuff-link and handed it to his friend. Keeping a fighter’s cuff for him during a match was an important job for the cornerman and symbolic of trust; DK put it on next to his own. Carr’s gloves went on, over his wrapped hands, bound securely several inches up his forearm, leaving the wrists fully mobile. Some zeroboxers opted for the heavier gloves with more wrist support, but Carr didn’t think it was worth sacrificing climbing agility.

“Thirty minutes,” the official in the hallway called.

“Terran or Martian?” DK retorted, cheeky. Zeroboxing rounds were always measured in the fractionally longer Martian minutes, so it was an ongoing joke that zeroboxers had no sense of standard Terran time.

“Get moving,” Uncle Polly said. “You know the drill—five times around the room, then wall-bounces.”

Carr swung into the square warm-up room and jogged the walls, up, down, and around, exerting himself just enough to raise his heart rate. There was a lumpy target dummy secured to the center of the room with cable wiring; he launched off a wall, somersaulted to strike the target with both feet, and rebounded to another wall. He worked the dummy from each wall and corner, and in the last five minutes, Uncle Polly called him back down for a brief recovery. Carr was warm now, just beginning to feel a sweat. Uncle Polly drifted in front of him and did a final check on his gloves and shoes. He clapped his fists down over Carr’s. “Let’s do this.”

The official’s voice called down the hallway, “Luka, you’re up!”

A deep thrill of nervous energy raced through Carr’s veins. He faced the hall, drew in a long, uneven breath, then let it hiss out slowly. “We’re right behind you,” DK reassured him.

Carr gripped the rungs and climbed. At the stadium entrance, the rumble of the crowd suddenly faded as the music and lights dimmed and blue spotlights began sweeping back and forth. The announcer’s bass voice bellowed, “Fighting out of the red corner, with a mass of seventy kilograms and a record of four wins, one loss, CAAARRR ... ‘THE RAPTOR’ LUKAAA!”

TWO

Carr kicked off the final hallway rung and through the entrance. He somersaulted tightly, then uncoiled, reached, and landed in a dramatic crouch on the deck, gripping it easily with the balls of feet and fingertips. The crowd roared its approval, and as he straightened, Carr saw close-ups of himself on the huge screens hanging around the stadium.

Great stars, there were a lot of people. They filled the tiered stands that stretched in all directions, blurred into shadow beyond the stark, glaring lights. Carr's pulse sped up, beating in his palms and the soles of his feet. Zeroboxing was the sort of thing people watched on screens at home; most planet rats couldn't afford to travel beyond atmosphere very often, and even those that could generally liked their artificial gravity. These spectators were the really hard-core fans, the ones who would rather be strapped into seats, drinking beer from squeeze bottles and brushing away floating globs of spilled orange soda and candy wrappers in order to see the fight live. Tonight, there were thousands of them, some still pulling themselves along the guide-rails to their seats.

Below the deck hung the Cube, empty, like an enormous minimalist ice sculpture. The sweeping spotlight beams distorted on its transparent surface, tingeing its edges and corners with cool blue light. Even experienced zeroboxers got shivers looking at the thing. To willingly enter it was to be completely imprisoned and utterly exposed. It was the prism of truth. There was no hiding in the Cube, no angle from which you could not be seen, and no way out until you had been proven victor or vanquished.

The announcer, Hal Greese, had a thick neck and a gut that, without gravity, migrated upward from the region of his waist to fill out his torso in a kind of general bulbousness. He turned in a slow circle in the center of the deck, one arm raised in anticipation. "Fighting out of the blue corner, with a mass of seventy-one kilograms and a record of nine wins, three losses, JAY ... 'DRACULA' ... FERRRANNOO!"

Jay Ferrano shot through the entrance, twisting like a corkscrew, and caught the landing deck neatly. A wave of enthusiastic noise vibrated the Cube beneath his feet. Carr looked across at his opponent. He seemed larger than he

had in the videos Carr had studied. “Dracula” had gotten his nickname after an early fight when he’d let loose a bellow and accidentally swallowed a floating bubble of his opponent’s blood. The fans had loved it and the clip had gone viral. Ferrano had apparently taken to his name, because the suspended screens zoomed in for a close-up of the liquid tattoo stretched across the back of his neck: a bat flapping its wings.

They met in the center of the deck, both of them ignoring the rails and walking steadily on gripper shoes alone. The referee said a bunch of the usual stuff about wanting a good, hard, clean fight and so on. Carr didn’t hear any of it. He watched Ferrano. Sometimes you could tell what kind of a fighter a man was by looking at his face in the seconds before a match. Some guys looked cool as ice and fought the same way, patient and technical. Those who didn’t even look you in the eyes were either too nervous or, in their hearts, nice fellas who would rather not think of their opponents as human beings they would have to hurt. The ones who growled and glowered as if they wanted to rip your limbs off—they fought because they were angry people.

Ferrano sniffed and cricked his neck from side to side. He looked strong, and mean, and here to play.

The referee told them to touch gloves. They did, and retreated to opposite sides of the deck. Carr was tingling from fingertips to toes. Uncle Polly was murmuring, “You’re ready, you’re ready. I’ll be in your ear the whole time.” DK put Carr’s mouth guard in, then spread coagulant gel on his face; it lessened the chance he’d get cut, and in the event he did, it would keep most of his blood on him instead of mucking up the air.

The attendant technician held an activation penlight up to his eyes and told Carr to look at a point straight ahead while he fixed the beam on each eye in turn. After a couple of seconds, he said, “Connection’s good,” and one of the screens above flickered and shifted into the view from Carr’s optic cameras, now being fed live to his subscribers.

The deck, which took up one entire outside surface of the Cube, had two entry hatches set into it. The border of Carr’s hatch flashed red and slid open. He went to the edge of it and stood like a man with his toes on the lip of a cliff, staring down into two hundred cubic meters of empty space. Then he dove through the opening like a swimmer into water. He piked his body backward and flipped, catching the wall behind him, hands first, feet second,

finding spread-fingered purchase on the textured surface, the magnetic pull on his gripper gloves, shoes, and the waistband of his shorts holding him against the wall.

On the other side of the Cube, Jay Ferrano shot through his hatch. Both entrances flashed once more—Ferrano’s blue, Carr’s red—before sealing off. The bell rang loudly outside the Cube for the benefit of the audience, more quietly in his ear. The fight was on.

Ferrano opened with a straight launch, propelling himself across the Cube with both legs, hands up in a guard. Carr judged the man’s path and leapt for an adjacent wall, kicking out at his passing opponent. His foot connected, not with enough power to do damage, but that wasn’t the point. It pushed the man in one direction and accelerated Carr’s travel in the other, setting up his rebound.

Ferrano turned off the wall and shot straight back. Carr tucked his legs, powered off the surface, and sailed just out of reach. He shot a hand out for the wall, grabbed it, and climbed; for a calculated moment he was directly above Ferrano’s head, and he swung down, fists flying for his opponent’s face. He nailed a right hook and followed the momentum of his weightless spin with a left elbow, but Ferrano wrapped a leg around his, halting both their rotations and creating a coveted opening to grab and to land punches.

“Cover! Cover and break!” Uncle Polly shouted, his voice tinny in Carr’s receiver.

Carr tucked his head between his forearms as Ferrano’s right fist started raining down blows. The man’s other hand was cupped behind Carr’s neck, right leg anchored tight around Carr’s thigh. He had to move before Ferrano could lock him up further. He drove his right knee up against his opponent’s chest and surged back. They came apart, Carr kicking out to speed up their separation.

“Stick to the plan,” Polly urged. “Stay out of his grab zone! Make him fly!”

All planet-born people instinctively had a sense of up and down; it took years of zero gravity training to develop a good space ear, to navigate 360 degrees of movement comfortably without nausea or disorientation. Carr was a natural. He twisted in the air, stretching for the wall with the balls of his feet. His left shoe found a magnetic grip while the rest of him kept traveling;

he arched his back and shot his arm out, bracing himself into one of the Cube's right angles. Ferrano was coming after him, but too slowly; he hadn't gotten off a strong push. Carr scrambled across the corner and attacked from behind, punching both heels into his opponent's back, slamming the man into the wall and sending himself flying again.

Ferrano's broad back tensed with frustration and he began chasing the younger fighter around the Cube. They traded blows but Carr kept moving, kept Ferrano coming after him. Uncle Polly's voice was a chant in his ear: "That's it, make him climb, you're good, you're good."

The bell sounded on six Martian minutes. The hatches flashed and slid open; Carr climbed sideways toward the glowing red square outline and pulled himself onto the deck.

He sat, ankles hooked under the stabilizing bar as DK took his mouth guard and squeezed water into his mouth. Uncle Polly appeared in front of him, and for a couple of seconds his voice had a weird double timbre as Carr picked it up from his receiver. Polly stabbed his cuff to mute it and squatted down on his gripper shoes, talking fast and excited. "You're pissing him off and wearing him out. That's exactly what you want. Pick your places. You can fly circles around him; he'll tire long before you do."

Carr felt good—slicked with sweat, but his energy still high. Long before he was given his Cube name "the Raptor," his nickname around the gym had been "Last Man Standing" because of his staying power. Uncle Polly was certain that Carr's cardiovascular endurance and uncanny space ear were the key to him winning against more seasoned fighters.

Carr sloshed water in his mouth and spit it out, the spray breaking into wobbly bubbles that DK swiped away with a towel. "It looks like I'm playing it too safe," he said. "Like I'm not taking it to him enough."

"You look great, kid," DK reassured him, pressing an ice pack to the back of his neck.

Two scantily clad Cube girls drifted above the deck, taut bodies undulating like mermaids as they circled a big, spinning holovid of the number two. Carr bit back down on his mouth guard, unhooked his feet from the bar, and dove back through the hatch just as the bell sounded on the second round.

Ferrano had adjusted his game plan. No immediate power launch and energy-expending chase this time; he wasn't going to be drawn into trying to out-fly Carr. He stuck to the walls, looking for an opening, fighting tight and deliberate. It didn't take long for Carr to start feeling like a crow harassing a porcupine. He was landing hits, but Ferrano had good, swift defense and the blows didn't do a lot of damage.

Carr gritted his teeth, his gut surging with anxiety. He couldn't be sure of winning, not if the rest of the round went like this. The judges might tilt in his favor, but he couldn't count on that. Not for this fight. He needed this fight.

He ran up the corner, bouncing off the right angles on the balls of his feet, then leapt back down at his opponent, legs scissoring for Ferrano's neck. The man evaded by less than a hand's width and grabbed Carr's leg. They both spun. Ferrano went for a leg lock. Carr twisted out of it, but the move gave Ferrano a brief opening. He threw his legs around Carr's waist, taking rear control and flinging his arm around Carr's neck.

Carr tucked his chin in time to avoid being immediately choked out. Ferrano had him around the jaw instead of the throat; the man's forearm began sawing back and forth.

Uncle Polly was shouting, "You have legs! Legs on a wall!"

He was being ridden and choked piggyback, but in the Cube, up and down were easily reversed. Carr kept his head down, braced his legs and kicked hard off the wall, sending them both shooting backward.

Ferrano's back slammed into the opposite wall, and they bounced. The impact knocked some of the wind out of Ferrano; he didn't let go, but his grip slipped enough for Carr to pull the stranglehold loose, twist his body a little sideways, and start nailing his opponent in the ribs with the tip of his elbow. Ferrano grunted but held on, tried to maneuver back into the choke with his other arm. They turned in space, locked together, everything barrel-rolling by slowly as they fought for advantage. With his free hand, Ferrano started hitting Carr in the head, forcing him to give up his elbow strikes to protect himself. Uncle Polly was yelling something but Carr couldn't hear it; his head was ringing with each blow.

Watching the video of the fight later, Carr would hear Xeth Stone exclaiming at this point, "It looks like Luka is in trouble now—they're

drifting and Ferrano is not going to let go! He's just pounding him! This is not looking good for Carr Luka!"

"This is exactly how Ferrano wins," Jeroan said. "He may not look as nimble in the Cube, but you can't underestimate his tenacity."

Everything began to blur and swim. The wall advanced slowly in the column of vision between Carr's raised forearms. Desperate clarity pierced through the roar of blood in his ears and the tinny incomprehensible noise from his implanted receiver. His body began to slacken; Ferrano dug in the choke and started to squeeze.

"Oh ... oh, this is it!" Xeth Stone yelled. "Ferrano's got it! He just wore Luka down with those punches."

Jeroan said, "Luka is going to have to tap any second now."

Blood and air were no longer reaching Carr's brain. Pain and blackness closed in. Ferrano growled with effort, completely focused on impending victory. *Just tap and it'll stop*, his meaty, sweaty forearm seemed to promise with each additional millimeter of pressure.

They reached the wall. Carr shot out hands and feet, catching the surface with all four magnetic grippers, and launched himself straight up with every remaining ounce of power in his limbs, as if shooting up the vertical side of a swimming pool toward air. The crown of Ferrano's head, higher than his by a couple inches, slammed into the Cube wall above them.

The impact jarred Carr as well, his tenuous hold on consciousness nearly giving out, darkness scudding across his eyes. But Ferrano's arm fell away and the flood of returning oxygen was like a slap of cold water in Carr's face. His body responded with a wave of sudden energy. He broke free and turned the corner like a spider crouching in its hollow. The walls, though solid, were designed to partially cushion impact; Ferrano was more dazed than injured, his eyes unfocused as he reached out clumsy hands to steady himself. Carr came at him from above, fist connecting square across the chin. Ferrano's head spun first, his body followed, and he went limp as a drifting rag doll.

Peripheral sounds and sensations returned. Outside the Cube, lights strobed and the crowd roared—one giant incoherent mass of noise.

"DID I JUST SEE THAT?" Xeth Stone squealed.

“We have a floater!” Jeroan’s usually unflappable voice held a note of awe. “Carr Luka just floated the third best zeroboxer in the lowmass division, in the second round, when it looked like he was done for.”

“What a stunning reversal! Ferrano did not see that coming at all! None of us did! I don’t know how Luka could take those hits and hang on through that choke, and still have enough left in him to pull that off! What an opener! That might be the fight of the night, Jeroan!”

The referee and a doctor navigated over to Ferrano and examined him, then took hold of his arms and carried him back over to his side of the Cube, propelling themselves with handheld mini-thrusters. Residual adrenaline pulsed through Carr’s body with each heartbeat; he felt as jittery as a bug as he jogged, on hands and feet, back to his hatch and out onto the deck. As the referee took his arm, Hal Greese’s voice boomed, “At four minutes, thirty-eight seconds in the second round, the winner, by knockout—CARRRRR LUKAAA!”

The sweet high of victory swept over Carr, dizzying him more than any gymnastic feat in the Cube. He saw his own face on the suspended screens—red, puffy, and bruised, shiny with pebbly sweat clinging to a layer of gel—and broke into a grin he felt would never stop. The shadowy tiers of spectators rippled with movement, chanting their approval. He was surrounded by people: DK and Uncle Polly hugging him, the doctor coming to check on him, the technician disconnecting his optic cameras and telling him that his cochlear receiver had been jolted and he’d need to get it fixed—that was why in the last seconds of the match he hadn’t heard Polly’s voice, only a high, distant whining. Sports journalists materialized out of nowhere, their tethers crowding the rails, raising their cuff-links above each other to catch his words. Carr scrabbled distractedly for what he was supposed to say right now.

“I just want to thank Jay Ferrano and the ZGFA for putting on a great fight. I’ve got to credit my incredible coach and my cornerman. To my mom and Enzo, back home on Earth—I love you guys.” There were more shouted questions, but DK and Uncle Polly ushered him back to the locker room. Carr barely felt the hallway rungs as he floated out of the crush of people.

He looped around the room like a drunken bird, bouncing off the banks of lockers and barreling into DK, who whooped and laughed and threw him into

a spin. When he pulled out of it, Carr hooked one foot under a toe bar and leaned back, still grinning stupidly as DK helped him out of his gripper shoes and gloves, towed him down, and placed a squeeze bottle of electrolyte drink in his hand.

Uncle Polly stood in front of him and leveled a stern finger at his face. “What was that? You were going to stay out of clinch.”

“He wasn’t falling for it, coach. I couldn’t count on being far enough ahead by the end of the third.”

“Hell of a risk. He nearly choked you out.”

“But he didn’t.”

“Don’t be smart with me. You were impatient to win and you got reckless.”

“C’mon, Polly,” DK said. “Your boy did good tonight. That knockout is one for the highlight reels.”

Uncle Polly huffed. Then his tough demeanor fell away as a slow, crooked smile brightened his stubbly face. “Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, it sure was.” He put his hands on either side of Carr’s face, giving his cheek an approving smack. “Not what I would’ve done, but damn, it worked.”

Carr relaxed. He didn’t want Uncle Polly unhappy with him. He got dressed and no sooner had he put his cuff back on than it vibrated with dozens of messages. Congratulations from friends and teammates, new subscriber stats, media hits ... he touched the screen to queue it all, not planning to deal with it until later, but one high priority message flashed insistently. His cochlear receiver was still messed up; when he tried to play the audio tag, it was shrill and jumbled. He saw who the sender was, though, and his stomach did a small, nervous dive, like the final weak aftershock of an earthquake.

Uncle Polly was watching him. “Well?”

Carr looked up and nodded. “The Martian wants to see me.”

THREE

The Martian's name was Bax Gant, and he was the co-owner of the Zero Gravity Fighting Association. His business partner, Terran entertainment industry tycoon Bran Merkel, was the money behind the ZGFA but only occasionally seen on Valtego; Gant managed all the day-to-day operations. He was called "the Martian" because he probably *was* the best known Martian on a city-station that was still overwhelmingly Terran, but also because, in zeroboxing circles, he was the sort of singularly influential personality who merited a *the* when spoken about, such as *the* Bossman or *the* Bastard. The Martian.

Carr stood in Gant's office trying not to look uncomfortable. He'd gone to the clinic for an injection of rehab/repair nanos; between the pricey cell-mending molecules and a dose of ibuprofen, post-fight pain wasn't his main problem. He'd had his receiver fixed too, and he wasn't even badly hungover from last night's after-party. It was just that Bax Gant's office felt like a walk-in refrigerator. Comfortable for a man from Mars, but not for someone raised in balmy Toronto. Carr imagined that Gant must feel the reverse; the whole rest of Valtego probably felt like a mild steam bath to him. No wonder he seemed to live in his office.

"Sit down, Luka," Gant said. "Coffee?"

Carr was about to decline, then remembered that he had just finished a fight and could eat and drink whatever he wanted to for a while. "Sure, thanks," he said, sitting down in the chair in front of the desk.

The last time he'd been in Gant's office was the day after his sixteenth birthday. Uncle Polly had sat next to him. The Martian had said, "You're training them from the womb now, are you, Pol?" and then turned a skeptical look on Carr. "The pros aren't like the ammys, kid. You think you're ready?" and Carr had said, "Yes, sir," though he'd been scared. This morning was different. Uncle Polly had cupped Carr's chin in his hand and said, "You're not a kid anymore. You're a pro fighter with a good record, and you're going to get re-signed or I'll eat my towel. Now go in there and talk to that domie, man-to-man."

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