

II. James

Twin alternating fists pummel a nylon and polyester punching bag. Quick, fluid jabs. Left—right—left. Talcum powder unfurls in the wake of each blow, sweeping inward and outward. The fists, wrapped in black synthetic strips of cotton, open and flex. They are the color and texture of aged parchment.

James McGregor breathes hard, springing back and forth on the balls of his feet. Only his breaths and the squeaking sway of the Everlast bag fill the empty room. Cracked windows line the wall behind him. At sixty-five, James has lost but a quarter of his strength to age. He's stocky but lean, of average height, and dressed in a white T-shirt with sweat pants and white tennis shoes. Short gray hair crowns the sides and back of his head. His concentration is made of steel.

James wipes his brow and bounces forward, fists clenched.

He swings.

A blue boxing glove connects with the pale flesh of a man's ribcage. Tidal waves of pressure ripple outward like a meteor striking the earth's surface. Ribs buckle, fracture, and break in low, thudding echoes. The glove, creased and made of premium dyed leather, its surface slicked with sweat, glistens from multicolored lights overhead. The glove remains frozen in place, but the man and his ribcage begin to recoil. A nearly-inaudible hum builds to a roar and erupts in the form of applause.

James is thirty years younger and bare-chested, a red-haired marble statue at the center of a boxing ring. His muscled frame is drawn taut and covered in perspiration. On all sides, a bloated mass of rabid fans shouts and cries his name. James hears only the sound of his own heartbeat, his brilliant gray-green eyes locked onto the form of his opponent.

Walter Packet ploughs back-first into the ropes, cradling his ribcage with bulbous white gloves. He's a hulk of a man—6'2" and made of bricks—but he's crumbling. His lip is freshly split. His angular jaw hangs slack. Splayed across his forehead, sopping blond hair bleeds sweat into his left eye. The right is swollen shut. He's already beaten, but the match

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continues. With effort, Walter pushes off the ropes and meets James in the middle.

Fists bobbing, James snaps a left hook—once, twice—and Walter goes spinning. He stumbles, one knee landing before the other in a syncopated beat. The arena's wailing assaults his ears, washes through his head, pounds at his temples.

Finish him! Finish him!

Primal, bloodthirsty cries.

James hears them for the first time as he watches Walter struggle to one foot, straining to bear the weight of his own head.

Finish him!

James crouches, eyes narrowing. He takes a giant step into the air, right hand cocked beside his head. He slows, silhouetted against the ceiling lights. Walter's head tilts back as James' shadow buries it.

Finish...

A wrapped fist connects with the Everlast bag. The bag ruptures from the blow, jolts off its hook. It slaps the floor and rolls, slowing at the tan boots of Officer Harold Packet. Packet's right boot settles on the bag and sinks into its surface. He wears the seamless regalia of the Second Watch: white pants, a tan belt with a silver buckle, and an electric baton holstered at his hips. The collar of his white jacket is raised.

“You've got a visitor,” Packet says. His voice is soft but cold, wrapped in layers of self-control. Short blonde hair, buzzed to a quarter of an inch, forms a widow's peak. The rest of his body is equally angular and solid. His blue eyes lower the temperature of the room.

James steps out from under the ceiling lights, drawing into the shadows between the windows.

As Packet speaks, his right eye ticks.

“It's your son.”