

CHAPTER ELEVEN

We flew back to San Belden, California late that night and got off the plane. As Chapling and I waited for our taxi, I got that weird sensation, *again*, that someone was watching me.

I turned to Chapling. “Do you feel strange or weird in any way?”

“I always feel weird,” he answered.

I laughed a little. “I mean, right now, do you feel as if someone’s watching you?”

Chapling looked around. “No. Do you?”

“Yeah, I’ve been feeling this way on and off pretty much since I got back from my last mission. And I keep thinking about . . . well, my sister.”

He shrugged. “Yeah, it could be her.”

I smiled.

“Before this mission you and I both were doing a lot of research, trying to find her, purposefully leaving identity stamps through cyberspace.” Chapling shrugged again. “If she’s half-way computer saavy, she found them.”

I turned a full circle, my heart jumping a little bit. Hearing someone agree with me made it even more real.

Through the dimly lit area, I searched the airport, the people standing, and the parking garage in front of us. *My sister*. It was almost too much to comprehend.

I smiled into the night, hoping she really *was* watching. *Hi sis*, I mouthed.

Our taxi pulled up and forty five minutes later we found ourselves in the conference room surrounded by our team.

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We told them everything that had happened. We described the layout of the mansion, the things we'd seen, the people we'd interacted with.

David nodded. "Everything's right on track. Warrior try outs are in two days. TL and I are going to do some last minute checks with the mission, and everyone else maintain training schedule. Dismissed."

My team filed out and I purposefully lingered, taking my time packing my things. I wanted to talk to David. Just to say hi, exchange a few sentences, and tell him about my sister—it seemed crazy that I hadn't had time to do even that. But more importantly I wanted to find out if he was okay. He had to be stressed to the max over this very personal mission to TL.

David didn't notice me lingering, his focus was so intent on a file.

"Hi," I softly said, and he glanced up.

I noticed then how blood shot his eyes were, and it melted my heart. Poor guy.

I didn't care we were 'just friends'. I walked right up to him and wrapped my arms around him. "You okay?" I whispered.

He didn't hesitate in returning the hug. Squeezing me tight, he buried his face in my neck and just stood breathing me in.

I closed my eyes and inhaled his scent and warmth, too. God, I'd missed this. Him. Us.

Neither one of us said anything for a good long while and sometime later he pulled back. "Thanks," he said, smiling a little.

I traced my finger across his brow and down his stubbly cheek, drinking in his handsome, caring face.

He stared into my eyes, and I got the distinct impression he really wanted to say something but couldn't bring himself to say it.

Instead, he reached up and caressed his thumb around the curve of my ear.

I swallowed, wanting to say so much, but not knowing if it was the right time. If he would accept my words. If he would reciprocate.

“Thank you,” I said instead, “for the text on the plane. Chapling and I both appreciated them.”

David’s eyes did that sexy crinkling thing. “You’re welcome.”

“Do you know how wonderful you are?”

He took a step back, glancing away in what seemed like embarrassment.

Lightly, I grasped his upper arm. “David, seriously, do you know how wonderful you are?”

He shrugged. “Just doing my job.”

“No, you’re not. You’re doing what’s you. What’s David. You’re thinking of everyone else always, making sure everyone’s fine. You’re amazing. Here you are with this huge stress on your shoulders. My God, TL and Nalani’s daughter, and you’re in charge. And yet you still think to text me and Chapling to make sure we’re okay.”

I tugged his arm a little so he’d look at me. And when he did, I repeated, “You’re amazing.”

David shrugged his embarrassment, and he was so cute I couldn’t help myself, I leaned forward and kissed his cheek.

“David,” TL interrupted, sticking his head in the open doorway. “My office, now.”

David gave me a tender smile, “Thanks,” and then gathered up his things and headed out.

I watched him go, happy I’d lingered and talked with him, and knowing I’d given him a margin of comfort he’d needed.

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David *did* spend a lot of his time emotionally supporting others when he desperately needed that support himself. Sure he got it from TL, but David needed it from me. I'd been so used to him being the strong one, the one in charge, the one with all the answers that I hadn't fully comprehended the importance of him being able to lean on me. He wasn't invincible, although he easily seemed that way.

I walked from the conference room, smiling to myself, feeling a boost to my confidence as a person and a woman. I was an equal partner to David, and it had taken me this long to figure that out. And I knew without a doubt in my mind that this 'friend' business wasn't going to cut it.

I wanted him back.

* * *

Early in the morning two days later, Chapling and I boarded a plane back to Washington. A taxi picked us up, drove us to Teacup, and dropped us at the mansion. The same huge, high-voiced, tattooed man led us through the house and down that interminably long stairwell to the gym.

Everything looked the same.

"Mr. Noor said you should set up," the tattooed man instructed. "Warrior tryouts will commence at precisely one p.m."

Again, I thought how this guy's proper demeanor seemed so out of place in the situation.

With that, he left us, and Chapling and I made ourselves at home. We were the only ones in the whole place throughout the entire morning. I didn't know what I had expected, but complete solitary was not it.

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I guess I'd expected fighters to be training or people to be coming in or out. And where were the prospective Warriors? Shouldn't they be here by now? Where was my team?

At precisely 1:00 p.m. Harry Noor walked through the PRIVATE archway and into the gym.

"Charlie, Gertrude," he said, "greetings."

Chapling and I smiled. "Mr. Noor."

"All set?" he asked, and we nodded.

He blew a whistle, and from the same archway filed a whole group of men. I would say some big, some small, but even the small ones were big. Halfway down the line I spotted Mystic, and at the end I saw David.

I surveyed the guys, counting twenty in all, and then each fighter had his trainer.

Shirtless, the fighters lined up in a row with their trainers standing behind them—of course, TL with Mystic and Jonathan with David.

I didn't think I'd ever been greeted by so many shirtless men. So many *muscular*, shirtless men. And to my surprise, most of them had no hair on their heads or their bodies. Maybe they thought being bald made them look more mean? Not to my surprise, the majority of them had tattoos.

I glanced down the line, noting Mystic, at five-foot-ten, stood the shortest. And then I looked straight at David. Stone-faced, completely in role, he stared straight ahead. TL had shaved his head for his disguise and wore a fake bushy beard. Even though some distance spanned between us, I could tell he'd put in dark contacts. Honestly, if I hadn't known the man behind Mystic was TL, I wouldn't have recognized him.

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I glanced around for Bruiser, before remembering girlfriends weren't allowed in tryouts, only in the actual fights.

No introductions were made. Harry Noor simply nodded for us to begin. So much for a warm and cozy start.

Chapling and I busied ourselves pasting the wireless Influence Sway Skins on each of the fighters for the baseline reading. I headed straight for David.

Not even glancing at me, he maintained his rigid posture and stoic expression. I took my time putting each Skin on him, slowly smoothing them into place. I wasn't flirting or teasing, don't get me wrong, this was *so* not the time to flirt. I just wanted him to feel my touch, to know I was here.

It worked, because as I smoothed the last Skin into place, he brought his eyes down to my face. His expression remained blank, but his eyes spoke volumes. Appreciation, warmth, affection, longing . . . *love?*

I tried hard to show him those same things before turning away and getting down to work.

When we finished taking baseline readings of each man, I turned to Harry Noor. "We're ready for the mock fights."

Harry blew his whistle again, and from the PRIVATE archway came six *gigantic* men. No, *gigantic* didn't fully describe them. Enormous. Massive. Gargantuan. Colossal. None of them under six feet five, and every one of them solid, beefy muscle, bone, and skin.

I blinked a few times, trying to make sure I was seeing what I was actually seeing, and noticed our greeter, the high voiced guy. To my surprise, in the line up, he stood the smallest. And that guy was *huge*.

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I chanced a quick look in Mystic's direction, and he swallowed as he took in the site of the current Warriors.

It hit me then. Oh my God, Mystic and David had to go up against these guys? That was so not good. Not good on too many levels. I didn't want Mystic and David to go up against these guys. Not even with the Combat Thrash Program and Bruiser's coaching did I feel confident Mystic and David would succeed.

Heck, succeed? Survive was more like it.

Harry Noor gave instructions that each fighter would go up against a current Warrior in a two minute round. During that time, Chapling and I would continue taking data, and after the two minute mark, would have a percentage of excellence. After all tryouts were complete, we would commence with the hologram portion of the afternoon, and Harry Noor would make his decision.

"What are you looking at, you freak?" someone yelled, and Chapling and I whipped around.

The fighter standing beside Mystic towered over him, his face stuck right in Mystic's. "Get your eyes off me," the fighter growled.

To Mystic's credit, he took a step *toward* the fighter, not away, inching his face even closer. "You got a problem?"

The two just stared at each other, and I knew what Mystic really wanted to do was apologize, discuss peace, and turn the other way.

And then it dawned on me as I watched them face-to-face, that Mystic was searching the fighter's eyes, looking for a possible Zandra clue.

"Men," Harry Noor grunted. "Save it for the octagon."

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Mystic and the fighter slowly turned away from each other, giving that whole I'm-meaner-than-you-I'm-top-dog look.

Warrior #1 stepped up onto the raised octagon and motioned fighter #1 to join him. With his Skins still on, fighter #1 cockily strutted over and up. The two men went at it, while we recorded data. They threw punches and kicks, jabs and strikes, and within thirty seconds fighter #1 had been knocked out.

“I doubt he's going to be chosen,” Chapling mumbled through the side of his mouth, and I held back a smile.

On and on it went, each Warrior going up against a fighter. Some of the fighters held their own, some not so much. So far only fighter #1 had been knocked out.

Halfway down the line, it was Mystic's turn. He stepped up onto the octagon to face a Warrior just as horribly huge as the others. I crossed my fingers and toes and said a prayer to the fighting gods on behalf of nonviolent Mystic.

Mystic closed his eyes, probably channeling the same gods, and to my surprise pulled a Bruiser. His eyes shot open as he simultaneously lunged forward, fainted left, dodged right, leapt up, and jabbed his elbow in a meridian pressure point on the Warrior's shoulder.

Mr. Warrior dropped to his knees.

Chapling and I exchanged an impressed glance. Bruiser would be so proud.

Without making an arrogant show, Mystic simply reached down, reset Mr. Warrior's meridian point, and helped him up. A little disoriented, the Warrior shook his head to regain his equilibrium, then stood for a second just staring at Mystic.

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Mystic stared back, and I knew, once again, he was searching for Zandra clues. With a respectful nod, Mystic reached his hand out, and the Warrior took it. They exchanged manly compliments and left the octagon side-by-side, slapping each other on the back.

Leave it to Mystic to make friends with a giant.

I glanced over to see if Harry Noor showed any signs of being impressed. With slightly narrowed eyes, he watched Mystic's every move as he walked beside the Warrior. That had to be a good sign. So far he hadn't watched any fighter that closely.

The rest of the fighters standing in line went. A couple did really well and most held their own up against the Warriors. Only one got knocked out. So far, hands down, Mystic had done the best.

Finally, it was the last person's turn—David. I glanced at the octagon to see which Warrior he'd be up against and found the high-pitched guy standing there waiting. It was weird, I know, but I kinda liked Mr. high-pitch guy. He'd been so gentlemanly to me and Chapling.

My gaze traveled down his body to his ankles and the supportive, half-sock he wore on each one. I studied each ankle, noticing the right one looked a bit thicker, and then I saw a hint of an ace bandage peeking out the top.

David strode down the line right past Mystic. Completely in role, he and Mystic showed no signs of recognition to each other.

I stepped forward. "Excuse me, I need to check your Skins." Pointing to my laptop, I turned to Harry Noor. "According to the Combat Thrash Program," I lied, "one has come unattached."

Harry nodded for David to approach me.

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I smoothed my finger across a Skin attached to his stomach, leaning close to inspect it. Beside me, Chapling faked being busy with the laptop.

“Right ankle,” I whispered, not moving my lips.

“Oh, goodgood,” Chapling mumbled.

David barely nodded his understanding.

I stepped back. “All good.”

Harry motioned for David to continue on, and he stepped up onto the octagon. Harry blew his whistle, and lightening quick, David dropped to the matt and swept his foot right into Mr. high-pitch’s bad ankle.

A snap echoed through the gym, and I watched wide-eyed as Mr. high-pitch fell to the matt, grabbing his ankle. He didn’t make a sound, but the agony on his face told me something bad had happened.

I glanced at David, wanting to tell him he didn’t have to go and break the guy’s ankle. But, I reminded myself, it would be a lot worse than this during the actual competition. Mystic and David both would not only inflict some major pain, but take it themselves. Neither one of them would walk out of this mission unscathed.

And, I reminded myself, these fighters came here expecting this. They were kidding themselves if they thought this would be a friendly encounter.

“Was that a bone?” Chapling asked, looking a little sick.

I shook my head. “I think it was a tendon or ligament or something.” Since joining the Specialists, I’d heard bones break, and that was most definitely not a bone.

A couple of the Warriors stepped up onto the octagon to help Mr. High-Pitch down. He couldn’t walk. David had seriously injured him.

“Let’s move on,” Harry instructed, clearly feeling no concern for his injured Warrior.

While Chapling went down the line of fighters taking their Influence Sway Skins off, I dove into the Combat Thrash Program, checking and double checking that David and Mystic were set to go.

Harry came over to me. “I’d like to see holograms first.”

“Which titled fighter would you like to see these prospective Warriors go up against?” I smiled a little. “I have Utotiz’s data,” I proudly said, referring to the world MMA title holder.

Harry Noor’s brows lifted. “Utotiz?” He turned his back to everyone so only I could see his face. “He happens to be a guest fighter in tomorrow’s fights,” he whispered.

I held my smile in check, when what I really wanted to do was freak out. “Utotiz?” Holy crap. David and Mystic would be going up against the world title holder?

Harry looked a bit smug. “The purse is ten million dollars. Most ever. Why do you think I hired you? One of my Warriors *must* win that fight.” He stepped to the side. “Now let’s see holograms.”

I glanced across the room to TL, but he didn’t return my glance.

“Gertrude?” Harry prompted me.

“Sorry.” I gave my program the go ahead, and in the center of the octagon appeared an image of Utotiz.

My God he looked mean.

While everyone watched, the hologram of Utotiz went up against each fighter in quick thirty second rounds. Just long enough to show Harry how each prospective Warrior would do. Of course, my program showed real data on everyone but Mystic and David. Some of the fighters did horrible, some okay. Mystic and David definitely held their own.

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When all holograms were complete, Harry turned to me. “Now let’s see percentage of excellence.”

I did some *click, click, clicks*, and a list appeared on my screen. Beside each fighter’s name was a percentage. David and Mystic were 99.9.

Harry studied the list, before turning to the line of fighters. “I’m going to call six names. If your name is not called, you and your trainer are to leave immediately. If your name is called, you are to be here tomorrow night promptly at six p.m.”