

Fight To The Finish

HOW THE SPECIALISTS RECRUITED MYSTIC AND BRUISER

“Now you listen to me, young man.” Joe’s foster father jabbed his finger in Joe’s face. “I am *sick* and *tired* of your lax attitude.”

Joe stared blankly at his foster father, the man he’d lived with for the past six months. He wanted to react, but what was the point?

Joe’s foster father took a step closer to him. He began ticking items off on his fingers. “You will rise from bed promptly at five a.m. You have exactly twenty minutes to prepare yourself for the day.” He ticked off another finger. “Breakfast is served at 5:20. And even if you are done before the rest of us, you will remain seated at the table.”

Another finger got ticked off. “Morning chores and prayers are from 5:45 until 6:45. Your mother—”

“She’s not my mother,” Joe quietly interrupted.

His foster father narrowed his eyes. “Your *mother* will have the living room set up for school by seven a.m. You are to be seated with notebook and pencil in hand prior to her starting.” He ticked another finger off. “We do not tolerate tardiness.” He leaned down right in Joe’s face. “Are you getting all of this?”

No, I’m not, Joe wanted to say. What did the man think he was, stupid? “Yes,” Joe answered instead.

His foster father straightened and ticked another finger. “Homework is due . . .” He continued to outline the day, down to every precise second. The same day Joe had been living over and over again since coming here.

It was driving him slowly to the point of insanity.

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His foster father leaned down again, hovering over Joe where he sat in the dining room chair. “If your parents,” he jabbed that stupid finger in Joe’s face again, “had raised you with more structure and stability, you wouldn’t have any problems following orders.”

Digging his fingers into the wooden armrests, Joe got slowly, purposefully to his feet. He stood only five foot ten, but he still had height over the man. “Don’t. You. *Ever* bad mouth my parents. They were two hundred percent more kind and decent than you will ever be.”

It wasn’t often someone could get a rise out of Joe. But his foster father could. Anybody who spoke badly of Joe’s parents would *definitely* get a rise out of him.

The man pulled his shoulders back. “You know what? I’m done with you. I’m calling your social worker and sending you back to the state. I’ve got better things to do than put up with your disrespect and obvious lack of manners.”

“Back to the state?” Joe smirked. “Fine by me. I’d rather live in a thousand boys’ homes than under your roof.”

His foster father turned red all the way up to his military crew cut. He jabbed his finger toward the door. “Get out!” he yelled.

Calmly, Joe nodded, when what he really wanted to do was punch the man in the face.

Turning, Joe strode across the living room, snagged his backpack from beside the couch, and went straight out the front door. He cut across the creek in the back yard and disappeared into the hills of Tennessee. What little Joe had was in his backpack. He’d left a few things back at his foster family’s house. He didn’t care. Everything and everyone Joe had ever loved was gone. Whatever he’d accumulated in the past six months . . . well, it just didn’t matter.

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Joe walked for hours through the Tennessee woods and hills he'd grown up in. He knew how to survive. He wasn't worried. His parents had raised him in nature. Joe could live for months, *years* on what God's earth provided.

Subconsciously, he headed in the direction of where his whole world had come apart six months ago. As he neared the spot, his heart picked up pace, and he nearly buckled with the overwhelming presence of his family's souls, still drifting, still not settled, searching, searching for peace.

Joe emerged from a forest of pine trees and crossed a meadow of dandelions. The same meadow he had played in nearly every day with the commune's other children.

He sucked in a breath with the rush of wind carrying the screams of those who were gone. Sometimes he wished he didn't hear, he didn't feel, he didn't see the pain others had gone through or were currently experiencing. Joe wished his gifts would let him see laughter and happiness, like his mother's had. Why had he inherited the sorrow of the world?

Joe sucked in another breath as the memory of his little sister's wail pierced his heart. Why couldn't he have saved them?

Squeezing his eyes shut, he willed away the sounds, the touch, the images.

Its okay, baby. Joe heard his mom's voice on the wind. *You're home. Go forward. Don't be afraid.*

He opened his eyes and watched the dandelions white seeds float on another rush of August wind. Joe lifted his face to the heavens and absorbed the sun's heat.

Slowly, he moved forward toward the edge of the meadow where the woods began again, marking the border of his home. He stepped into the woods and stood in the shadows, staring at

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the burnt ground where his home used to be. Why anyone would have done this, he'd never know.

Sixty one people, his family, had died that day. And he was the only survivor.

With a deep breath, Joe turned and left the Tennessee ridge he'd always known as home. He made his way through the woods down the hill to the valley. Just like it had been six months ago, the old town had only one grocery store, one post office, a hardware store, and no stop lights. Population: two hundred and fifty people.

He walked into the grocery store and over to the fruit and vegetable section. He loaded up on bananas, tomatoes, and cucumbers, and then grabbed a bag of shelled pecans and a box of powdered milk. Combined with what nature always provided, he'd be able to live for months in the hills.

With a nod to a woman with a baby on her hip, Joe rounded the corner and headed to the cash register.

“In national news, Janie Spieth, seven year old daughter to Wisconsin governor, William Spieth, has gone missing. Experts expect foul play, although no ransom note has been issued. . .”

Joe stared at the black and white television, into the eyes of little Janie Spieth, and felt the familiar tug of her soul. She was alive. Her energy told him that.

He closed his eyes as a chill ran through his body, giving him goose bumps. Little Janie was freezing.

Her sob echoed in Joe's ears, followed by a boat's horn.

An image of a freight liner floated past, and Joe focused on the name painted on its steel side. STOCK AND ROLL LINER he made out.

Little Janie's tear streaked face flashed in his brain as she cuddled a baby doll in the dark.

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“cuse me, you gonna go or what?”

Joe’s eyes snapped open, and he turned to see the young woman with her baby. He motioned them ahead to check out and focused back on the television.

“If you have any information,” the reporter continued, “pertaining to the whereabouts of Janie Spieth, please call this number. . .”

Joe memorized the number, quickly paid for his groceries, and went to the nearest pay phone. Disguising his voice, he called it in, just like he had done two hundred and twenty three times before. Two hundred and twenty three children and adults had been located because of him.

That thought brought a smile to his face.

He hung up the phone and turned to grab his groceries from the ground.

“Interesting information you have there. Want to tell me how you got it?”

Joe whipped around to see a dark-haired man staring at him through peculiar light green eyes. Taking a step back, Joe regained his composure. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

The man slipped his hands into the front pockets of his camouflaged pants. “I’ve been following you.”

Joe took another step away. “What do you mean you’ve been following me?”

“My people and I have been watching you for the past six months. You’ve placed quite a few similar phone calls from a pay phone near your foster family’s home. We had your voice analyzed and realized you were the same person who’d been calling in leads for a few years now. I saw you leave your foster family’s home this morning. I followed you into the woods, up into the mountains, back to your home, and now down to here.”

“Who are you?” Joe asked.

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The man slipped his hand from his pocket and held it out. “Thomas Liba. I work for the government.”

“The government?” Joe took another step away, not shaking his hand. His parents had warned him about the government.

Mr. Liba put his hand back in his pocket. “Two hundred and twenty three people you’ve helped save. That’s some track record.”

Joe’s eyes widened. This man *did* know a lot.

Mr. Liba nodded to the grocery bag in Joe’s hand. “Can’t survive in the woods on just that. You need other supplies.”

“I was heading to the hardware store,” Joe told him before he realized what he was saying.

“Planning on disappearing?”

Joe didn’t answer him.

“Joe Green,” Mr Liba said his name. “Seventeen years old. Five foot ten. One hundred and eighty five pounds. Blonde hair. Blue eyes. Grew up in a commune in the Tennessee hills. Home schooled. Your father was the commune’s teacher, your mother, the healer. Your little sister lived to be ten year’s old. And you, my boy, inherited your mother’s gift of sight. Your world was perfect until earlier this year when your home was targeted in a hate crime by people who only understand one way of life. They brutally—”

Joe squeezed his eyes shut. “Don’t. Please.”

“You had gone to gather herbs,” Mr. Liba continued. “There was nothing you could have done. By the time you returned—”

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“Please. Stop.” Joe had seen enough of it already. Had relived it many times. He didn’t need any reminders.

Mr. Liba didn’t say anything else, and after a few seconds Joe opened his eyes, looked straight into Mr. Liba’s, and saw all the way to his soul.

Flashes of his life reeled passed. Him as a little boy being horribly beaten, locked in a closet, starved . . . as a young teenager being ganged up on by older guys . . . as a young man in training along side other men, learning how to fight . . . later in life rescuing people from terrible situations . . .

This man, Mr. Liba, had a stern, but gentle soul. A soul that was a little lost. A soul to be trusted. One full of kindness. Yet one not to be messed with.

This is your destiny. Joe heard his mother’s voice.

Mr. Liba swallowed, and Joe sensed this man had lost a little bit of control and didn’t like it. Mr. Liba knew Joe had just seen his childhood.

Mr. Liba cleared his throat, clearly uncomfortable. “I would appreciate it,” he said, “if you would not share with people what you just saw in me.”

Joe nodded. “We all have our secrets. And I now know I’m supposed to come with you. I also know you’ve got to get to Chicago ASAP. That someone very important needs your help.”

Mr. Liba just looked at Joe. “You’re something else.”

They climbed into the black van parked in the grocery store lot. As they pulled away, Joe’s mind drifted to last year. . . “Jimmy Williams was from Chicago.”

“Twelve years old,” Mr. Liba picked up on the conversation. “Taken from the ball field. Missing one month. You called in the lead that got him rescued.”

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Joe nodded. “Barely in time. The follow up news stories reported Jimmy was near starvation when he was finally found.”

“Yes,” Mr. Liba agreed. “But thanks to you he made it.”

Joe breathed a soft sigh. Yes, Jimmy had made it.

They drove in silence for a while, and Joe closed his eyes, allowing his thoughts to drift with Mr. Liba’s. He was personally connected to someone in Chicago. A man who had an intricate part of Mr. Liba’s past. A man Mr. Liba thought very highly of. A man who had secrets of his own.

Joe opened his eyes, feeling intrusive into Mr. Liba’s emotions, and purposefully cut the connection between them. “Tell me about the Specialists,” he prompted.

A hint of a smile curved Mr. Liba’s lips as he began speaking. That conversation led to another and then another. . .

They only stopped once and eight hours later arrived in Chicago. Mr. Liba pulled up in front of a condemned firehouse. Through the windshield and the dark, Joe studied the deserted building. Something red flashed in his peripheral vision and he turned to see a petite red-headed girl running down the alley toward them.

“That’s her,” TL said.

* * *

Sprinting down the dark Chicago alleyway, Molly jumped a huge puddle, rounded the backside of a dumpster, and shimmied up a six foot tall concrete wall.

She needed needed to get to Red.

Dodging the chunks of glass lining the top of the wall, she swung over and down and landed on her feet.

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He had not sounded good when she left.

She ducked under a CONDEMNED sign, slipped through a hole in the chain linked fence, and trotted up a flight of rickety stairs. Pulling back heavy plastic, Molly climbed through the window of the deserted firehouse she had called home, along with twelve other kids, for the past ten years.

A small battery operated lamp put a dim yellow glow in their bedroom. Mattresses, foam, and old cushions piled with blankets and sheets lined the walls. She'd done everyone's laundry yesterday in the tub downstairs, so it smelled better than usual in here.

Molly turned to the corner where she knew Red, the man who had raised her, would be. He lay bundled up under his own blankets as well as others that kids had laid on him. It was a muggy July night outside, but as usual, Red was freezing cold.

He opened his eyes and looked at Molly.

She grinned. "Hey, Red."

Through his bushy gray beard, Molly made out a few teeth, and knew he was smiling back. He coughed, filling the air with a gurgly lung sound.

Molly looked around at all the empty beds and tried not to show her irritation.

"Everybody leave you, huh?" She tried to make a joke.

She'd made it clear many times there was to always be someone, *anyone*, here watching Red. If it weren't for him they'd all still be on the streets.

Ten years ago when she was five years old, Red had found her under a bridge about a mile from where they were now. She'd been in a fight with a boy a few years older. Red had broken the fight up, sent the boy home, and when he found out Molly had no home, Red had

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taken her “under his wing.” He’d brought her here to this firehouse and had been the only family she’d ever known. He’d brought her into the world of fighting.

Molly crossed the floor to where he lay and knelt down beside him. She reached out and put her hand on his clammy forehead. As usual it felt hot. *Too* hot.

Slipping her backpack off her shoulders, she rummaged around inside for the things Red had sent her to get: Ibuprofen, Gatorade, and cough medicine.

“Red,” Molly whispered. “Please let me take you to the emergency room.”

He’d been like this for three straight weeks and wasn’t getting any better.

“No,” he rasped and coughed again. “I told you, I’ve been like this before. I’ll be fine.”

Molly sighed. She’d known him ten years and that was what he always said when he got this way. That it was just side effects of things that had happened when he was in the military. To her it seemed more serious than ‘just side effects.’

He didn’t want to go to the hospital because he was afraid.

Afraid they’d find out who he was. Afraid they’d find all of the street kids. Afraid he’d die. Afraid this warehouse would be raided. Afraid of everything and everyone.

And although he’d never admitted it, Molly suspected he was hiding from something, from someone.

Red brought his arm out from under the covers and with a shaky hand opened the cough medicine. Molly handed him four Ibuprofen, and he swallowed them dry, then gurgled down some of the cough stuff and set the bottle aside.

He gave a slight nod for her to go on. “Skedaddle, little one. The fight starts soon.” He pointed a finger at her. “And you promised me you wouldn’t fight tonight. You need a break.”

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Molly nodded slightly as she slipped her hand into his. She studied his dirty fingernails and large rough hands. *Please don't die*, she wanted to say, but knew he'd bop her upside the head if she did.

Red squeezed her fingers. "Go on. I'll be here when you get back."

"Bobby can handle the fights," Molly suggested, referring to one of the other street kids. "I'd rather stay here with you."

"Jonesy will be back any second." Red let go of Molly's hand. "I won't be alone for long."

Jonesy. Molly almost snorted. Jonesy was *the* most irresponsible of the kids that lived here. In fact, Jonesy was the one who was supposed to be watching Red right now.

Slowly, Molly got to her feet, knowing Red would engage in an all out argument with her if she didn't leave.

"Who's fighting tonight?" he rasped.

"Larry the Louse and Charlie big man Cheeseburger." Molly shoved her hands in her back pockets. "Cheeseburger's gonna win."

Red chuckled. "Yeah, he's got Larry two to one in weight."

Molly snorted. "What's that got to do with anything? Everybody's got me in weight."

Red smiled. "True. And you manage to submit 'em every time."

Molly shrugged. "What can I say? I was taught by the best." The best being Red.

She'd never seen another fighter more skilled than him. And although he didn't talk much about his past, he had said he'd been trained in Asia. He'd taught all the other kids that lived here to fight, too. Mostly to defend themselves on the streets. None of the others loved the art as much as Molly, though.

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“I knew the moment I met your scrappy little five-year-old self, you had a gift. You had that boy twice your size bloodied up and in a heap on the ground. Fighting comes naturally for you, Molly. It was easy to teach you. You’ve got it flowing in your blood.” He huffed out a breath. “Yep, you’re something else.” Red chuckled and it rolled right into a coughing fit.

Cringing at the sound, Molly went to her bed, got a roll of toilet paper, and brought it back to him. She unrolled a wad and handed it to him and watched him spit up blood.

“Red,” she whispered.

“Go on now, Molly.”

“Red . . .”

“When’s your next fight?” he changed the subject.

“Not ‘til tomorrow.”

He nodded toward the door. “Go on now.”

Nodding, she backed away, staring at his body as he rolled to his side and put his back to her.

She slipped through the heavy clear plastic covering the doorway and out onto the steel landing. Pulling a slim flashlight from her front pocket, she twisted the head and shined the light down the spiral staircase that led from one floor to the next, five stories down to the bottom.

On floor four, Red and her and some of the other homeless kids had set up a make shift kitchen with stuff they’d found on the streets: A two burner propane camping stove, couple of aluminum bowls for sinks, dishes someone had thrown out right after Christmas, and even an ice box that kept things cool for a week.

On floor three they had running water. Red said someone at city hall forgot to turn it off when they condemned the firehouse some twenty years ago. It wasn’t hot water, but at least it

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was water. There had already been a tub on floor three when Molly came to live here. Red had insisted if she was going to stay she had to bathe every two days, hot water or not.

Molly smiled at the memory. She'd been so filthy when he'd found her fighting that kid in the dirt.

Floor two of the firehouse was nothing. Just steel beams. No floor even.

Floor one was dirty and nasty, but safe. They purposefully stayed clear of it, though, so if anyone on the street happened to look in a window they'd see only a condemned building in dire need of a clean up.

The fight club was in the basement below floor one.

With the fight club on her mind now, Molly put the flashlight in her mouth, stepped from the landing, snaked her body around the steel pole, and whooshed all the way down five stories to the bottom. She crossed the floor to the corner where Red had installed a trap door.

Pulling the rug aside, she used the rope handle and lifted open the hidden door. Sounds of the fight club shot out the opening. Yells, chants, grunts, and a thumping bass from the room's stereo.

A stairwell led from the trap door down to a landing. The landing led to nowhere, just the ceiling rafters of the firehouse's basement. If Molly or one of the other kids that lived with her wanted to get down to the fight club, they simply slid down a rope that had been attached to the rafters.

Tonight, though, Molly would stay in the rafters. She was in charge of emceeing the fights.

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Jogging down the stairwell, she hopped onto the landing, grabbed the bullhorn she'd left there last night, and walked out onto the rafters. From her high up view point she surveyed the crowd.

About thirty of the usual customers. Mostly men. She did recognize a few new people. That was good. That meant the club was growing. All of them entered through a secret passageway in the nearby train station. That was part of the allure. The secretiveness, exclusiveness, the betting, hoping for a gruesome fight. It fulfilled some dark side of them.

Molly didn't care as long as they threw around their money. Money her and Red put aside for all the kids. To one day make a better life. She felt a bit a pride at that. Thanks to her, this fight club existed. She'd begged and begged Red to let her turn the basement into a fight club. Last year, he'd finally given in. And they'd seen nothing but profit since.

A whistle pierced the air above the sound of the crowd. Molly looked down and straight into Bobby's eyes. He winked at her, indicating he'd gotten all the bets and it was time to start.

Hanging onto the steel rafters, Molly held the bullhorn up to her mouth. "Ladies and gentlemen," she yelled. "Welcome to tonight's fiiiiggghhhttt!"

Everyone screamed.

"Tonight," she continued, "we have two of the best street fighters in Chicago. We have Larry the Louse and Charlie big man Cheeseburger."

The crowd roared.

Molly's hand tightened around the bullhorn. "There are no rules in this fight club. Be clean, be dirty. Fight good, fight nasty. Knock 'em out, leave 'em standing. No rules, except . . ." She purposefully paused, just like Red had suggested, knowing it was what the crowd expected, knowing it would get a rise out of them.

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“Blood, blood, blood,” they chanted.

Molly rolled her eyes. “No rules except BLOOD. We have to see BLOOD.”

The crowd roared.

And then everything happened lightning quick. Some of the patrons pulled guns out and yelled, “Freeze!”

Someone else threw a canister and the underground club erupted in smoke.

Molly didn’t spare a second. She sprinted across the dark rafters onto the landing and up the stairs. She shoved open the trap door, climbed through, shut it behind her, and covered it with the rug.

Red. She had to get to Red.

Taking the spiral stairs two at a time, she hoofed it up five stories. And barely winded, she threw the plastic aside and ran into the bedroom. A tall man stood beside where Red lay.

Without a second of thought, Molly flew across the room, caught air, and executed a round house, landing the heel of her left foot in the man’s sternum, right at his lung meridian point.

He stumbled back and gasped for air.

“Stop.” Red commanded.

Molly came down on both feet, hands up, ready for anything that came next. “Who are you?” she asked the man.

The man held his hands up, palms out. “My God, Red, you’re right.”

Red chuckled. “I told you she was something else. This girl’s got a gift.”

Molly didn’t take her gaze off the unknown man.

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“Thomas Liba,” Red said, “I’d like you to meet Molly. We have no idea what her last name is or when she was born. But she said she was five when I found her, which would make her almost fifteen now. She’s four foot eleven. Ninety five pounds. Red hair. Green eyes. She is, hands down, the best fighter I’ve ever trained.”

“Molly,” Red continued, “this man is here for you. I want you to go with him.”

Molly still didn’t take her gaze off the man, Thomas Liba. “What are you talking about? I’m not leaving you.”

“Do you remember Tommy, that fourteen year old kid I told you about?” Red asked.

Molly nodded. “Yeah, you said he pulled a knife on you and asked for all your money.”

Thomas Liba chuckled at that. “And my life has never been the same.”

“He was a street kid,” Red put in. “Just like you. I took him in and trained him. This is him, Molly. This is Tommy.”

Molly eyed the man.

Red coughed. “You and I both know I’m sick. I need help. But I can’t go to a hospital. Tommy can help me. He can help you. There’s a lot about my past you don’t know. One day I want to share it with you. But I have to get better.” He paused. “Molly, look at me.”

Slowly, she took her eyes off Thomas Liba and focused down into the face of the only family she’d ever known.

“Go with Tommy,” Red said. “You can trust him. I promise I’ll get better and we’ll see each other again.”

“When?” she asked.

Red shook his head. “I don’t know. But I’ve never broken a promise to you. If I say we’ll see each other again, then we will. If you don’t go with him, I can’t get help. I *won’t* get help.

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And don't worry about the other kids. Tommy's got lots of connections. He's going to make sure they get treated well."

For a long minute, Molly stared into Red's eyes. She would do anything for him. And she knew he would do anything for her. If this was what Red wanted, this was what she would do.

Molly nodded to Thomas Liba. "I'm yours."

He nodded back. "Call me TL."

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CHAPTER ONE

Wirenut pulled the ranch's van into the Boardwalk's packed parking lot. The Boardwalk stretched three miles along San Belden, California's coast. Amusement rides, food, dancing, roller blading—you name it, the place had it. It never closed down.

He turned around in his seat to face all of us. "Now kids," he jokingly began, lowering his voice to an authoritative tone. "I want you to remember we represent the San Belden Ranch for Boys and Girls."

Wirenut looked at me. "Okay, Miss tall blondie. You will behave yourself. No hacking into anyone's computers. You hear me, GiGi?"

I saluted him, hiding my smile. "Yes, sir."

"And you." Wirenut looked at Beaker. "No mixing of strange chemicals. And absolutely no more body piercings."

Snapping her gum, Beaker nodded her pink dyed head. "You got it."

"And you." Wirenut narrowed his eyes at Bruiser. "Youngest member of our clan and today's birthday girl. No beating anyone up."

Flipping a red braid over her shoulder, Bruiser batted her lashes. "I'm only here to celebrate my sweet sixteen."

"And you." Wirenut switched his attention to Parrot. "No speaking any foreign languages. English only tonight."

Parrot smiled.

"You." Wirenut nodded to Mystic. "Mr. Thick Neck. No reading of fortunes."

Mystic put his hand over his heart. "Never."

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Wirenut turned to the van's passenger seat where Cat sat. "You," he softened his tone, "my gorgeous, Mediterranean, goddess are allowed to break into *anything* you want to."

"Hey!" we all objected.

Cat reached across the space between them and tugged on Wirenut's dark goatee. "And you are absolutely *not* allowed to tinker with anyone's electronics."

Wirenut pulled her over for a swift kiss. "Deal."

I smiled, a little sad despite the happiness around me. They're cuteness together made me miss David.

"Okay, enough already," Bruiser said, pulling open the van's side door. "Let's paaarrty!" She jumped out. "It's my birthday. Yo, yo it's my birthday. Everybody say woot-woot, it's my birthday." She danced across the parking lot. "It's my birthday. Yo, yo it's my birthday. Everybody say woot-woot, it's my birthday."

We laughed at her silliness as we piled out of the van.

As we walked through the parking lot, memories of David flooded back. We'd gone on our first date here at The Boardwalk. We'd ridden the Ferris Wheel and explored all the eclectic shops. We'd eaten too much junk food and shared beautiful kisses. He'd won me a stuffed giraffe.

Inwardly, I sighed. I had really messed things up with him when I told him about kissing Professor Quirk on my last mission. David had said he needed space and time to think. And then TL had sent him on a pre-op assignment that had turned into a month long trip. I'd heard from David exactly twice a week via text messages. Unfortunately, they were the kind of texts he'd send a friend, not a girlfriend.

HEY. JUST WANTED U TO KNOW I'M HERE SAFE.

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HEY. THINGS R GOING WELL.

HEY. I'LL BE COMING BACK SOON.

No I miss you. I'm thinking of you. Or even sweet dreams.

He came back yesterday, gave me a hug hello, and told me we would talk. We hadn't had that talk yet, and I hoped beyond hope that when we did, things would be back to normal between us. Fun, romantic, light hearted.

Parrot looped his arm through mine, and I turned and smiled into his dark eyes. Our friendship had gone to another level since our mission together. We'd bonded in a way I hadn't bonded with my other teammates. We'd almost died in the jungle on that cliff.

I still shuddered every time I thought of it.

Actually, I'd experienced one too many close calls since joining The Specialists over a year ago. Being kidnapped in Ushbania, thrown in a dungeon in Rissala, and coming face-to-face with my parents' killer in Barracuda Key.

"What'd you get Bruiser for her birthday?" Parrot asked, bringing me from my thoughts.

"A gift certificate to that T-shirt shop she loves." Bruiser lived in T-shirts, each with their own unique saying. She wore one today that read, KISS ME. IT'S MY BIRTHDAY AND I'M AWESOME. "What'd you get her?"

"Well, my mom has recently begun making Native American jewelry. I bought Bruiser a pair of turquoise earrings." Parrot glanced over at me. "You think she'll like them?"

"Oh, Parrot." I smiled at his sweet question. "Yes, I'm sure she'll like them." I squeezed his arm, so glad he'd decided to stay. After being reunited with his mom, none of us were sure if he'd stay on the ranch or leave. *I can't imagine life without you all*, he'd said very simply.

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Mystic and Beaker came up beside us. “I made her my own personal blend of herbal tea,” Mystic said. “She should drink it once a day for tranquility, relaxation, and sedation. Lord knows she could use it twice a day.”

Beaker snorted. “You know as well as we all do that she’s not going to drink that.”

True. Mystic and Bruiser were always messing with each other. Him trying to calm her down and her trying to toughen him up.

Mystic smiled. “I meditated about it. She’ll drink it.”

“What did you get her?” I asked Beaker.

“Six hours of argument-free chemistry tutoring.” She waved her blue nail-polished fingers through the air. “No more. No less.”

“Very generous of you.” Beaker had tried on numerous occasions to tutor Bruiser, but they always ended up in a fight.

I glanced over my shoulder to see Wirenut and Cat holding hands, meandering across the parking lot toward us. I knew Cat had gotten Bruiser a make up kit in an effort to bring out her feminine side. That kit would go in a bathroom drawer and gather dust. Bruiser had no girly-girl side; she was a tomboy through and through.

And Wirenut? Funny enough, Bruiser had begged him to show her how to hot wire a car. So after today’s outing, that was the first thing on Bruiser’s list. Hot wire a car.

We stepped from the parking lot onto the sidewalk that began The Boardwalk, and I stopped. Slowly, I turned around, feeling that creepy sensation that someone was watching me. I’d felt it a lot since returning from my last mission. I searched the full parking lot, looking for anything, anyone that may seem odd. I’d never been the paranoid type, but since I’d found out I had a sister, subconsciously I’d convinced myself she was looking for me, too.

Fight To The Finish

Parrot tugged on my wrist. “You okay?”

Nodding I turned back around. “Thought I heard something, that’s all.” Maybe I was just being paranoid.

Up ahead I saw Bruiser talking to David. He’d driven separately with Adam. David’s yum factor was pretty much off the scales today. With that dark, five o’clock shadow and form fitted long sleeve T . . . sometimes he was so hot I could barely stand it. He said something and Bruiser laughed. David laughed, too, and the sound made my stomach flutter.

They were the only two that had come from Team One. The rest of them, Piper, Curtis, and Tina, were gone on missions.

Leaning down from his towering height, Adam gave Bruiser a birthday kiss on the cheek. Her freckly face turned bright red to match her hair as she playfully pushed him away. I smiled. That was probably the best gift ever for her. Bruiser had a big time crush on Adam.

We all approached and David glanced up at me before giving me a slight smile. I wanted to ask him when we would talk, but now wasn’t the time. This was Bruiser’s day.

Wirenut came around and put Bruiser in a head lock. “Okay, birthday girl.” He knuckle rubbed her head. “What do you want to do first? Sky’s the limit.”

She flashed this innocent, dimpled grin. “Sky’s the limit?”

Everyone nodded, but me. I knew that innocent grin. She was up to no good.

Her grin got bigger. “Anything I say goes?”

Everyone nodded, but me. I didn’t like this one bit.

Bruiser batted her lashes. “I want one of those old timey pictures. Ya know, black and white, where we all have on a costume.”

Fight To The Finish

I narrowed my eyes. Something wasn't right. An old timey picture sounded a little *too* easy.

She looked at each of us through wide, childlike eyes. "Everybody in?"

They all nodded.

"And it's my birthday, so I get to chose what you wear, 'kay?"

No one nodded that time, probably because they'd finally realized she was up to no good.

Cat stepped forward. "Come on everybody. It's her birthday. Let's all be sports."

Reluctantly, let me repeat that, *reluctantly* we followed her down The Boardwalk to the old timey photo shop. She'd made a reservation, the little twerp, and so we got right in. She'd even pre-arranged our outfits.

And I had to admit they weren't that bad . . . for the girls.

There we all stood, we girls dressed in old western gunfighter outfits, complete with duster coats, suspenders, six shooters and holsters, leather pants, black boots with spurs, and cowboy hats.

And the guys? Our barmaids. Complete with fish net stockings and garter belts, high heels, form-fitted dresses, hand fans, and feathers in their hats.

Leave it to Bruiser.

Outside the photo shop, Bruiser handed me the picture. "Look at the guys." She busted out laughing. "Oh, yowza, that's funny. That's going right on top my dresser when we get back."

Cat and Beaker crowded in beside me as we looked at the black and white photo, all of us girls smiling and all the guys frowning. I glanced at David's legs in the fish net stockings and couldn't help but grin.

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I studied Beaker and David's faces, like I frequently found myself doing, looking for similarities. They'd found out during the Barracuda Key mission that they were half brother and sister. It made me think of my own sister, the one I'd just found out about. I knew exactly what she looked like from the wanted picture of her that we'd obtained on my last mission.

There was a lot about us in common, like our eyes and the shape of our faces. I wondered what kind of person she was. Funny? Serious? Quiet? Loud? And I wondered where she was. Even with my computer expertise, I had yet to nail down her current identity and location. Her aliases were too numerous, and she seemed to move around every few days. And it appeared that she'd recently become an independent agent, working for whoever hired her.

She was a puzzle, that was for sure, but I hadn't given up. I'd been leaving bread crumbs through cyberspace in hopes she'd find them and follow them back to me. She was my only family, and I *would* find her. Or she'd find me first.

"You and David have the same nose," Cat told Beaker, bringing me from my thoughts.

"Food," Wirenut announced. "I need food."

Cat rolled her eyes. "You're always hungry," she laughed, playfully tapping his belly.

Bruiser picked an outdoor Mexican place, we all ordered, and right as our food arrived, Mystic's cell went off.

Every one of us turned and looked. *My* cell was always the one going off, not my team members.

I unclipped my phone from my pants and checked the display. Huh. No text messages.

David's went off next, which was usual. Being TL's, our team leader's, right hand guy, David's cell stayed more active than the rest of us.

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He checked the display, then looked at Mystic. “That’s TL’s stat code. We’re out of here.”

I checked my phone again and gave it a little tap. Maybe I just hadn’t gotten my text yet. I glanced up at David, and he shook his head. “Only me and Mystic,” he said in answer to my unspoken question.

I looked at Mystic, and he shrugged, clearly as perplexed as me.

The two guys took off running, and all my team members dug in to their food. I sat at the outdoor table, idly watching them eat, listening to the ocean, completely sidetracked by what had just happened.

What was going on? I mean, I knew that one day we would all be going off on missions at different times, but up until now, it had always been me and one of the others. I wondered why I wasn’t involved this time and more than a little curious to find out the details.

We finished eating and spent the rest of the time doing exactly what Bruiser wanted. We rode every single ride, including the tilta whirl (barf). We ate way too much ice cream. We played nearly every video game in the arcade.

At seven that night we pulled through the ranch’s gate and up the long driveway to our house. Wirenut and Bruiser stayed with the van for the hot wiring lesson, and the rest of us filed inside.

The guys went off to their room and me and the girls went to ours.

I plopped down across my bed, and Mystic strolled straight in our room.

I sat up. “So?”

Mystic sounded as stunned as he looked. “I’m going on my first mission.”

“You are?”

Fight To The Finish

Cat came out of the bathroom. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks,” Mystic responded, still not moving from his stunned spot.

Beaker kicked her black flip flops off and shoved them under her bed. “Where you going?”

Mystic shook his head. “I can’t tell you yet.”

The secretiveness was the worst part of being a member of The Specialists.

“When are you leaving?” I asked.

Mystic blinked. “Tonight.”

Beaker and I looked at each other. “*Tonight?*”

Cat sat down on her bed. “That’s weird. No training? No preparation?”

“TL said there wasn’t any time. He and David are going with me.”

I was dying to ask Mystic if he’d seen his special room. All of my team members who had been on a mission had been introduced to their room, complete with training items specific to their specialty. Beaker had a state of the art chemistry lab. Wirenut an electronics warehouse. Parrot a language facility. And I, of course, had a kick butt computer lab.

David peeked his head in the door. “Mystic, come with me. We need to talk about a few things.”

Without a glance in my direction, David headed off and Mystic followed.

Cat lay back on her bed. “GiGi, is there something wrong with you and David? I know he’s been gone a month, but I figured you two would be connected at the hip since he returned. What gives?”

I glanced across the room to Beaker, who looked right back at me, obviously curious what my response would be, too. I hadn’t told any of my team members about the Professor

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Quirk episode. And normally I didn't just go around sharing my personal business. But something made me want to share and possibly get some advice.

"I . . ." I began and then stopped. How did I say this exactly? "I," I tried again, and then sighed. "Another guy kissed me, and David's upset. But I don't think it's so much the kiss as it is that I told David this other guy 'got me'."

Neither Cat nor Beaker uttered a word.

"Oh, yeah!" Bruiser rushed into the room. "That was awesome! I can't believe I just hot wired a car. I'm totally going out on the town tomorrow night and becoming a criminal." She stopped and looked at each of us. "What's wrong? Looks like someone ate your last lollipop."

Laughing, Wirenut came in behind her. "That was too cool. She actually got it the first time around." He looked at each of us. "What's wrong?"

Parrot stuck his head in the door. "Heard the commotion. I take it you hot wired?" He looked at each of us. "Something wrong?"

"GiGi," Beaker and Cat said in unison, "kissed another guy."

Everyone turned and looked at me, and I felt about as big as my pinky toe.

"I didn't say *I* kissed another guy." Pushing off my bed, I stood and gave Cat and Beaker a dirty look. "So glad everybody knows my personal business now."

Beaker shrugged. "David *is* my brother. I'm naturally going to take his side."

"Beaker," Cat got onto her and then turned to me. "GiGi," she softened her tone.

I waved them off. "Never mind." I didn't need their disapproval on top of my already confusion over the situation. "I'll see you guys later." Snagging a lollipop from my dresser, I walked past Wirenut and Parrot and out the door.

Fight To The Finish

“GiGi,” Bruiser called. “Come back. Let’s talk. We were all just shocked, that’s all. And everyone knows Beaker’s an idiot.”

Ignoring her, I strode down the hallway, past TL’s office, and came to a stop at the mural that hid our elevator. Placing my hand on the globe light fixture, I waited while it scanned my prints and the mural opened to reveal the secret elevator.

I stepped inside, punched in my personal code, and the elevator descended. I unwrapped my lollipop and plunked it in my mouth. *Mmm, pina colada*. I realized then that this was one of the lollipops from the candy bouquet David had given me when I returned from my mission with Wirenut.

David was always doing sweet things like that. Somehow that thought made me feel even worse.

The elevator stopped at Sub Floor Four, the doors opened, and I stepped out. I chunked the wrapper in the garbage and told myself I was not going to think of David anymore.

I headed off to the right and down the hall to where my lab was, along with all the other secret rooms. When I first arrived here at the ranch, these undisclosed doors had driven me absolutely insane. But now I knew what lay behind nearly every one.

I came to a stop at my lab door and as I began punching in the code to enter the room, I heard voices coming down the hallway.

“Oh, GiGi. Goodgood, you’re here.” Chapling, my mentor, said. “I want you to meet someone.”

I punched in the last few code segments on the key pad and with a smile turned . . . and gasped. I stumbled back, straight through the lab door, missed the step down, and landed on my butt.

Fight To The Finish

“Ooohhh,” I groaned.

“Kelly?” The guy used my real name.

I looked up and straight into the eyes of, “Professor Quirk?”

Fight To The Finish

CHAPTER TWO

Neither one of us said a word as we stared into each other's eyes. I was sure his brain was circling the same thought as mine.

What the . . . ?

Quirk's brows lifted. "Kelly? Wh—" He glanced over his shoulder at Chapling and then back to me. "I don't—"

Chapling hobbled up beside him. "GiGi?" He looked between the two of us. "You two know each other?"

Slowly, we nodded, still staring at each other.

What would Quirk be doing here?

I realized my mouth was open and closed it. And then I realized I was still on the floor where I'd stumbled and fell. Quirk must have realized it, too, because he reached forward to help me up.

I took his hand and let him pull me to my feet. "Randy," I said, using his real name.

He smiled, and it shot butterflies right through my stomach.

"You're GiGi?" Randy realized. "Chapling's told me all about you."

Chapling stepped up beside us. "I didn't realize you knew Randy."

I looked down at him. "How do *you* know Randy?"

Chapling bobbed his bushy brows. "Couple of years ago we worked on something together for the IPNC."

"Oh."

"Yeah, he's my bro," Randy commented, elbowing Chapling.

Fight To The Finish

Chapling giggled. “Yeahyeah, that’s right. Everybody joked we were brothers.”

Smiling, I looked between the two of them, finding that absurdly funny. They looked nothing like brothers. Chapling was a little person with frizzy red hair, freckles, and lots of chub. Randy stood six feet of in shape leanness with dark hair, adorable green eyes, and way too cute wire rimmed glasses.

Wait a minute. Why was I thinking of him as adorable and cute? He was a klutzy nerd.

Well, so was I.

Chapling waddled off and over to his coffee station in the corner of the computer lab.

“How funny. Funnyfunny. You two know each other.”

Randy and I smiled at each other.

Chapling dumped old coffee into the sink. “Where’d you all meet?”

“Junoesque Jungle,” we answered in unison, referring to my last mission.

“The Junoesque?” Chapling poured water into the coffee maker. “Hm.” He glanced across the lab at Randy. “What were you doing in the jungle?”

“He was the glyph expert,” I answered for him.

“Well, what do you know.” Chapling dumped the old grounds and piled in new ones.

“You didn’t know?” I asked.

Chapling shook his head. “Nope.”

This organization continued to amaze me. Chapling was fairly high up in The Specialists and yet he hadn’t had clearance to know his friend Randy was on my last mission.

TL walked in the open door, pressed the button to close it, and it made a suction noise as it slid together. He looked up at me and Randy, and I got the distinct impression he was in a bad mood.

Fight To The Finish

“Did you show Randy around?” TL asked Chapling, and he nodded. “You two know each other, of course, from the Junoesque mission,” TL continued. “I was very impressed with Randy’s work. I’ve asked him to come on board for a few weeks as a historian consult on a few things I have going on.”

“What?!”

Chapling and Randy jumped, and TL just looked at me.

I cleared my throat. “I mean, what?” Holy crap. Joining The Specialists? This wasn’t good. This *so* wasn’t good. I know it was only for a few weeks, but this *so* wasn’t good.

The lab door opened and in walked David.

I swallowed.

TL gave him a brusque nod, and my thoughts went back to wondering why TL seemed so upset. “David meet Randy. He’ll be here for a few weeks as a historian consult. He comes to us from the IPNC.”

David stepped forward and shook Randy’s hand.

I watched it all in a sort of slow motion. My boyfriend meeting the guy that kissed me.

Chapling grabbed the still brewing coffee and poured himself a mug. “Isn’t it weird that GiGi and Randy already know each other?”

David glanced between the two of us. “You two know each other?”

I tried to swallow, but the HUGE lump in my throat prohibited me.

“Yep,” Chapling went on. “From GiGi’s last mission. Randy was the glyph expert.”

David didn’t respond for a second, and I watched as it slowly dawned on him. He turned and stared right into Randy’s eyes. “*You’re the professor?*” *You’re the guy that ‘gets’ my girlfriend?* I imagined him saying.

Fight To The Finish

Randy nodded, clearly not picking up on things.

“David,” TL said, “Randy will be staying in the guest room. Take care of getting him settled.” With that, TL walked from the room.

Everyone stood in silence. David staring at Randy. Me looking between the two of them. And Randy looking between me and David.

“Yes!” Chapling smacked his lips. “Nothing like caffeine straight to the veins.” Carrying his coffee mug, he waddled over and climbed up into his computer chair and started clicking away, completely oblivious to the three of us.

“Um,” Randy pushed his glasses up his nose. “Wanna show me to my room?”

Without a glance in my direction, David turned and strode from the computer lab. “Yeah, let’s go.”

Randy gave me a *what’s-going-on?* look to which I sort of smiled and shrugged.

In silence I watched the two of them leave the computer lab. I was in trouble. *Big* trouble.

* * *

Later that night, TL, Mystic, and David left for the mission. No one had a clue where they were going, but all of us were dying to know. Never, in the time I’d been here, had a mission occurred so quickly. Usually there were weeks of preparation before someone left.

Whatever it was, it had to be really important.

David hadn’t even had a chance to said goodbye.

And Mystic hadn’t even received his going away party, tradition for all first missions.

“Did you meet the new guy?” Cat asked.

I glanced up from where I sat in the corner of the rec room, idly watching Bruiser and Parrot across the room playing air hockey while Wirenut cheered.

Fight To The Finish

I nodded. “Yes.” And went back to watching Bruiser and Parrot.

Cat sat down in the oversized, leather chair beside me. “Cute, huh?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

Beaker plopped down in the other leather chair. “Wonder how old he is.”

“Twenty three,” I answered.

Cat snuggled further down in her chair. “Wonder where he came from.”

“IPNC.” The same organization we used to belong to before going private.

Beaker kicked her legs up on the table in front of us. “I heard he’s a historian.”

I nodded, still watching the air hockey. “Yes.”

“Suppose he has a girlfriend?” Beaker asked.

I shook my head. “He doesn’t.”

No one said anything for a few minutes, and then Cat looked over at me. “You sure know a lot about him.”

“Yes,” I agreed.

They didn’t reply, obviously waiting for me to continue.

I sighed, resigned to the inevitable. “He’s the guy that kissed me.”

Beaker coughed. “*What?!*”

I finally took my eyes off of the air hockey match and drug them over to Beaker and Cat.

“He was on the mission with Parrot and I.”

Cat sat up in her chair. “Does David know?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“What did he say?” Beaker asked.

I shook my head. “Nothing.”

Fight To The Finish

Cat blinked. “What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know.” It wasn’t like I had a lot of experience with this sort of thing. “I don’t suppose either of you have any words of wisdom.”

Beaker shrugged. “Sorry. I’ve never had a boyfriend. Can’t help you.”

Cat shrugged, too. “I’ve never cheated on a boyfriend.”

“I didn’t cheat,” I defended myself.

Beaker narrowed her eyes. “You *kissed* another guy.”

“No. *He* kissed me.”

They just looked at me.

I rolled my eyes. “I guess this is the time when an older sister or mom would come in handy, huh?”

They both nodded.

“Oh and what I said earlier about David being my brother . . .” Beaker waved her hand in the air. “Whatever. You know I’m here for both of you and all that crap.”

I let out a humorless laugh. “Gee, thanks.” Leave it to Beaker to be reluctantly supportive. Which, actually, was *tons* better than what she was before.

Randy appeared in the doorway. “Kelly? Can I see you?”

Beaker and Cat exchanged a look. *Kelly?* They mouthed in unison.

The truth was I sort of liked that he called me Kelly instead of GiGi. It had been a long time since my real name had been used.

Slowly, I got to my feet and crossed the rec room to where he stood in the door. I followed him across the hall and into the cafeteria that sat empty at the late hour. He slid into one of the aluminum, picnic type tables and I sat down across from him.

Fight To The Finish

Quietly, we looked over the table at each other, and the more staring seconds that passed, the more anxious I became.

“You all settled in?” I struck up a conversation.

He nodded.

And then we fell back into the silently-staring-at-each-other thing.

Honestly, conversation was *so* not my strong point.

“I can’t . . .” he let out a nervous chuckle. “I can’t believe you’re here. I’m here. I didn’t think I’d ever see you again.”

I smiled a little, really not knowing what to say, and thanking God David wasn’t here to walk in on us.

“Um, I kind of got the hint that David’s your boyfriend. And, I, um, also got the hint that he knows about you and me.”

“Did he say anything?” I immediately asked.

Randy didn’t answer me at first, and then his face slowly curved into a sad smile. “He means a lot to you.”

Swallowing, I nodded, feeling like in some way I was hurting Randy’s feelings.

He lowered his gaze to his hands clasped on top the table. “Kelly, the last thing I want to do is come between you and your friends, you and your boyfriend.” He brought his gaze up to mine. “It matters to me what people think. I don’t want to come in and mess things up. And I’m not going to lie to you. I think you’re great. But you and David are together, and there you go.”

Randy got up from the table. “And even if you and David weren’t together, it’s not a good idea for people who work together to date. So,” he held his hand out to me, “friends?”

Fight To The Finish

I didn't know what to say. David and I weren't together. Or at least we'd never really broken up. And why did it feel like Randy was breaking up with me when we weren't even dating?

Inwardly, I sighed. Life was a lot easier when only computers rocked my world.

I reached out and did the only thing I could. I smiled and took his hand. "Friends."

* * *

Two days later we had just finished up a PT session and were walking out of the barn. Mystic, TL, and David pulled up. The car doors opened, they climbed out, and walked straight into the house without a glance in our direction.

TL and David disappeared into TL's office and shut the door, making it more than obvious that no one was to disturb them. Mystic went straight to his bedroom, and we all followed.

"What's going on?" Wirenut asked him.

Mystic didn't look at any of us, just shook his head.

Bruiser and I exchanged a glance.

"Are you okay?" she asked. "Did you get hurt?"

"I'm fine," Mystic mumbled.

Beaker stepped into the room. "Is everything done? Is the mission over?"

Mystic grabbed a purple bag off his dresser. "I really need to be alone." With that, he slipped past all of us and out the door.

Cat turned to Wirenut. "What's in that purple bag?"

"His mo-jo stuff," Wirenut answered. "Ya know, crystals and herbs and whatever else he needs to become one with the universe."

Fight To The Finish

None of us spoke for a few seconds.

Beaker heaved a sigh. “Well, I guess I’m going to go,” she shrugged, “do whatever.”

Bruiser looked at Parrot. “Wanna go for a ride?” she asked, referring to the horses, and Parrot nodded.

Wirenut grabbed his iPod and he and Cat stretched out on his bed to listen to music, which left me standing in the boy’s room with nothing to do.

“Well,” I headed toward the door, “guess I’ll see you guys later.”

Wirenut and Cat waved bye. I headed down the hall to the hidden elevator and descended to Sub Floor Four. I punched in my code to the computer lab and went on in. As usual, Chapling sat bent over his station clicking away.

I walked up behind him and saw that he was updating our video monitoring software. I glanced at all the black and white images stacked on his screen. They showed where everyone was and what everyone was doing. I saw Jonathan, our PT instructor, go into TL’s office.

I saw an image of TL’s office with him on the phone, David looking through a file, and Jonathan listening to TL’s conversation. All three of them looked incredibly concentrated and definitely stressed.

I was dying, *dying*, to know what was going on.

Then I saw an image of Mystic up on the hill meditating. He’d placed some different colored crystals in front of him, and I found myself curious what each crystal was for.

I touched Chapling on the shoulder, and he jumped.

“Ohmygod. Ohmygodohmygod.” He grabbed the sides of his fuzzy head. “Don’t scare me like that.”

Fight To The Finish

I smiled. “You didn’t hear me come in?” Stupid question, of course he didn’t hear me. I was completely oblivious, too, when I was working.

“Nooo, I didn’t hear you.” Chapling clicked a few keys. “What’s up?”

I pointed to the image of TL’s office. “Any idea what’s going on?”

Chapling shook his head. “Not yet.” He pointed to my station. “I sent you code. We’ve been hired to review it for infections.”

With a nod, I stepped over to my station and sat down. Taped to the side of my flat screen was a picture of me and David as little kids, taken right here at the ranch. I smiled as I looked at the image of him and I holding hands, grinning for the camera.

I missed him.

With a sigh, I keyed in my password, brought up the code, and got down to work. Hours zoomed by as I lost myself in thousands of lines of data. I tagged the deprecations, ascribed the client agents to depiction, and formatted the cipher for essentials. I repeated that process over and over again with each subsection of records and then partitioned the intervals.

“GiGi?”

I focused on the elements and continued—

“*GIGI?!?*”

I jerked my head up. “What?”

Chapling stood at the door. “Let’s go. TL wants us.”

“Oh.” I blinked my eyes a few times. As quick as I could, I secured my station and followed Chapling out the lab and down the hall to the conference room.

Around the table sat TL, David, Jonathan, Mystic, Bruiser, and . . . Nalani? What was TL’s wife doing here? I looked straight at her and gave her a huge smile that she did not return.

Fight To The Finish

Something was wrong. Something was *really* wrong.

I pulled a leather chair out beside Bruiser and sat down. “What are you doing here?” I whispered to Bruiser, and she shrugged.

Chapling closed the door and sat beside David.

No one said a word as we stared at TL, waiting.

Seconds later, he closed a file he’d been studying and stood. “For those of you who do not know, this is Nalani Kai, my wife.”

I blinked, taken aback that he’d just said that. Nalani being his wife was a big time secret I had accidentally found out and TL had sworn me to secrecy on.

TL didn’t say anything for a few seconds, and I got the distinct impression he was trying extremely hard to control his emotions. “Someone . . .” he inhaled and released a quick breath. “Someone has kidnapped our daughter.”

Fight To The Finish

CHAPTER THREE

What?!

Oh.

My.

God.

What? TL had a daughter?

I looked at Nalani. TL and Nalani had a daughter?

I put my hands over my mouth. *Oh, no.*

TL pointed his remote at the wall mounted flat screen, and an image of a little girl flashed into view. With huge brown eyes, tiny glasses, and curly black hair, she stared back into the camera with a big toothless grin.

Happy was the first word to pop into my mind.

“This is Zandra,” TL monotoned, completely void of any emotion. “She’s seven years old.”

Zandra was beautiful. Absolutely gorgeous. An incredible mix of Nalani and TL’s best physical qualities.

“She was taken three days ago,” TL continued, “from the back yard of her maternal grandmother’s home. No one saw anything. A note was attached to the ball she was playing with.” TL clicked the remote and a piece of yellow paper flashed onto the screen.

I squinted and made out the one and only typed sentence.

TRY TO FIND HER OR SHE DIES.

My heart paused a beat as I read the last word. DIES.

Fight To The Finish

“Try to find her or she dies,” TL read. “That is all we have received. No ransom, no phone calls, just this one-sentence note. We have no idea who the kidnappers are or what they want in exchange. Through our work with the IPNC, Nalani and I have made a lot of enemies over the years. The kidnapper could be anybody from anywhere in the world.”

I looked between the two of them, puzzling at their stoic, blank expressions. Their daughter had been kidnapped and yet they maintained that ever present control. How? How was that even possible?

I glanced over to Nalani, hoping to send her an encouraging look, but she didn't return my glance. As I stared at her, I saw her jaw flex and realized she was doing everything possible to keep it in control.

“Of course,” TL continued, “we have no intentions of standing peacefully by waiting to be contacted by the kidnappers.” TL put the remote down on the table. “This is where all of you come in.” TL nodded to Mystic. “Unbeknownst to everyone here at the ranch, Mystic is considered a very precious asset to the government.”

Bruiser and I exchanged a curious glance.

“Before Mystic came to us,” TL continued, “he anonymously submitted information to Lost America, our nation's missing person's foundation. When I recruited him, he had successfully helped find two hundred and twenty three people. Since he's been living here at the ranch, he's been working behind the scenes, providing information that has led to the rescue of sixteen more missing people.”

What?

Bruiser and I exchanged another surprised look. From her perplexed expression, I gathered she didn't know about this either.

Fight To The Finish

Mystic had been working for TL this whole time? Behind the scenes? I hadn't known.

Why hadn't Mystic said anything?

Stupid question. Mystic hadn't said anything because TL didn't want any of us to know.

And—a thought occurred to me—when I'd first met Mystic, he'd said he was taken in for operating a 1-900 psychic scam. It was probably a cover TL had given him.

TL rolled his chair out and took his seat. “Needless to say, we have kept Mystic's identity closely guarded.”

I smiled to myself as he answered my unspoken question.

“Only myself, David, Chapling, and a few high up people in the government know of Mystic's ability.” TL turned to Mystic. “Tell everyone how your specialty works.”

“I need to see into a person's eyes to understand what they're feeling,” Mystic explained. “Unfortunately I see mostly their pain, not their happiness. It can be a picture of them or an image on T.V. Normally, that's all I need to feel them, hear them, to see them.”

No one responded as those words floated in the air. I could only imagine the things Mystic must see on a daily basis just by looking into someone's eyes.

That thought sent a chill racing up my arms. I didn't think I could handle looking into a person's eyes and seeing only pain.

What a burdening ability to have. I wondered if Mystic could block it somehow. And—I suddenly realized—what had he seen in me?

“Tell them,” TL prompted Mystic, “what you saw with Zandra?”

“I saw fighting. But fighting like I've never seen before. It was organized, but not like boxing. There was an octagon, but no cage, and no gloves. Just raw fighting. I heard different languages being spoken. There was a medium sized crowd of people sitting around the octagon.

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I'd say about fifty people. And the men, the fighters, they were very bloody. I heard the snap of a bone . . ." Mystic closed his eyes. "That's a sound I never want to hear again."

He took a breath and opened his eyes. "I also got the sense that this fighting is rooted in one place here in the States and has been for years. That people come from all around for this gruesome fighting where money is exchanged."

Mystic looked across the table at Bruiser. "I also got the distinct feeling that many men have died during these fights. That it's almost *preferred* for a man to perish. It's why people bet such big money. In hopes that someone will die . . ." Mystic's voice trailed off as he slowly shook his head.

"I don't have anything else," he continued a few seconds later. "But I know without a doubt in my mind that I need to be around these fights if I'm going to locate Zandra."

"Okay, Bruiser," David cut in. "Tell us what your thoughts are after hearing this description."

For the first time ever, I saw Bruiser in a serious mode. Gone was her perpetual grin and silliness. She was focused as she began speaking. "The type of fighting that Mystic is describing is found more commonly overseas in less regulated countries. You can, however, find underground clubs throughout America. But death of a fighter most certainly is *not* part of the equation, unless, of course, an accident occurs."

She scooted up in her seat. "But here in America there is one very exclusive, underground club where fighters get paid bonuses if they kill their competition. I've never been to this club, but I've heard all about it. The club is called Demise Chain, and it's located in the Pacific Northwest in the little town of Teacup, Washington."

Teacup? What an innocent sounding city for such a horrible thing going on.

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“The worst part of this,” Bruiser continued, “is that less skilled fighters are brought over from other countries with a promise of American citizenship if they compete in Demise Chain. Little do they know that they are the ones that will die during the match.”

“Die?” I gasped, and Bruiser nodded.

It was amazing to me how just a year and a half ago I was in my own little world, completely oblivious to this world. Since joining The Specialists I’d found out way too many disturbing things about the human race.

Bruiser nodded. “Like I said, I’ve never seen one of these fights. But the man who raised me competed in one. He barely made it out alive.” She paused for a second. “We’re talking MMA, here. Everything goes.”

“MMA?” Mystic asked.

Good question. I had no clue either.

“Mixed martial arts,” she answered. “It was made popular by UFC in the early nineties. But it’s been going on a lot longer than that.”

I raised my hand. “UFC?”

“Ultimate Fighting Championship,” Bruiser answered. “You can see it on T.V. now, it’s so popular. MMA. A combination of karate, judo, Wing Chun, and whatever else, all in one fight. Striking, grappling. Basically whatever it takes to win.”

“You all should know,” TL inputted, “that Bruiser was raised and trained by one of the world’s elite fighters. She knows more about martial arts than anybody I’ve ever met, and I’ve been in this business a long time. She is, hands down, the most talented fighter I have ever seen. Her input into this mission is imperative.”

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I glanced over at Bruiser to see her shyly look down. Her embarrassment was very out of character for her. TL's kudos had brought a side out in her I'd never seen.

"It is our goal," David carried on the conversation, "to get Mystic in the room where these fights are going on and—"

Bruiser huffed out a humorless laugh, cutting David off. "Good luck on that one. Demise Chain is closely monitored. It's like the mafia, or for that matter, the White House. You don't just walk in the front door. You have to earn your way in."

"Precisely," TL agreed.

Bruiser frowned. "And so how is Mystic going to get in?"

I smiled to myself. I didn't bother informing her that TL could do just about anything. Bruiser would figure that out soon enough.

"As David said," TL continued, "we need to get Mystic in that room. We've looked at it from all angles, and hands down our best bet is to have him be a competitive fighter. That is our objective. From there and what he discovers, we will move onto the next phase of things—finding Zandra."

"Did you say I'm going to be a competitive fighter?" Mystic asked.

"Him, a competitive fighter?" Bruiser balked.

I listened closely, wondering how I factored into all of this?

Ignoring Mystic and Bruiser's outbursts, TL pointed the remote at the screen. A gray haired gentleman popped up. Wearing a coat and tie, he grinned for the camera, coming across adorable and sweet. He looked like what I imagined everyone's grandpa should look like.

"This is Harry Noor." TL announced. "He is the owner of the Demise Chain."

"Him?" Bruiser laughed.

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“Harry Noor,” TL went on, “has his own set of fighters called Warriors. Recently, he put the word out he’s looking for some new Warriors. He also put the word out he’s looking for a computer specialist. He wants a program designed exclusively for him that can identify top notch fighters. A program than can also advise competitors during a fight what they should and should not be doing differently.”

“Um, that’s called a coach,” Bruiser identified the obvious. “And how in the world does he expect a program to advise a fighter?”

TL glanced at me. “That’s for the computer specialist to figure out.”

“Harry Noor,” David explained, “is quite the gadget man. He’s got to have the latest and greatest of everything—the first of a kind. He’s also tight with his money and doesn’t want to dish out the dollars needed to hire top notch trainers. And he’s all about having things computerized. He wants a program that will identify his new Warriors. And that is what we’re going to give him.”

“David and Mystic,” TL picked up on the conversation, “are going to be those new Warriors.”

“Wait a minute. I’m not fighting?” Bruiser asked.

“Warrior?” Mystic shook his head. “I’m not fighting.”

I didn’t like the idea of *anybody* fighting, not after the way Bruiser had described it. Wait a minute, did TL just say David’s fighting, too? My heart skipped a beat as I glanced over at David. *No*.

“As of right now,” TL continued, not answering Bruiser or Mystic, “Harry Noor allows each of his Warriors to have a trainer. Jonathan will be David’s trainer, and I will be Mystic’s.” TL looked at his wife. “Nalani has already secured a job as the new hostess of the Demise Chain.

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She's in charge, basically, of greeting people when they come in." TL turned his attention to Bruiser. "And you will be Mystic's girlfriend."

"His *girlfriend*?" she nearly squeaked.

"I can't fight," Mystic repeated himself. "It's against everything I believe in."

TL's jaw hardened, and I could tell he was not in the mood to deal with any objections or questions.

David must have picked up on it, too, because he quickly took over the conversation. "Women aren't allowed to compete in the fights," he answered Bruiser. "But we definitely need you there as our fighting consultant. Mystic's girlfriend is the only cover we can give you that will put you close enough to the fights."

Bruiser and Mystic eyed each other across the table. They did not look happy.

"The fighters are kept separate from each other," David went on. "Mystic needs to interact with everyone until he sees what he needs to see regarding Zandra. This makes it imperative that Mystic fight as many competitors as possible."

I raised my finger. "And me and Chapling?"

TL nodded to Chapling. "Chapling, of course, will work from home base."

Of course. I remembered a time when *I* was promised *I* would work from home base. But, truth be told, I'd gotten to the point where I sort of liked the traveling, the missions. *Sort of.* Of course, I'd never admit that out loud.

TL looked between me and Chapling. "You two are going to design that state-of-the-art, one-of-a-kind program to identify Harry Noor's new Warriors. And when David and Mystic show up for Warrior tryouts, you need to figure out how your program will identify them as top notch fighters and get them hired on with the Demise Chain. After that, you'll be on hand

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working for Harry Noor, advising his fighters. Obviously, if it's anybody other than Mystic, you'll give bad advice. Anything to advance Mystic in the competition."

"Um," *Hello?* Did they not see the fact that I knew absolutely nothing about fighting? For that matter, I'd never even played a fighting video game. Heck, I couldn't even remember the last time I'd played a video game, period. Not that we were talking about video games, but it was all I could think of that related.

Chapling clapped his hands. "No problem. Noprobnoprob. This'll be fun. A little Physics, electricity, throw in some magnetism—Oooh! And we can get those absorption pads from storage and switch out the acceleration wires for recording force faction. Oooh!" He rapid fire clapped. "We should totally get Dr. Gretchen involved. Have you seen what she's got in her cabinets?" He scratched his head, making his brillo pad hair poof out. "Yeahyeahyeahyeahyeah."

He pushed back from the table and jumped down from his seat. "She's got that really cool," he snapped his fingers, "what do you call it . . . oh I can't remember right now." Chapling waddled over to the conference door, opened it, and walked right on out.

Everyone just looked at each other.

David turned to me. "Back on track. Harry Noor is meeting with prospective computer designers in one week. He'll pick the person he wants to work with after seeing their presentation. He *will* pick you."

I lifted my brows and asked the obvious. "And if he doesn't pick me?"

"That's not an option," David responded.

Great. Talk about pressure.

"A couple days after that," David continued, "the Warrior try outs will occur, and the following evening will be the night of fighting that Mystic and I will compete in."

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TL clicked his pen. “There are a lot of unknown facts here. Who is the person who kidnapped Zandra? What does he or she want? What do the fights have to do with it?” TL clicked his pen again. “We’re working with a lot of indefinite details. And that doesn’t make me comfortable in the least.”

Not to mention the fact his, *their*, daughter’s life was at stake. With that thought I glanced at Nalani again and found her sitting there staring blankly at the table in front of her. Slowly, her eyes closed, and although it was slight, her brows drew together with the stress and sadness of the situation.

“Switching modes.” TL pushed back from the table and stood. “Each of you has a specialty. In order to expand on that talent and further your knowledge, you need materials. You need your own special place to go for privacy, research, and practice.”

I knew he was talking about our special rooms. Only Mystic and Bruiser had not been introduced to their rooms. TL had introduced the rest of us to our rooms right before we went on our first missions.

TL looked at Bruiser. “Bruiser, you are the only member of your team who has not seen your training room.” He nodded. “Time to take a look.”

What? I looked across the table at Mystic. *You’ve seen your room?* I mouthed.

He nodded.

Huh. I’d been there every other time my team members had been shown their special area. Why not Mystic?

TL opened the conference room door. “David’s going to take over from here. It’s late. Please do eat. Get some rest. Training starts first thing in the morning. Bruiser, I want you and

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David to meet me in my office in one hour. We need to discuss the MMA training needed for this mission.”

Bruiser nodded.

Jonathan and Nalani followed TL out of the conference room, leaving me, Mystic, and Bruiser alone with David.

“When did you all remove your monitoring patches?” I asked, referring to a device we all had to wear when we first moved in.

“About a month into living here,” Bruiser answered.

Mystic shrugged. “About the same time.”

“Same time as me then,” I realized.

“Bruiser,” David cut in, “ready to see your room?”

“Definitely!” She pushed back from the table.

“Can we come?” I asked. “And what about Mystic’s room? Can we see his?”

David nodded. “I don’t have a problem with that.”

He led us from the conference room and down the hall of secret rooms, past all the doors I knew of, and came to a stop at a tall, beige, double wide filing cabinet.

This file cabinet had been here up against the wall from pretty much day one of me arriving to the ranch. I hadn’t given it much attention. I did open it once and found it unlocked, with every drawer empty. I’d figured it was extra storage, and TL would move it somewhere when he was ready.

Stepping to the side, David motioned Mystic forward, and Bruiser and I exchanged a puzzled glance.

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Mystic slowly ran his fingers along the top of the cabinet, almost as if he was a magician silently telling it abracadabra. The cabinet shifted out from the wall and slid to the side, revealing a tunnel glowing in a soft blue light. My nostrils flared a little as they picked up a waft of incense.

I stood there for a second, staring at the tunnel, smelling the incense, trying to work through what had just happened.

“There are identity stamp sensors painted into the perimeter of the cabinet,” David explained. “They are rigged to read mine, Mystic’s, Chapling’s, and TL’s prints.”

“Oh.” That made sense.

Mystic stepped into the blue glowing tunnel, and we followed. About six feet in, the tunnel opened into a large circular room I estimated to be fifty feet in diameter.

The walls had been painted light purple, and on the walls scripted with the color teal were the words love, peace, joy, breathe, and harmony. A wooden table stood in the center of the room with a yellow pottery vase. Smoke trailed up from the vase, and I assumed it contained the incense. Oversized, vibrant pillows and cushions piled the area around that table. I guessed that was where Mystic meditated.

Soft music trickled through the air, settling the sound of hollow wind chimes through me. Around the circumference of the room, about every few feet, stood wooden tables with bowls of brightly colored stones.

To our immediate right, there were three glass cabinets with see-through doors. Crystals lined the shelves. Big ones, small ones. Round, jagged, lumpy. Clear, green, red, yellow, and purple. Bowls, too, with various herbs in them. My gaze trailed over the top shelf where a row of pendants lay. I smiled at one shaped like a fairy.

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Across the circular room I saw a bookshelf with about fifty books. I could only assume they dealt with mystical themes.

Diagonal to where I stood sat a desk with a computer on top. It seemed so out of place in this gypsy world atmosphere. Surrounding the desk and hanging from the ceiling were long beads that acted as the desk's walls. Diagonal in the opposite direction sat another desk surrounded by hanging beads as well. Decks of cards sat on top that desk, and I gathered they were Tarot or something of that nature.

There was so much to look at I couldn't possibly take it all in. But I did notice a telescope off to my left with an extension leading up and through the ceiling. I didn't know a lot about telescopes, but from what I did know that one looked top of the line. And keeping in mind we were on Sub Floor Four, that was one high powered star gazer.

Peaceful. That word definitely described this room.

"Ya know," Bruiser whispered. "This room makes me want to take a nap or meditate or something."

I smiled. Napping and meditating were two words *definitely* not in Bruiser's vocabulary.

She wandered over to one of the tables with the bowls of stones. "What do these do?" She reached out.

"Stop." Mystic commanded. "Don't. They're not ready for the human touch yet."

Bruiser lifted her hands away and glanced over at me. "Ready for the human touch?"

I shrugged.

"Okay," David said, stepping back into the tunnel. "Let's go see Bruiser's room."

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CHAPTER FOUR

We walked down the blue glowing tunnel that led out from Mystic's room and stepped back into the hallway. Mystic abracadabrad his fingers over the filing cabinet, and it slid back into place.

Mystic, Bruiser, and I followed David through the underground corridors back to the elevator that we all had used when coming down here. David punched in his personal code, and we stepped inside.

Bruiser and I exchanged a questioning glance. "But what about her room?"

"Your room," David answered, "is on Sub Floor Two."

"Sub Floor Two?" I perked up. Cool. I'd wondered what else was on that floor.

One, of course, was our ranch level. Sub Two contained Parrot's room. Sub Three, I'd discovered while prepping for my last mission, was the clinic where Dr. Gretchen worked. And we'd all known what was on Sub Four since day one—our conference room and the other secret rooms.

David pointed to the elevator's control panel. In the center of it was a small black box which looked like a camera. "This is an exhalation analyzer. It is programmed to read your DNA via your breath. Step forward and breathe into it."

An exhalation analyzer? And here I'd always thought it was a camera.

"Freakin' A, that's cool." Bruiser stepped up to the analyzer and breathed a quick, fast breath.

The elevator ascended, stopped at Sub Two, the door opened, and Bruiser's mouth simultaneously dropped.

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I peered over her head—being tall always had its advantages—and into, well, a gymnasium was how I supposed it would be described. Then again, the only physical training room I'd ever been in was our barn where we had daily PT. So I wasn't exactly an expert when it came to identifying work out rooms.

“Where's Parrot's room in relation to this?” I asked.

“On the other side of the wall.” David motioned his head across the room. “Separated by five feet of concrete.”

Mouth still open, Bruiser slowly stepped into the enormous room.

This place was bigger than all the other secret rooms. Octangular in shape, I estimated it covered over one hundred square feet. A fighting rink sprawled the center of the room, bordered by thick wire mesh. It had a red floor with some sort of Asian symbol painted on it.

Bruiser wandered off to the left, and I watched her as she found her way around the room in a sort of daze. She passed by a wall with an assortment of weapons: swords, knives, throwing stars, numb chucks.

She reached up for a sword, and taking it from the wall, turned to David. “Sparring?”

He nodded. “They're dull.”

With a nod, she continued around the room, idly swishing the sword through the air. She passed by punching bags, a collection of body pads, hanging rings, a rack of dumbbells, and came to a stop at the edge of a section of bamboo flooring.

Kicking her running shoes off, she stepped onto the bamboo and gave a slight bounce. A slow smile curved her face as she turned to all of us. “Oh, yeah.”

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And then she launched into a series of spins that looked like a cross between martial arts and gymnastics. I'd seen her in action many times, but her speed and agility always left me speechless.

She came to a stop just as quickly as she had begun and wandered off the bamboo and over to a book shelf. She stood for a second perusing, and then reached up and slid one free. She opened it and flipped through. "Sa-weet. The latest meridian book."

I turned to David and Mystic. "Meridian?"

"Pressure points in your body," Mystic answered. "Used in holistic healing and martial arts among other things."

"Hmmm." It sounded like Mystic and Bruiser's specialties shared similarities. Of course, I wouldn't point that out to them. They were the antithesis of each other.

While Bruiser continued looking through her books, I took in the rest of the room. A shower in the corner, a climbing wall, dangling ropes, thick poles I assumed were for some workout reason, and like Mystic's place, Bruiser had a desk and computer.

Like I said, I knew next to nothing about gyms, but this seemed pretty darn cool.

Bruiser closed the book and with it tucked under her arm, turned to David.

"Unbelievable. There's not one thing I can think of that I don't have."

David smiled a little. "Well, if you do think of something, just let me or TL know, and we'll get it for you."

Bruiser grinned. "Can I have an endless supply of chocolate?"

David gave her a playfully disciplinary look. "Within reason."

She laughed and started bouncing in place. "Can I stay?"

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David nodded. “Not long. Remember we have a meeting with TL. Dinner and rest and we start first thing in the morning.”

She gave another bounce. “Is this where we’re training for the Demise Chain mission?”

David nodded again.

Bruiser headed over to a punching bag. “Oh, goodie,”

David stepped back into the elevator, and Mystic and I followed.

Mystic pressed the Sub Four button and the doors closed. “I’m heading to my room.”

David started to say something and Mystic held up his hand. “I know dinner and rest and we start first thing in the morning.”

David smiled his acknowledgment. The elevator descended, Mystic got off, and the door closed, shutting David and I alone in the elevator.

Immediately my stomach kicked in with nervousness.

Neither one of us moved to punch in our code, and I detected uneasiness in him, too.

“Do you realize,” I softly said, “this is the first time we’ve been alone in a month?”

Smiling a little, he turned to me. “And this will probably be the last time we have an alone moment until after this mission.”

I nodded, understanding if we were going to finally talk about things, now was it. “Can we talk?”

Folding his gorgeous, muscular arms over his beautiful chest, he leaned back against the wall. “Yes, let’s.”

“I thought—” he started at the same time I said, “You know—”

We both laughed a little, and he motioned me to go ahead.

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“You know,” I began again, “the last real conversation we had was over a month ago. And we both know how that played out. I told you about Professor Quirk and you told me you needed time to think. And then you got sent away on a mission, we exchanged a few text messages, no phone calls, and here we are.”

David nodded. “Being a Specialist doesn’t give much time for other things, does it?”

I chuckled a breath. “That’s putting it lightly.”

He smiled at that. “And so?” he prompted me.

I sighed. “David, I guess at this point I just want to know what’s on your mind. I know you’re not happy about Professor Quirk, but let me remind you *he* kissed *me*.”

David nodded. “I know that, GiGi. You’re a beautiful, intelligent woman. Guys are going to hit on you. That’s just a fact of life.”

I tried not to get flattered at the beautiful part, but I *was* a girl after all. “Then why do I feel like we’re going to break up over this?”

He didn’t respond, just kept looking at me.

“David?” And then it dawned on me, and my heart paused a beat. “*Are* we breaking up?”

“GiGi,” he quietly sighed. “It wasn’t the kiss. It was never the kiss.”

“Then what?” I asked, surprised that I could talk with a huge lump forming in my throat.

“It was the ‘we clicked on an intellectual level’ part. That really hurt.”

I swallowed. “Oh, David. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean—”

With a shake of his head, he held up his hand. “Tell me what you want.”

For you to touch me, to hug me, to tell me we’re okay. But instead, I shook my head, unable to collect my suddenly spinning thoughts. *What can I say to save this? What can I do?*

“That’s just it,” he softly responded. “I don’t think you know what you want.”

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I want you, I wanted to say, but instead responded, “What do *you* want?”

He gave me a sad smile. “You shouldn’t have to ask me that.”

“But . . .” hadn’t he just asked me that exact same question?

“And now,” David continued, “with Randy temporarily here, I don’t know. I just don’t know.”

I swallowed.

“I don’t know what else to do.” He closed his eyes. “I thought we were fine, great in fact. Then this thing with Randy comes up. Now he’s here, and obviously there’s something between you.”

“What? No,” I denied. “We’re friends, that’s all.”

David’s expression softened as he gazed at me, not saying anything.

Finally, he nodded. “Truth be told, GiGi, somewhere deep inside I knew this wouldn’t work. Dating, living under the same roof, working for the same organization. It’s too much. It’s too close.”

Pushing off the wall, he ran his hands down his face and sighed. “Yes, we’re breaking up. I’ve been thinking and rethinking the whole problem for the past month. Usually, I don’t take so long to make decisions. But I find myself acting out-of-character when I’m around you.”

I didn’t like him labeling me as a problem. But, weird enough, I experienced a spark of hope that he acted ‘out-of-character’ around me. Surely, that had to be a good sign that he thought of me special enough to act so differently when he was around me.

David reached around me, punched in his code, and the elevator began ascending. “Yes, it’s definitely not a good idea for people who work together to date.”

“That’s what Randy said,” I mumbled and then immediately realized I shouldn’t have.

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David shook his head. “Nice, GiGi.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Listen, we work to close together for there to be any awkwardness between us. So,” he held out his hand, “friends?”

I felt like I was back in the cafeteria with Randy.

David lifted his brows, waiting.

And so I did the only I could. I reached out and took his hand. “Friends.”

* * *

Dinner and a good night’s sleep did not happen to me. All I could think of was David. I played and replayed every moment we’d spent together. Every word we’d spoken. Every kiss, every touch. Come five in the morning, I’d had about enough of my wildly running thoughts. I got up, dressed, and made my way down to the lab. I did the only thing I could to forget about David, I dove into my Demise Chain assignment.

I had exactly six days before I went in front of Harry Noor with my state-of-the-art program. Mystic and David had exactly eight days until tryouts, eight days to learn how to be world class fighters. *Plenty of time*, I tried to convince myself.

I spent hours researching something I never thought in a million years I would. Fighting. I watched countless videos that had been filmed all over the world, some legal, some not so much.

I poured through archived files of the library, the internet, and, believe it or not, the History channel. I played a few fighting video games. I analyzed programs that were currently on the market. I hacked into servers to find out which software developers Harry Noor, the owner of

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Demise Chain, was meeting with. And then I hacked into those developer's computers to see what they'd come up with.

I knew TL didn't like me hacking things without prior approval, but this was for him and his family. He wouldn't mind.

Back to my research . . . I took notes. I cross referenced those notes with other notes. And then I found myself with a whole list of questions for Bruiser.

List tucked in my pocket, I walked into our bedroom and found her laying on her bed with her head buried in her pillow.

"Hey," I said, plopping down beside her on her bed. "Why aren't you training?"

"We're on a ten minute break," she mumbled into the pillow.

"What's up with you?" She rarely, if ever, looked down and out.

She let out a long, loud sigh. "GiiiGiii," she whined, "I don't want to do this."

"Do what?" And then it dawned on me. "The mission? But why? It's fighting. It's what your specialty is."

"I'm not going to be fighting. I'm going to be Mystic's stupid girlfriend." She rolled over. "I'll be standing on the sidelines looking all dumb and airheady."

I laughed. "Who says you have to be dumb and airheady?"

Bruiser heaved another sigh. "TL. Just a few minutes ago before he told us to take a break."

"What?" That didn't make any sense.

"He says Harry Noor likes his girls sweet and innocent and a tidbit dumb."

I laughed again. "What? But you're not going to be Harry's girl, you're Mystic's."

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Bruiser wiggled up on the bed. “I know. But TL wants to do everything possible to be in Harry Noor’s good graces. He doesn’t want to do anything to raise flags, piss anybody off, etcetera.”

I nodded. “Well, that does make sense. Mr. Noor *is* the owner of the Demise Chain, and we want to get into the fights. And we definitely need to play all of our cards right. And if TL thinks your being sweet, innocent, and a little dumb will contribute to that, then he knows what he’s talking about.”

With a groan, Bruiser dropped her head back. “Why do girls always have to play the sidelines? I can fight better than David and Mystic. *I* should be competing, not them.” She slammed her fist into her hand. “I’d bust some people up.”

“Bruiser, you’re not on the sidelines. You’re part of a top secret mission to save TL’s daughter.” Hello? Did she not see this? “I’ve been on four missions now, and you’d be amazed what roles people play and how they all fit together into a sort of puzzle to solve the greater problem.”

“I mean, my God,” I continued, “Jonathan was my modeling agent in Ushbania. Do you think he really liked that? And me? Ug. I was a model? And Nalani in Rissala was a greasy, toothless boat captain. And Beaker in Barracuda Key a cheerleader? Can anybody say snort? And then down in the Junoesque Jungle, I had no control. I was just another female, serving the guys, sitting in the back. My point is, it all comes together in the end, and every role is just as important as the next.”

“I hear what you’re saying.” Bruiser scrunched up her face. “It’s just . . . well, fighting is my one true talent. I’m not as smart as the rest of you guys.”

Fight To The Finish

“What? What are you talking about? That’s absolutely ridiculous,” I argued. Bruiser was one of the smartest girls I knew. And funny. And great to be around.

“Hey.” Mystic stuck his head in. “Can I come in?”

We both waved him in.

He lowered himself to his usual spot at the foot of Bruiser’s bed. And folding his legs up, he took what I referred to as his meditative position.

We both stared at him, waiting . . .

“This mission is against everything I believe in. Everything my parents taught me.” He looked up at us. “And I’m trying to figure out a way to tell TL I can’t fight. There’s got to be a way to get me in that room without requiring me to fight.”

I almost rolled my eyes. Why did it seem like it was my job to convince my team members to go on missions? When had I become the ranch’s Psychologist?

“I know,” Bruiser agreed. “I’m not happy about this either. I say we both go and talk to TL. There’s got to be some other way. And, dude,” Bruiser reached over me and bopped Mystic in the head, “I can’t believe you don’t want to fight. I’d give anything to be in your shoes.”

“Guys.” I held up my hands. “TL would not design a mission and put you into a role unless he felt you were fully capable. And he’s certainly not going to redesign a mission based on your uncomfortableness. Believe me, I know.” I felt like a broken record. Hadn’t I said similar things to all my other team members?

“It’s an honor,” I continued, “to be chosen.”

The both just looked at me.

Fight To The Finish

“Listen,” I said, none so gently. “This is part of our new life. It comes with it. God knows I’ve done things I didn’t want to.” I got up off the bed. “That’s the bottom line. So you just have to suck it up.”

They both scowled at me.

I walked from the room, feeling like a crabby butt for my harshness, and not quite understanding why I had gotten so irritable with them. I guess I just didn’t have the patience right now. Maybe it was the whole thing with David and Randy. I didn’t know.

“Jeez, Kelly, can you be any less understanding?”

I turned to see Randy leaning against the hallway wall.

“Everybody gets scared when they’re prepping for their first mission, especially when it’s out of their realm of comfortable zone. Everybody experiences second thoughts.” Randy pushed up from the wall.

David came out of his bedroom. “I agree with Randy.”

Great, now I felt even worse.

David knocked on my open bedroom door. “Hey, guys, can we talk?”

Mystic and Bruiser waved him in and Randy followed.

With a sigh, I turned and walked off, feeling more and more horrible about myself with each step. I needed to apologize. Next time I saw them I would.

* * *

That evening I found myself in my lab pounding my head. Give me something to hack or a code to break and no problem. Design a state-of-the-art, not-like-anything-else fighting program from scratch? Sheesh. What did they want from me?

Fight To The Finish

I had a ton of questions and knew Bruiser had the answers, but after what had happened earlier, I didn't feel comfortable approaching her. Or Mystic for that matter.

Chapling sat over in the corner behind some patch panels. I couldn't see him, but I knew he was testing (on himself) the Influence-Sway Skins (his creation, his term) that he'd taken from Dr. Gretchen and tweaked to fit our needs. The Skins would not only record muscle aptitude, they would give us a multi dimensional image of the skeletal. If they worked, we'd use them in conjunction with the Combat-Thrash program (my creation/my term) that I had yet to fully develop. The program that would coach any fighter to greatness.

"OW!" he yelped.

Guess the testing wasn't going so well.

My cell buzzed and I looked at the display.

* * * TL's stat code.

Chapling waddled out from behind the patch panel, rubbing his chest through his T-shirt.

"I need to find someone else to test things on." He squinted his eyes at me.

I held my hands up. "No. Nonononono."

He smiled. "Let's go. Did you get the stat code?"

I nodded and followed him out the computer lab and down the hall to the conference room.

Fight To The Finish

CHAPTER FIVE

Chapling rapped softly on the closed conference room door, and TL opened it.

Around the table sat everyone going on the mission: Nalani, Jonathan, David, Mystic, and Bruiser.

Chapling and I took seats beside each other to TL's left.

TL ran his gaze over everyone in the room, taking a second to make eye contact with each of us. "I'd like to start out by saying this is an incredible place we live. Regardless of your backgrounds, I hope each of you realize what an honor it is to have been picked for this program. You are an elite, talented, intelligent group, and I'm proud to say you are on my team."

No one uttered a sound as we stared at him. I was sure they were picking up on the same thing as me. While his words were complimentary, his tone came across disappointed.

Pushing back from the table, TL stood, and rolling his chair in, he rested his hands on top of the leather seat back.

My eyes wandered down to his ring finger where he wore no wedding band. I looked across the table to Nalani's finger and saw the same. What kind of relationship did they have that not even in the safety of the ranch did they wear rings? I didn't understand the two of them.

TL took a breath. "David, go ahead."

David hit the remote, and the wall inserted screen flickered. An image of Zandra popped up with a rag tied around her eyes and tears streaking her face.

I sucked in a breath as I stared at the curls matted to her little cheeks.

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“This picture arrived today,” David explained. “We traced it and have found out it was mailed a block away from where Zandra was taken. This picture was probably snapped moments after she was kidnapped.” He pressed the remote, and another image came into view.

It was a note, just like the first. FIND HER OR SHE DIES.

David put the remote down. “That message came with the picture.”

“What about prints?” Chapling asked.

David shook his head. “Nothing.” He turned to Mystic. “Do you get anything looking at that?”

Mystic shook his head. “No, I’m sorry. I need to see her eyes.”

“Again,” TL spoke up. “The kidnappers could be anybody. Nalani and I have so many enemies.” TL stopped for a second and rubbed his hand across his forehead. “What do they want? It doesn’t make sense. Do they want me? Nalani? Money? To free someone from prison? I don’t know.” He rubbed his forehead even harder. “At this point, I’m beginning to doubt if they want anything at all. Maybe they’re just playing a game. I’m beginning to doubt their intentions . . . and what exactly their plans are with,” TL swallowed, “with our daughter,” his voice cracked a little.

I swallowed, too, at the raw emotion in his tone. At the horrible things that *could* happen to their daughter.

Dropping his head, TL pressed his fingers into the sides of his temple.

“Please . . .” Nalani squeezed her fingers together so tight her knuckles turned white.

“Please, you all in this room, you’re our only hope.”

My stomach clenched at the desperation in her voice. And I realized this was the first time I’d heard Nalani speak since first seeing her.

Fight To The Finish

She looked first at Mystic and then Bruiser. “TL told me you two are hesitant to do this mission.”

I glanced over at my team members to find them both dropping their heads. I couldn’t believe it. I couldn’t believe they’d actually gone to TL. I loved my teammates, but at this point I felt incredibly disappointed in them, too. I didn’t care what hesitancy I might have, it was TL and Nalani’s daughter, for God’s sake. Did Mystic and Bruiser not see this?

“I can’t make you do this,” TL softly spoke, taking his fingers from his temple and dragging his gaze to both Mystic and Bruiser. “I could have gone to anybody. I know people on all levels of the government. But I brought this to you because I know you’re the best, *we’re* the best.”

Mystic and Bruiser kept their heads down. I didn’t know about them, but I would feel very guilty and definitely a little “in trouble” if TL were putting me on the spot right now.

“Look at me,” Nalani requested.

Mystic and Bruiser raised their eyes.

Nalani released her white knuckled fingers and laid them flat on her chest. “I’m here asking you as a mother to find my daughter, *our* daughter.”

That hit home. Although I had very few memories of my mother, I knew she would spare no resource to find me if I’d been kidnapped. Heck, if the roles were reversed, I’d go to the ends of the earth to find *any* missing family member. And I knew my team members would do the same.

Inhaling a long, soft breath, Mystic closed his eyes. It might have been my imagination but I swore he was listening to something.

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A few seconds ticked by and no one said a word as Mystic sat there meditating. I looked around the room to see what everyone thought, and they were all staring at him.

After a few more seconds, he gave a slight nod, opened his eyes and gazed straight into Nalani's. "You may definitely count me in."

With a shaky smile, she nodded. "Thank you." And then she turned to Bruiser.

"I'm sorry," Bruiser immediately apologized, looking from TL to Nalani, and back to TL. "I'm so, so sorry. I can't believe I acted so immature in thinking of myself, when people I love are in need of my talents. Sir, you may unequivocally count on me in any way."

Closing his eyes in what looked like pure relief, TL slowly turned his back to us. "Thank you." Then he opened the door and walked straight from the room with out dismissing us.

I couldn't recall a time I'd seen him struggle so hard to maintain composure.

He'd always been there for us. We would most certainly be there for him.

* * *

I worked the whole next day along side Chapling writing and rewriting code. I just wasn't happy, and neither was Chapling. We had to create one bang up Combat-Thrash (fighting analysis) program and all we had as of now was mediocre at best. Five days was all we had left. Seven was all Mystic and David had.

"Maybe we need to see the training stages of a superior fighter," I suggested. "All we've watched and researched is the end product. I think we need to see exactly, in person, how a fighter becomes a fighter."

Chapling snapped his finger and pointed at me. "Smartgirl. Let's go."

Camera in hand, we made our way up to Sub Floor Two where we knew Bruiser and the guys were training. We texted Bruiser to let her know we were in the elevator, and she let us in.

Fight To The Finish

Chapling and I found an empty corner, set our camera up, and settled ourselves on a pile of mats. Laptops in front of each of us, we tuned into Bruiser and the guys.

And I tried very hard not to stare at David's sweaty, clingy T-shirt. "Can you recap what you've done so far and what the training schedule will be like until competition day?"

"Conditioning, sparring, specific technique," Bruiser ticked off her fingers.

"Conditioning, sparring, specific technique. We cycle through those three things, spending two hours on each and then starting back over, making for a packed twelve hours. We eat a high protein, high fiber diet to repair muscle tears. And each day I introduce a new technique. A new art. David and Mystic have to be as well rounded as possible. They have to do in seven days what others spends years perfecting."

Bruiser crossed the floor and grabbed up a handful of four-foot bamboo poles. "Kumite is one of the three sections of karate. Its training against an adversary. Balance is a key here and learning the basics by feel. If you get your lights knocked out, you're going to be disorientated. You need to have a mental scope for a guide, a clock in your head to oriente you until your senses come back. *If* they come back."

She handed TL, David, Mystic, and Jonathan each a pole. "Karate involves modification. Its about your senses, muscle memory, and imagery. You have to be able to use your wits with strategy. You have to be unpredictable. One of the key factors in winning or at least holding your own in a fight is the ability to anticipate your opponent's movements."

"Allow me to demonstrate." She pulled a black scarf from the elastic waist band of her shorts and tied it around her eyes. She lifted her hands and waved them on with her fingers. "Hit me."

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Mystic and Jonathan exchanged a glance. TL and David exchanged a glance. Chapling and I exchanged a glance.

Was she serious?

Bruiser waggled her fingers again. “Come on. What are you waiting for?”

“B—” Mystic almost looked pained. “But you’re so small.”

She smirked and waved them on again. “Let’s go. No holding back.”

TL lunged first, bringing the pole back and swinging it at her. I knew TL’s power, and clearly, he was holding back.

Bruiser dodged the swing, grabbed his pole from behind, twisted it free, and tossed it across the gym. “I. Said. Don’t. Hold. Back.”

All the guys smiled at her irritable tone. All the guys, but TL.

In fact, I hadn’t seen any expression on his face over the last couple of days but that of focus and concentration.

He looked stressed to the max.

David went next, stealthily slipping to the left and coming at her from below. She slammed her foot down on the pole, flipped it up with the toe of her running shoe, and jabbed the end into David’s side.

With a grunt, he fell to his knees and grabbed his side. “Man, Bruiser.”

Jonathan attacked next, not giving her a chance to respond to David, and whipped his pole toward the back of her knees. She leapt straight up and flipped backwards over Jonathan, snatched the pole from his grasp, and swept him off his feet.

With a thud, he landed on his butt. “Lord, girl,” he chuckled. “You’re something else.”

Blindfold still on, she turned to Mystic. “Come on, dude, be a man”

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Mystic swallowed. "I think I'm afraid of you."

Bruiser smiled. "As you should be." And then she sprinted toward him.

His eyes widened as he held up the pole and backed away. She came to a stop right in front of him, reached out, and bopped him in the side of the head.

Mystic jerked. "Hey!"

She bopped him in the other side of the head. "You're a sissy. How do you expect to compete in less than two weeks? I'm just a little girl and I'm about to beat you up." She shoved him in the chest. "You're going to be up against guys twice your size. And they're going to laugh in your face if you back away from them."

Standing on her tiptoes, Bruiser leaned in closer until their faces were mere inches away from each other. "They're going to laugh, and then they'll beat you to a bloody pulp. Now," she butted her forehead into his face, "hit me, you girl."

Mystic narrowed his eyes, and I swore it was the first time I ever saw him look irritated. He slid his pole up between them and shoved her away.

She took a few steps back. "Good. Come on."

He lifted the pole, holding it like a spear, and slung it at her.

Bruiser didn't move, just lifted her hand and caught it. "Didn't expect you to do that. Not bad." She tossed the pole back to him.

Looking a little proud of himself, Mystic caught the pole.

Very quietly TL signaled the guys, and they all moved at once, coming at her from opposite directions.

They swatted and jabbed and rushed at her. She dodged and kicked and flipped.

They swung and struck. She punched and blocked.

Fight To The Finish

They lunged and poked. She disarmed and tossed their weapons.

They reached for her, and Bruiser, looking a bit 'done with it', whirled and touched Jonathan in the back of the neck. Spun and flicked David in the hip. Whipped around and poked the tip of her elbow to Mystic's shoulder. And shot straight up in a split and tapped TL in the chest with her toes.

All four guys fell to the floor, moaning and heaving for breaths.

Bruiser took her blindfold off. "I think I broke a nail." And then she giggled at her own silly humor.

Chapling and I just sat there, staring at the remnants of the Jackie Chan scene we'd just seen.

I realized then he and I were gripping each other's hands, and I let go. "Sorry."

"Wow." Chapling blinked. "I think Bruiser's my new idol."

"I think we need Bruiser on *all* our missions." I turned to Chapling. "She barely even touched them that last time around."

He nodded. "Like I said, my idol."

Bruiser went over and helped each of the guys up, tapping them at different places on their backs.

"What's she doing?" I asked.

"Resetting our meridian points," Mystic moaned as Bruiser did him.

I slipped my notepad from my pocket and took a second to jot down everything I'd just seen. In my peripheral I saw Chapling's fingers begin racing over his laptop keys. This was exactly what both of us needed.

Fight To The Finish

I looked up at the injured guys and they seemed, amazing enough, to be recovering.

“What did it feel like before you guys dropped to the floor?”

TL straightened his shoulders. “Compression.”

Compression?

I pondered that for a second and realized to really comprehend that word I would need to feel it. And then—the obligatory light bulb went off in my head—that was what my Combat-Thrash program needed. To incorporate all five senses.

My heart kicked in with that awesome rhythm that comes with solving a problem. I turned to Chapling and he was typing away, the light bulb having gone off in him, too.

“Chap?”

He held up his finger for me to wait, keyed a few more things, and then looked over.

I smiled. “We’re going to make history. First program of its kind. We need—”

“The senses!” Chapling answered for me.

“Oh my God, that’s exactly what I was thinking.”

He clapped his hands. “Of course it was. We’re smart that way.”

I put my laptop aside and stood.

Chapling looked up at me. “What are you doing?”

I straightened my T-shirt. “Feeling compression.”

His bushy red brows lifted an inch. “For real?”

I gave one definitive nod, more to convince me than to assure him. “I’m going in.”

“I changed my mind. *You’re* my idol.”

I took a deep breath. Here went nothing. “Bruiser, do that to me.”

All the guys and Bruiser turned to look at me.

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Pulling my shoulders back, I took a few steps toward them. “I’m serious. I really need to be involved in all aspects of training for this mission if I’m going to create a program that will blow Harry Noor out of this world.”

I waved my hand through the air. “This is all so foreign to me, this fighting thing. I’ve spent much of my time swimming through research videos and books and it’s really getting me nowhere. Fighting is a full body sport, and it just occurred to Chapling and I that we need to incorporate all five senses into our Combat-Thrash program. Compression. That’s what TL said. And that’s what I need to feel.”

“She’s taking one for the team,” Chapling said from behind me. “Because *I’m* definitely not volunteering my little self for a compression experiment.”

“Combat-Thrash program?” Bruiser asked.

I shrugged. “That’s what I’ve decided to call it.”

She snorted. “It’s a stupid name.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Are you going to show me compression or what?”

Bruiser glanced over at TL, and he nodded her ahead.

She smirked, looking at little *too* happy if you asked me.

Perhaps I should have apologized to her *before* I asked her to compress me.

Bruiser waved me over, and I crossed the mat to her, getting this odd feeling I was walking the plank or something.

I came to a stop right in front of her and looked down. “I’m sorry for not being a very good friend to you and Mystic and getting cranky and all that.”

One side of her lip curled up. “Apology accepted.”

And then she reached out and touched my neck and my whole world went black.

Fight To The Finish

* * *

Sounds of classical music drifted through my brain and my eyelids fluttered open. A blurry image of Dr. Gretchen with her salt and pepper hair stepped into view.

She smiled. “Welcome back.”

I tried to sit up, and she patted my shoulder.

“I suggest you lay right there for a minute or two. You’re in the infirmary. It’s eleven at night. You’ve been out,” she peeked at her watch, “for nearly two hours.”

She brought a cup to me and held a straw to my lips. I took a long sip.

“What happened,” I asked a few seconds later.

“You don’t remember?”

I thought for a second . . . “Oh, compression. That’s right.” Bruiser’s fingers had felt like rocks. “Wait a minute . . .” my brain trailed off as I recalled everything. “Why didn’t she ‘reset my meridian points’?” I asked, using Mystic’s term.

Dr. Gretchen chuckled. “She did. You didn’t respond.”

I closed my eyes. Of course I didn’t respond. Leave it to me to be the dork that doesn’t respond right to something.

Dr. Gretchen sat down in the chair beside my bed. “GiGi,” she sighed. “You’ve got to be more careful. Some of us are made for combat, and some of us are, well, like you.”

I opened my eyes. “What does that mean?”

She gave me a tolerant look. “You know exactly what that means.”

Sadly, I did.

“You’ve been here more than anyone else,” she reminded me.

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I held my hand up. “Point taken.” I swung my legs over the side of the bed to get up and closed my eyes on a wave of nausea. “Maybe I’ll just,” I scooted back on the bed and stretched out, “lay down a little while longer.”

Dr. Gretchen smiled a little. “Brilliant idea.” She settled back in her chair. “You know, David came to see you while you were out.”

I perked up. “He did?”

She nodded.

My stomach flippity-flopped at the thought of him looking in on me. What did that mean exactly? Was he looking in on me as a friend? Or as an I-might-want-to-get-back-together-with-you sort of thing? And then it occurred to me . . . had I been *drooling*? I had been in a coma after all.

“Why don’t we visit for a while?” Dr. Gretchen suggested.

I nodded, completely sidetracked by the fact David had been here, and waited for her to start the conversation.

She didn’t.

“Um,” I searched my brain for something to say . . . my thoughts drifted through the time I’d known Dr. Gretchen . . . and suddenly it hit me. “Hey, I’ve been dying to ask you a question.”

She waved me on. “Shoot.”

“Why do you and Jonathan hate each other so much?”

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CHAPTER SIX

Dr. Gretchen half-snorted/half laughed. “Jonathan and I don’t hate each other.”

I gave her an incredulous look. “Right.”

She heaved a heavy sigh. “Really, we don’t.”

“That’s not what Jonathan said.” It was low ball of me, seeing as how Jonathan hadn’t said anything one way or another.

Dr. Gretchen’s eyes narrowed to two tiny beads. “What did he say?”

I shrugged and glanced away. “This and that.”

“Listen.” She shoved out of her chair. “It wasn’t *my* fault the spear went through his eye.”

A spear? I concentrated on not showing that I really had no idea what she was talking about. “Not according to him.”

Her entire face clenched. “*I* wasn’t the one who wanted to go spear fishing. That was *his* brilliant idea.”

“Hmmm.” I looked up at her with an expression that I hoped said Jonathan had said otherwise.

Dr. Gretchen jabbed her finger in my direction. “He’s just embarrassed because the shark scared *him* and not me.”

Shark? I waited for her to keep going with the story, but she didn’t. And so I fed her another line. “He said the shark didn’t even faze him.”

“*What?!*” she shouted, and I jumped.

“Of all the nerve!” She turned and took a stomping pace around the room. “I thought he was man enough to own up to things by now.” Dr. Gretchen whipped around and jabbed her

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finger in my direction again. “Is he still saying when the shark swam by I was the one who got scared and pulled the trigger on the spear gun?”

I nodded, hoping God didn’t strike me down for all this.

She let out a grunt. “I can’t *stand* him.”

I watched her pace away from me, fists clenched, breathing heavy, more angry than I’d ever seen her. But I still didn’t hesitate from asking, “So what really happened?”

Dr. Gretchen shook her head, and I could visualize her mind reeling back the years. “It happened five years ago. We used to work together in the IPNC. Ten years we worked out of the same division and finally he asked me out. Australia is where we happened to be at the time. Went spear fishing on the Great Barrier Reef. A shark swam by, he freaked in the water, and ran straight into my spear.”

I couldn’t help it, I laughed. “*That’s* how he lost his eye?” And here we’d all thought he’d gotten injured on some top secret mission.

“Yes, that’s how he lost his eye.” She turned to me. “But you want to know the real kicker?”

I nodded. Oh, this was too juicy and good.

“He never asked me out again. He’s too embarrassed.”

A knock sounded on the open door and we both glanced over to see Jonathan standing there.

I swallowed. Oops, bad timing.

Dr. Gretchen grabbed a bed pan and slung it across the room. It sailed through the air to thunk Jonathan smack in the nose.

“Ow!” He grabbed his nose. “What are you doing, you crazy woman?”

Fight To The Finish

“How dare you tell everybody I was the one who,” she quoted the air with her fingers, “‘accidentally’ speared your eye.”

“I didn’t tell anybody anything,” he loudly defended himself.

Dr. Gretchen pointed to me. “Not according to GiGi.”

They both fell silent, and slowly, they turned to look at me.

I gulped a swallow and tried my best for innocence. “Um, I was practicing my getting-information-out-of-someone-when-I-really-don’t-know-anything skill.”

They narrowed their eyes, or, I should say, Jonathan narrowed one eye.

“TL taught a whole class on it just a few weeks ago. How to lead someone in a conversation to get information out of him or her.” I looked between them. “My homework was to practice the lesson on someone.” I gave Dr. Gretchen a big fake smile. “Hope you don’t mind you were that someone.”

It was true. TL *had* taught a whole class, and all of us *had* been given that assignment. I just didn’t realize I was going to do my homework until now.

Jonathan busted out laughing. “How do you like that, Gretch?”

She shook her head, and I got the distinct impression she was growing reluctantly amused with the whole situation.

I swung my legs over the bed, got up, and made my way toward the door. “Well, if you don’t mind telling TL I did my homework assignment, that’d be great.” And then I beelined it out of there before I got into trouble.

“Just remember,” Dr. Gretchen yelled after me, “I can make your medical needs *painful* or *pain free*.”

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I immediately recalled the inoculations me, Parrot, and Jonathan had received prior to leaving for the jungle. Parrot and I hadn't felt a thing. Jonathan, on the other hand, had screamed through every single needle.

As I pressed the elevator button, I gave her a sweet wave that I hoped would smooth things over.

In response, she let out an evil giggle.

Great. Juuust great.

* * *

Even though it was eleven at night, I wasn't tired in the least. Probably because of my two hour nap slash coma I'd been in. And so I headed to my lab, punched in my code, and the door swished open.

Chapling and Randy both glanced up from the corner where the coffee pot sat. Seeing Randy made my stomach flip flop. My reaction to him both confused and bothered me. How was it possible both David *and* Randy could make me feel this way? I never wanted to be *that* girl that bopped from one guy to the next, but this little love triangle made me feel that way.

Randy smiled a little. "Hey."

"Hey," I greeted him back.

It seemed like it'd been a week instead of a day since I'd seen him last.

I pulled out my computer station's chair and took a seat. "What are you doing in here?"

"Having a late night cup of coffee," Randy answered, purposefully rolling his eyes down to Chapling so I would look.

"Chapling?" I noticed his sick expression. "You okay?"

He shook his head, but didn't speak.

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“He found out,” Randy spoke for him, “that he’s going on the mission with you.”

“What?!” I broke into a smile. “That’s awesome!”

Chapling shook his head.

“He’s never been on a mission,” Randy spoke for him again.

“*What?!?*”

My surprised outburst made Chapling look sicker. Randy gave me a you’re-not-helping-him look.

“Oh, Chapling.” I stepped forward. “You’ll be fine. I’ll be there, and TL, and David, and everybody.” I walked over to him, leaned down, and gave him a hug. “I promise. You’ll be fine. I’ve got your back.”

Chapling nodded, still not speaking.

“That’s what I keep telling him.” Randy looked me up and down. “How are you feeling? I heard about what happened.”

I waved him off. “Fine. Chapling gets to be the guinea pig next time.”

Chapling half-heartedly chuckled at my joke. At least he’d come out of zombie mode. Actually, he was handling it fairly well. I remembered the first time I was told I was going on a mission. I’d nearly passed out.

“We need to get baseline data on everybody,” I told Chapling, knowing talking work was definitely the way to get his mind off things.

“Already did,” he responded.

“Oh, yeah, when’d you do that?”

Chapling reached for his coffee. “When you were, ya know, passed out.”

I smiled. “Thanks.”

Fight To The Finish

He returned my smile, looking a bit better then when I first walked in.

“So, Chap, I did have a few questions about the project I’m working on for TL.” Randy nodded to one of the open computer stations. “Mind helping me real quick with some research?”

“Oh sure. Suresuresure.” Chapling waddled across the lab to his station and climbed up in his chair.

“Thanks,” I whispered to Randy, knowing he was trying to keep Chapling sidetracked.

“You’re welcome.”

While the guys logged in and started talking, I situated myself at my station and got down to work.

I lost myself in my own little world, analyzing the baseline data Chapling had recorded. I took the film footage of Bruiser and the guys and turned it into 3-D animation. I applied basic principles of Geometry and physics in analyzing each movement and what could have been done differently for the guys to succeed in their fight with Bruiser.

I tweaked the 3-D animation, redoing the fight, and observed the new results. I watched as an animated figure of Mystic forced Bruiser into a compromising situation. It wasn’t likely that anyone would ever defeat Bruiser in real life, but watching it in animation was really darn cool.

Actually, the whole thing reminded me of a complicated board game. Fighting was definitely a thinking man’s game that used a combination of mathematics and fighting skill to win.

I factored more options and measured the outcomes and angles. I definitely needed more data, both internal and external. I needed to observe more training to visualize their muscle movement from the inside out.

Fight To The Finish

I turned to Chapling and with a glance around the room, noted Randy had left. “Hey, are those Influence Sway Skins ready?”

Oblivious to me, Chapling fiddled with a new hologram machine we’d gotten a few weeks ago. It portrayed some sort of military game. I wondered why he was fiddling with that when we had a mission to pull together.

“Chap?”

Eyes glued to the hologram image in front of him, he waved his finger incased in a virtual reality wrap and made one warrior stab another.

“CHAPLING?”

He jerked back. “What?”

“Are those Influence Sway Skins ready? I want to get some internal muscular data.”

“Oh yeah. Yeahyeahyeah. They’re ready.”

I nodded. “Good.” And then my gaze wandered to the hologram game as he went back to playing it. Again, I wondered why he was wasting his time when . . .

My thoughts died off as I got drawn in watching one warrior battle another. Once again that obligatory light bulb went off in my head. Hologram. We needed to make the Combat-Thrash program a hologram. Nobody else presenting for Harry Noor was doing a hologram.

My heart kicked in with my idea I couldn’t wait to share. “Chap?”

He didn’t glance away from his game. “Yeah?”

“Are you thinking the same thing I’m thinking?”

“Probably. Incorporate holograms into the Combat Thrash Program?”

“Yep, we’re thinking the same thing.” No wonder he was playing the game.

Fight To The Finish

Chapling spun on his stool in my direction. He pointed his wrapped finger back and forth between the two of us. “We rock the house.”

I laughed. “That we do.”

* * *

Four days left until Chapling and I went in front of Harry Noor. Six days until Mystic and David did. That’s all I could think of as I strolled into the cafeteria the next morning for a quick breakfast. I ran straight into Mystic and Bruiser. They both gave me a ‘look’. It took me a second to remember that the last words between us weren’t exactly pleasant.

Granted, I *had* apologized to Bruiser, but even I knew that had been a last minute, don’t-hurt-me-too-bad apology. Right before she, of course, had put my lights out.

Without a second thought, I went straight over and sat down across from them. “Listen, I know I lost my patience and was mean. I know it. You know it. Everyone screws up at sometime or another. So can we please just make up and be friends again?”

They both just stared at me.

“Please?” I prompted.

Mystic shrugged as he shoved a chunk of watermelon in his mouth. “I suppose.”

“Oh, gee, thanks.”

Bruiser folded her arms. “I guess I owe you an apology, too.”

I raised my brows. “Oh?”

“You know,” she waved her fingers through the air, “for putting you in a coma and all that.”

“Yeah, well, Dr. Gretchen said my body just didn’t respond to the resetting-the-meridian-point thing.”

Fight To The Finish

Mystic and Bruiser exchanged a sly glance.

I frowned. “What?” And then it dawned at me. “You didn’t reset my meridian points, did you?”

She smirked. “Not really.”

My jaw dropped. “Bruiser!”

She lifted her hands. “Hey, you want to be all irritated with me and Mystic, it’s the least you deserved.”

My jaw dropped even further. And then, I couldn’t help it, I laughed. After all, it wasn’t literally a coma, more like a very long nap.

Mystic and Brusier exchanged a knuckle tap.

Ha ha. Jokes on me.

Parrot sat down beside me, sliding a small plate of bacon in front of me. “It’s the peppered kind. I know you love it.”

I gave him a smile. “Thanks.”

Parrot took a sip of his cinnamon coffee. Since being introduced to it on our last mission, it seemed to be the only thing he drank nowadays. “What’s so funny?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Nothing. Just Bruiser and her silliness.”

Wirenut sat down on the other side of me. “Hey, no fair having fun without me.”

We all smiled.

“Where’s Beaker and Cat?” Bruiser asked.

Wirenut shrugged. “Something about girl talk.”

“What do you do when you do that?” Bruiser asked, bringing my attention to who she was staring at—Mystic.

Fight To The Finish

With his eyes closed, he sat peacefully, seemingly lost in some other world. He'd looked like that in the conference room, too.

Mystic didn't respond at first, and right when I thought he *wouldn't* answer, his lips curled into a soft smile. "I'm listening to my mother."

None of us had a response to that, and in fact, didn't even exchange a glance. Our gazes were fixed on Mystic.

His eyelids fluttered open, and I saw peace there. I could only imagine how it would feel to hear my mother's voice.

And then he told us about his mother, his father, his baby sister. And how he'd been raised in a commune in the hills of TN. How people fueled by hate had viciously killed his family, not only blood, but those he had grown up with.

Wirenut spoke next. He shared his horrid past and how he'd watched his parents and older brothers be slaughtered by his evil uncle. He described growing up in boys' homes and the criminal path he'd taken that had finally gotten him recruited by TL.

Bruiser went next, describing abandonment as a small girl and being found by a wonderful man who raised her and other street kids. She told us about learning to fight by this man, Red, and how she hoped to one day see him again.

Parrot picked up the conversation, sharing his past. His mother being sold into slavery, his father dying, his grandmother sick and raising him. He described being manipulated by his Indian chief to translate deals involving children and women being sold into slavery.

Somewhere in the conversation Beaker and Cat sat down. Cat had been raised by the same man who slaughtered Wirenut's family. She'd been lied to her whole life and found her first truth and freedom when joining the Specialists.

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Beaker described her abusive, neglectful mother. How she'd been pegged a drug user in school and no one liked her. How she'd lived out of the locker rooms in the high school and because of a fluke explosion she'd caused, found her way to the Specialists.

And then I shared my story, losing my parents in a plane crash. Moving from foster family to foster family. Being pegged a freak because my IQ made people scared of me. And how David had been my very first friend. David had recruited me into this new lifestyle.

When we finished, none of us uttered a word. But the feeling of family and unity was so strong between all of us, I was sure they felt it, too.

The conversation picked up again as Beaker told us about the very unexpected news that her and David were siblings.

Bruiser dropped a bomb, revealing her and TL were raised by the same man.

Parrot shared stories of being reunited with his mother.

Mystic revealed he'd known all along about our pasts.

Wirenut pulled his shirt up and showed the horrid scar he always hid.

I told them I'd just found out after my last mission that I had a sister.

I didn't know, we didn't know, if we were saying stuff we weren't supposed to say.

Things TL might not want us sharing. But we didn't care. It flowed from us. None of us held back.

We shared our fears, our hopes, our desires. We put ourselves out there, raw and impure.

It was amazing, truly amazing, the level our bond deepened. It was like we'd been waiting for this moment for over a year. Secrets revealed. Souls bared. Each of us knew without a doubt that we would be connected forever.

Fight To The Finish

Under the table, Parrot took my hand. I grasped Wirenut's, and he clasped Cat's. She reached across the table and took Beaker's, and her and Bruiser linked fingers. On it went to Mystic and back to Parrot, all of us quietly holding hands, and for the first time truly becoming one.

* * *

That afternoon Bruiser wanted everybody to meet outside for the day's training. So carrying my video cam and tripod, I pulled my laptop strap further up my shoulder and crossed the yard to the barn.

That weird sensation hit me again.

Someone's watching me.

Maybe I *was* being paranoid. Stopping in my tracks, I turned a slow circle, searching the ranch's property: the house, pool, the hills, trees, and the fence in the distance that ran the ranch's perimeter. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, but still, that sensation hit me strong.

Mystic came up beside me. "What's wrong?"

I shook my head. "Nothing."

He nodded to the barn. "Let's go."

We entered the barn to see Bruiser in the corner shadow boxing. Before this mission, I, of course, had never used the term shadow boxing, but now I felt comfortable throwing it around.

While she continued doing her thing, I set my cam and tripod up and pressed record.

Bruiser stopped boxing the air and dropped to her fists for a rapid round of pushups. She boinged to her feet and turned around. "Good you're here."

David, TL, and Jonathan walked in behind us.

Fight To The Finish

Bruiser bounced from foot to foot, like I'd seen athletes do when they were trying to keep their bodies warm. "Okay." She clapped her hands. "Six days left to make Mystic and David competitive fighters. Today we're doing a little bit of everything. Striking, take down, submission. Like I said, MMA."

"And right when you're the most tired," Bruiser continued, "we're taking it outside in the fashion of the Greeks. We're going to throw rocks, run piggy backed with one another, bench press each other, military press wood beams, and squats until you drop. No modern day equipment. We're going to condition our bodies like the warriors used to."

I got exhausted just listening to the rundown.

A shadow flicked in my peripheral vision, and I turned to see an average sized man with a bushy gray beard step into the barn.

"Sounds like the Molly I know," the man said.

"Red!" Molly squealed and sprinted across the barn.

Fight To The Finish

CHAPTER SEVEN

With a smile, I watched Bruiser and Red embrace.

“How’s my spunky Molly?” Red asked, squeezing her tight.

She returned the squeeze. “Oh, Red, I missed you so much.”

Every since I had known her, Bruiser had always been happy go lucky, fun, never took anything serious. And she pretty much wore a perpetual grin on her face. But seeing her here with Red brought out a glow in her that I had never seen before. She seemed to beam with excitement, and for the first time since I’d known her, her body came across relaxed, content.

Which was funny, seeing as how I had never noticed that she seemed *uncontent* in any way until now. It was amazing how much body language showed a person’s emotions.

“How do you feel?” Bruiser asked as she stepped back from Red. “You look great.”

Smiling down at her, he tweaked her chin. “I’m fine. Perfect in fact.”

“How long are you here for?” she asked.

Red glanced over her head to TL. “We’ll find out in a second.”

TL crossed the barn to where Red stood and went straight into his arms. No handshake. No greeting. Just a heartfelt, long hug. Red turned his head and whispered something into TL’s ear, and he nodded his head.

Although TL’s back was to me, I imagined his eyes squeezed tight as he received the warm embrace. I probably didn’t, but I thought I heard TL sniff back tears. That sound, that small snuffle, brought tears to my own eyes, and at that moment, I truly felt TL’s pain.

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And for the first time ever, I saw TL in a different light. I saw him vulnerable, just a man fighting for his family. I saw him human, as weird as that sounds, and not as some sort of super hero immune to pain and able to accomplish anything.

Red whispered something else to TL and gave him a pat on the back. TL discreetly rubbed his face on Red's shirt, took a deep breath, and turned to us.

"Team," TL addressed us. "I'd like you to meet the man who raised both me and Bruiser, our father, Mr. Red Cartlynn."

By 'father' I knew he didn't mean blood related, but it made no difference. Here stood the man who raised both TL and Bruiser. How crazy was that? Every day around this place revealed something new—that was for sure.

"Please feel free to call him Red," TL continued. "You are standing in the presence of one of the most highly decorated veterans in our nation. An Army Ranger, sniper, with four combat tours in Vietnam. Later recruited into the CIA. Went MIA in southeast Asia. Crossed the border into Thailand. Studied under the world's best fighters. He is one of the elite. However, he still suffers from the lingering affects of hepatitis and malaria while he was a POW." TL glanced over to Red. "So he's going to take it easy."

Red chuckled. "Complete burnout and being double crossed by a few unnamed people sent me into hiding. Glad that I did. I would have never met Tommy and Molly."

Tommy? That cute nickname for TL made me smile.

TL pointed to each of us, introducing us. "That's GiGi, our computer specialist. And Mystic, our clairvoyant. David, my right hand. And Jonathan in charge of physical training. You'll the meet the rest tonight at dinner."

We all smiled and nodded hello.

Fight To The Finish

“Red,” TL continued, “has agreed to join us here at the ranch as our warfare specialist.”

“Really?” Bruiser nearly squealed.

Red nodded. “Really. And I’m also going to be assisting in training you all for this mission.”

Her excitement was so evident it nearly vibrated off of her.

Red waved his hand in the air. “Okay, I’ve interrupted you enough. Carry on.”

Straightening her tank top, Bruiser turned to us. “Alrighty, before we move into Greek conditioning, I want to feel the anger. It doesn’t matter what your personality is, when you are competing, you have to maintain a level, thinking head and at the same time channel fury. You want power behind your muscles, and fury, mixed with concentration, is the way to obtain it.”

She turned to Mystic and her face transitioned into obvious doubt. “Are you going to be able to channel fury?”

Mystic shrugged, not looking too convinced. “Sure.”

“Just think of what really pisses you off, and use *that*,” Bruiser slammed her right fist into her other hand, “to put power behind your punch.”

I turned to Mystic, doubting anything ever pissed him off. “Well?”

His jaw clenched. “My foster father.”

His foster father? Hmmm . . . I wondered at the type of man who could get this reaction out of peaceful, in-touch-with-the-world Mystic. His foster father must have been a real jerk.

Bruiser pointed her finger at Mystic. “You’re really irritated. I can see it on your face. That’s good. And sometimes that’s not so good. Depending on your opponent, it’ll work to your advantage to either show that fury or mask it.” She walked straight up to him. “Hit me with your fist.”

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Jaw still clenched, Mystic shook his head.

She got right in his face. "I'm not doing this again with you. When I tell you to do something, you do it. We have a little over a week to train for this fight. So enough already. Think of your foster father and hit me."

Mystic reared back and slammed his fist into Bruiser's gut.

I sucked in a breath.

Mystic sucked in a breath.

And Bruiser smiled. "Not bad."

Not bad? I'd be bent over moaning from that. Mystic wasn't exactly a small dude.

He reached for her. "I'm sorry. Oh my God, Bruiser, I'm so sorry."

She smiled even bigger. "Felt good, didn't it?"

Mystic frowned. "No."

Bruiser wagged her finger in his face. "Liar. You know that felt good. Come on, admit it."

Mystic just looked at her.

"Come on," she egged him on, "admit it."

He shrugged. "Okay, a little."

She jabbed her finger in the air. "Ah-hah! It would've felt superb if it would have been your foster father, huh?"

Mystic reluctantly nodded, clearly not liking this violent side of her. He reached for her again. "Seriously, you okay?"

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She waved him off. “Didn’t even feel it. Okay,” she turned to all of us. “Originally, I wanted to do some striking and MMA work first, but I’ve changed my mind. Let’s do a little Greek style conditioning.” Bruiser pointed to me. “You *sure* you want to do this?”

I nodded. “Experiencing the training and the world of a fighter first hand will give me a ‘one up’ on those designers who will be presenting to Harry Noor. And afterward I’ll take statistics on everybody. Using Chapling’s Influence Sway Skins, I’ll trace pulse velocity, strapping adroitness, fortitude, faction, lactic acerbic dissolve, and a few others. I’ll amalgamate that with my Combat Thrash Program and come up with at least three variations to arrangements that will outrival a unit feat.”

Everyone just looked at me.

I sighed. “Never mind. Just trust I know what I’m doing.” Where was Chapling when I needed someone to understand me?

Bruiser pointed to the barn doors. “Let’s take it outside.”

Everyone filed out as I grabbed the video cam, tripod, and my laptop. I followed the group outside and behind the barn.

Bruiser had turned the side yard into an old fashioned training ground. There were a pile of mid-sized boulders off to the left. Between two trees about six feet from each other she’d tied thick rope—two strands up high and two down low. I studied the get up as I set the cam back up, trying to figure out exactly what those ropes would be used for.

Bruiser beckoned Red over with a nod of her head. “Flexibility is a key factor in conditioning your body for a fight. I expect you two,” she pointed to David and Mystic, “to do what I’m about to show you ten times a day.”

Mystic and David nodded their understanding.

Fight To The Finish

Bruiser positioned herself between the trees and held her arms up and out to her sides. Red tied her right wrist to a rope high up on one tree and her left wrist to the other tree, leaving her upper body sprawled and stretched.

He took her left ankle next, lifting it, pulling it, and tying it to the left tree. With the tiptoes of her right foot only, she stood supported.

“Ready?” Red asked her.

She nodded.

Grasping her right ankle, he took it out from under her and stretched it over to the other tree, tying that leg off as well.

Sprawled to the max, her legs stretched and strained sideways to form a perfect split. I cringed as my own legs ached just watching her.

Bruiser smiled. “This, my friends, is awesome for flexibility. And obviously it takes a partner to tie you up. David and Mystic, you two are competing. Like I said, this is most certainly an exercise I want you to do every day. You’ll start off with five minutes and build your time from there. I, personally, love to hang for thirty or more minutes.”

Thirty or more minutes? Ug. That hurt just thinking about it.

“And no worries,” she continued. “The rope won’t take you any further than you’re ready for.”

With that, she nodded to Red. He adjusted the rope around the tree, and her body dropped, hyper extending her stretch by pulling her legs straight up to form a V.

Ow! That couldn’t be good for her body.

Bruiser nodded to Red again, and he loosened her ties one-by-one, letting her body drop back into a standing position.

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Once free, she waved David and Mystic over. “David, you’re first.”

He stepped up between the trees, and she tied off his wrists first, showing Mystic how the ropes worked. She did David’s legs next, first his left, and then his right, leaving him stretched, dangling between the two trees, shaking, cringing, and sweating more and more by the second.

I almost closed my eyes. I couldn’t stand to watch him. He seemed like he was in so much pain. And he wasn’t even doing a split. In fact, he was fairly far away from accomplishing the split portion of the training.

“You’re doing great,” I felt compelled to tell him.

He barely nodded.

“Three minutes,” Bruiser informed him, adjusting the ropes so that he dropped slightly more into the split position.

Closing his eyes, he breathed deeply, working through the pain. It was a physical and mental strategy that TL had taught all of us.

Inhale through the nose.

Exhale through the mouth.

Inhale through the nose.

Exhale through the mouth.

Three minutes passed, and Bruiser showed Mystic how to release the ropes, softly dropping David back into a standing position. He stood for a few seconds, shaking his legs and arms, probably trying to get sensation back into them.

Mystic went next, doing phenomenally well. I didn’t know why it surprised me, really. I’d seen him in all sorts of contortion, meditative positions. I guess it always took me off guard because of the size of his ‘football’ like body, very thick and stout.

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He did his five minutes amazingly fast, definitely accomplishing a split, but not the hyperextension.

After he'd been loosened and lowered to the ground, Bruiser turned to the rest of us. "This is a fighter's stretch, and something I'd like you all to experience at least once. But it's certainly not something you need to do every day." She looked at me. "Who's first?"

I took a step back. What was she looking at me for?

"You said," she reminded me, "that you wanted to experience all aspects of training to be a fighter."

I narrowed my eyes. She just *had* to remind me of that, didn't she?

Bruiser raised her brows, a little too sweetly if you asked me. "Well?"

"Fine." I put my laptop down and walked over to the tree-torture area.

Bruiser and Red tied my wrists. Mystic did my left ankle, and I stood supported only by my other foot. I looked down at David who had his fingers wrapped around my right ankle.

"You ready?" he asked.

I nodded.

Gently, David slid my foot from under me, and I dropped into a forced split. *Ow!*

I clenched my jaw and sucked in a breath through my teeth. *Ow!*

"Breathe," TL instructed.

I sucked in another breath.

Oh my God! How had David and Mystic done this?

"Are you ready to be lowered into a split?" Bruiser asked.

"*What?!*" Wasn't I already in a split? "No! Don't touch me."

Bruiser chuckled. "GiGi, really. You're hardly even stretched."

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“*What?! You’ve got to be kidding me.*” I felt like I was about to crack in half. “Let me down.”

Brusier glanced at TL, and he shook his head.

Fighting the urge to glare at him, I squeezed my eyes shut and tried not to focus on my screaming, shaking muscles.

“It’s just a few minutes,” David quietly spoke. “You can do this. Breathe and think of code.”

I listened to his mellow, deep voice and inhaled a breath. On exhale, I conjured code for the Combat-Thrash program:

```
<!Phrase % element “Em” (&#x0009;)>
```

```
<!Entity (%styfon;~%phse;)- -(&#x000C;)(%line:)>
```

```
<( %line:)-(&#x2000B;)>
```

I continued to code, my eyes closed, inhaling and exhaling in a subconscious deep rhythm. I went over every axiom, matching it to its component, and uniting it with all the rudiments. And, strange enough, I solved a fissure in the data that had perplexed me.

“That’s five minutes,” Bruiser announced, bringing me from my concentration. “You didn’t even flinch when I lowered you a few more inches.”

I looked down my body and saw that I was suspended in the air mere inches away from doing a complete split. “Wow.”

Mystic and David went through the motions of letting me free, and much like David, I had to stand for a second and shake out the kinks.

TL went next, doing, of course, fabulously well.

Red stepped up, doing just as great as Bruiser.

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And Jonathan followed, not doing as good as I thought he would have.

We moved onto bench pressing each other next.

“Its all about balance and strength,” Bruiser explained. “In an actual fight, you’re manipulating a person’s body weight. Lifting a person is completely different than lifting weights. Bench pressing each other is a guaranteed way to accelerate your strength training.”

She paired Mystic with Jonathan, TL with Red, and me with David.

“What about you?” I asked.

Bruiser shrugged. “I’m too little. It won’t be a challenge to anybody.”

I wasn’t sure what she meant by that until she gave instructions, David was lying on his back, and I found myself on top of him.

With our faces definitely within kissing distance, I gave him a little smile. “Hey.”

“Hey.” He smiled back.

We locked our fingers palm to palm, he pushed me straight up, and I found myself above him looking down into his too sexy face.

“Give me a set of twelve,” Bruiser instructed.

In my peripheral, I saw TL and Jonathan in the same position as David, bench pressing their partners up. All of us on top were lowered down by our partners, paused for a second, and then they pushed us back up.

I tried really hard to ignore David’s scrumptious cologne. And bicep bulges. And chest striations. And every other straining, flexed muscle as he pushed me up and lowered me back down. Pushed me up. And lowered me back down.

I just kept smiling. I mean, really, how great was this?

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If I'd been a self-conscious girl, I would've been offended by his red, exerted face. But let's face it, at five foot ten I wasn't exactly the smallest girl ever created.

The set of twelve ended, and we switched positions with me on bottom and him on top. We linked hands palm to palm, Bruiser gave the go ahead, and I pushed with all my might.

Nothing happened.

I pushed again, every muscle shaking, my arms literally vibrating from the effort.

Still nothing happened.

"Stop holding your breath," David said.

"I." Quick breath. "Can't" Quick breath. "Lift you."

"And down," Bruiser told everyone, and through the sides of my eyes I watched as Mystic lowered Jonathan and Red lowered TL.

One of them grunted, and it pleased me beyond words that someone else was having difficulties, too.

Up and down we went, or I should say they all went, going through the motions of the exercise. I just sort of pushed with all my might, held my breath, and waited for Bruiser to say 'down'.

We finished that and moved onto throwing rocks, or I should say heaving small boulders.

We finished that and ran each other piggy backed across the yard.

We finished that and military pressed wood beams over our heads.

We finished that and did umpteen rounds of squats holding the same small boulders.

We finished that right as the sun was going down and I literally dropped to my shaking knees. I couldn't tell you how happy I was to see everyone else gasping for air, too. Why I ever

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thought I needed to be involved with the actual training stretched beyond my comprehension. Frankly, I never wanted to see Bruiser again in my life.

Not really, but you know what I mean.

“And that, my friends,” Bruiser proclaimed, “is a mere smidgen of the way Greek warriors trained before going into battle. Now we need a good high protein, high fiber meal, and then we’ll meet back here for striking and take down.”

News flash. I had no intention of participating in tonight’s ‘striking and take down’. I needed a nap.

“GiGi?” Bruiser prompted. “Didn’t you want to take data or something?”

I got up—*ow*—and hobbled over to my laptop case—*ow*. I got out the Influence Sway Skins, powered up my laptop, and turned to everyone. “If you could please take your shirts off, I want to get a reading on your muscle adroitness and compare it to data Chapling already took on you.” I looked at all of them. “Who’s first?”

David took his shirt off. “I am.”

Fight To The Finish

CHAPTER EIGHT

I stared at David's bare, sweaty, muscular, tanned chest.

I stared.

And I stared some more.

I only slightly registered everyone else taking off their shirts, and Bruiser tucking her tank top in the elastic of her shorts, leaving her standing in a black sports bra.

I think I must have forgotten how scrumptious David's body was. How I could have forgotten, I had no idea. This body of his was most definitely *not* one a person should or could forget.

"GiGi?" David said.

I blinked—*oh!*—and snapped to attention. "Sorry." Idiot. I was *such* an idiot. "Okay." I held up the Influence Sway Skins. "I'm going to attach these square pads to various spots on each of your bodies and take muscular recordings. I'll compare the results to the base line reading Chapling took of each of you. The range of the data will help us put the finishing touches on the Combat Thrash Program. I'll organize the program's code to recognize David and Mystic's output, tweak it, and identify them as superior fighters, resulting in Harry Noor picking them for Demise Chain."

I ran my gaze over the whole group. "Got it?"

They all nodded.

I brought the Combat Thrash Program up on my laptop. It took a second for the program to boot and detect the wireless skins. It beeped, signaling me it was ready for muscular readings.

Here went nothing.

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I walked across the grass to David and stopped right in front of him. Up close and personal with his bare chest was almost more than I could handle. Purposefully focusing all my attention on the Influence Sway Skins, I peeled the protective, hygienic back off of each square pad and began placing them at key points on David's body.

His stomach. His chest. His biceps and triceps. His thighs. His hamstrings. And ended with his calves.

I walked back over to my laptop, *click, click, clicked*, and it began recording his body. I watched my screen as the Influence Sway Skins x-rayed through his epidermis and brought up a 3-D image of his muscular skeletal. I smiled as I watched electrical pulses run up and down his body, recording his inner workings.

A box popped up in the bottom left corner comparing the current recordings to his base line data. Another box popped up in the upper right hand corner showing a video image of David doing the Greek style conditioning. Another box popped up in the upper left hand corner displaying a 3-D image of what David was capable of in a fictitious fight. I, of course, would tweak that part to make David and Mystic stand out above all the others. And the only thing missing was the hologram image, which I knew would be our slam dunk in securing this job.

I finished with David and used new pads each time I did the others: Mystic, Bruiser, TL, and then Red. I'd get a baseline reading on Red later to round out the data. I'd lie and tell Harry Noor I'd traveled around the world to obtain data on the best fighters. It'd give me a one up on the other programmers.

And it wasn't a total lie. Red and Bruiser *were* some of the world's best fighters. I just hadn't traveled for the information. It'd been conveniently right here at my disposal.

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Plus Chapling had been working hard hacking into the computers of the most renowned competitors, obtaining their medical records, training schedules, eating diaries . . . anything to give more validity to our program and make us stand out above the other designers.

We were definitely going to kick butt.

* * *

The next afternoon I strode toward the barn with some last minute questions for Bruiser. Chapling and I had a mere three days left until we went in front of Harry Noor. Mystic and David had only five.

I pulled the barn door open and stepped inside. Sounds of classic rock surrounded me, and I stood for a second letting my eyes adjust to the dim interior.

I realized then that someone had covered the windows with dark cloth, and candles flickered in the corner on a table. Bruiser and Mystic sat across from each other having . . . a romantic lunch?

What the . . . ?

“Um,” I took a step back. “Sorry. Sorry to interrupt.”

Bruiser glanced up, looking so put out that I almost laughed.

I looked between them. “What are you two doing?” This definitely wasn’t right. Mystic and Bruiser didn’t like each other *that* way.

Bruiser rolled her eyes. “Wasting valuable training time playing boyfriend and girlfriend.”

I laughed. “You’re doing what?”

Mystic swatted at a fly. “TL said if we were going to be boyfriend and girlfriend on the mission, then we had to have a few lovey dovey moments.”

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I laughed again. “Oh, this is too good.”

Bruiser scowled.

Mystic picked up a piece of paper from the table. “Okay, it says we have to make polite conversation while eating a meal.”

I nodded to the paper. “What is that? And who set up all this candlelight and fancy stuff?”

Mystic swatted at the fly again. “This is a list of things TL wants us to do on this quote-unquote date. And the candlelight stuff was here when we got here.” He swatted the fly again.

Bruiser leaned forward and snatched the fly from mid air. “Would you leave the poor thing alone?”

Mystic and I exchanged a surprised glance.

“TL’s list of things.” Bruiser snorted as she walked over to the window and let the fly go. “Who’s going to know anyway? I say we tell TL we did it and move on with our lives.”

“I’ll know,” Adam announced as he stepped into the barn carrying a tray.

Bruiser turned from the window. “What are you doing here?”

“TL sent me.” Adam held up the tray. “I’m your waiter.”

“Our *what?*” Bruiser almost shouted.

Oh, yeah, this was too good. Bruiser’s crush, Adam, serving her and Mystic while they played lovey-dovey. This—I sat down on the floor—I had to watch.

Mystic looked at me. “What are you doing?”

I smiled. “Watching.”

Bruiser scowled again. “Is that allowed?”

We all looked at Adam, and he shrugged. “Sure, why not.”

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I batted my lashes at Bruiser, and she narrowed her eyes.

Hey, it was the least I deserved after all the stuff she'd seen me be put through. Model training, cheerleading prep, endless horrible PT's . . .

All in waiter role, Adam crossed the floor. He put the tray down on a smaller, linen covered table that sat off to the side. Then he pulled Bruiser's chair out. "Madam."

She plopped down in it, and ignoring Adam's help, scooted her own self up.

Adam took Bruiser's folded napkin from the table, snapped it open, and laid it across her lap. He did Mystic's next. "According to that list," Adam began all proper, "you are to have polite conversation. You are to eat a meal together. You are to hold hands. You are to exchange one kiss. You are," he glanced between them, "going to act like you adore each other. And I will determine when that goal is met." He looked at Bruiser. "And *you* are to act girly and sweet and innocent." Adam smiled. "Got it?"

Mystic nodded, and Bruiser scowled again.

"You look like Beaker," I told her, and she stuck her tongue out at me.

I laughed. Bruiser was a tomboy through and through, a girl that would rather punch out her problems than talk through them. This 'date' had to be mild torture for her.

Adam pointed to a blue disc clipped to his shirt. "I'll press this," he pressed it and a buzzer went off, "when you're not doing things correctly."

Straightening his back, Adam walked over to the tray and picked up a carafe of what looked like apple juice. He took each of their wine glasses and filled them up. "Polite conversation," he reminded them.

"What lovely," Mystic started, "green eyes you have, my dear Bruiser."

She scoffed.

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Buzz.

“Your hair,” Mystic tried again, “glows vibrant in the light.”

She rolled her eyes.

Buzz.

Adam put plates down in front of each of them. “We’ll stay here all day,” he sweetly reminded Bruiser, “if need be.”

Bruiser looked down at her plate. “Peanut butter and jelly?”

Adam waved his hand through the air. “We pull out all the stops here at restaurant de Adam.”

Using his fork and knife, Mystic cut a chunk of his sandwich, very much in proper role. “What beautiful weather we’re having today.”

Bruiser grabbed her sandwich and took a purposefully huge bite.

Buzz.

I put my hand over my mouth. This was too funny.

Mystic took a sip of his apple juice. “Did you sleep well last night, my sweets?”

Bruiser just looked at him.

Buzz.

Mystic delicately wiped the sides of his mouth. “I heard you downloaded some new music. Tell me about it.”

Bruiser glanced at her watch, shoved back from her chair, and tossed her wadded napkin on top of her sandwich.

Buzz.

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She planted a sweet, dimpled smile on her face, and both guys watched in suspicious curiosity.

I watched, too. What was she up to?

Gently, very ladylike, she pushed her chair in. She took her wadded napkin, folded it nice and neat, and placed it beside her plate. “Silly napkin. I’m not sure how it got so wadded.”

I chuckled silently. I knew Bruiser, and I think I knew what she was up to.

Batting her lashes, holding her innocent grin, she rounded the table to where Mystic sat. She ran her fingers through his short, sandy blonde hair. “I’m so fortunate you’re in my life.” Cupping his cheek, she tilted his face up to hers. “You are the best boyfriend in the whole world, and I’m so silly to have ignored your pleasant conversation.”

She placed a kiss to his forehead. “Thank you for telling me I have lovely green eyes and vibrant red hair.” She traced her finger down his nose. “Yes, it is beautiful weather we’re having today.” She pressed a feathery kiss on his cheek. “And, my *sweets*, I slept very well last night. Thank you for asking.”

Trailing her hand down his arm, she linked fingers with him and brought his hand to her lips. She put a soft kiss on each knuckle. “You’re right. I did download some music. Just some nature sounds to meditate by.”

Bruiser meditate? Not likely.

“So let’s see,” Bruiser delicately traced her finger over the top of his hand, “the list said polite conversation. Check. Act girly and sweet. Check. Hold hands. Check. And exchange one kiss.” She let go of his hand, gently cupped his face, and placed a tender kiss to his lips.

“Check.”

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“And you,” she turned to Adam, closing the small distance between them. “You should expand your menu at restaurant de Adam.” She traced her finger down his chest, poked his belly, and then pressed the blue button.

Buzz.

Bruiser spun on her heel, strutted straight past me, across the barn, and out the door. I watched her go, her small hips swaying in exaggeration, and then turned back to the guys.

Neither one of them had moved from their spots, Mystic sitting and Adam standing, staring at the path Bruiser had just taken.

I studied Adam’s face and got the distinct impression he’d just seen Bruiser in a new light. A definitely feminine, attractive light.

I pushed myself up, remembering why I came here to begin with, and told the guys, “See ya later.” I needed to track Bruiser down for a few quick questions.

I left the barn, saw Bruiser in the distance stepping inside the house, and took off after her.

I heard a rustling noise to my left and whipped around. I searched the pool and the yard beyond all the way to the tree line and the fence that bordered our property. It might have been my imagination, but I thought I saw a shadow move. “Who’s out there?” I yelled, feeling a bit silly, wishing instead I would have yelled, *is it you, sister?*

Mystic stepped from the barn. “Did you say something?”

I shook my head. “No. I keep feeling like someone’s watching me. Weird, huh?”

“Nah, it’s not weird. It’s called the theory of shadow scrutiny. It’s your psyche, body, and spirit all speaking with your outer organization.”

“Huh?”

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Mystic arched his arm through the air. “Basically, if you feel someone’s watching you, then someone probably is.”

I glanced around. “My sister?”

He shrugged. “Couldn’t tell you.”

“Can’t you use your psychic ability to figure it out?”

Mystic laughed. “It doesn’t work that way, GiGi.”

With a sigh, I turned and started back across the yard. Mystic fell into step beside me, and seconds later we entered the house.

A giggle had me glancing right into the rec room where Beaker and Randy sat playing cards. Wait a minute, Beaker and Randy?

She giggled. He laughed. And I narrowed my eyes. *What* was going on?

Smiling, they both glanced up at me and Mystic.

“Hey,” Beaker greeted us.

“Hey,” we both responded.

Randy held his cards up. “Uno. Anyone up for a game?”

We both shook our heads, and Randy and Beaker went back to playing.

Mystic and I continued on down the hall, past the cafeteria, rounded the corner and saw Bruiser standing with her ear to TL’s door.

“What are you doing?” I whispered.

She put her finger to her lips and shook her head.

I heard it then, TL and Nalani arguing behind his door.

“You told me,” Nalani said, “when I got pregnant that we’d leave this life.”

“Keep your voice down,” TL responded.

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“You told me,” Nalani repeated, her voice cracking.

“Neither one of us,” TL pointed out, “expected you to get pregnant.”

“And what exactly does that mean? God, Thomas, we both know you only married me because of Zandra.”

“I was trying to do the right thing,” TL defended himself.

“Why?” Nalani asked. “Why did you even bother marrying me?”

Because I love you, I hoped TL would say.

“Why?” Nalani repeated.

He paused. “Because I wasn’t about to bring a bastard child into this world.”

Nalani scoffed. “What, like you were? Get over it, Thomas. So you had a crappy childhood. Every one of these kids here did. *I* did. That’s how we met. Or have you forgotten that?”

“Keep. Your. Voice. Down,” TL gritted.

“I don’t want to keep my voice down,” Nalani fired back. “I’m *tired* of ‘keeping my voice down.’ I’m *tired* of hiding. I’m *tired* of slinking around trying to keep things secret. I want a real life now. I want to live with my husband and my daughter.”

“We decided together,” TL came back, “that your mother should raise Zandra.”

“And that’s a decision I’ve regretted nearly every day of Zandra’s life.”

“Oh, yeah?” TL’s voice finally pitched loud. “How many enemies do you have? How many enemies do I have? We chose this life early on and with that comes consequences. We couldn’t chance Zandra’s life, your life, my life. Do you think I like keeping it hidden that you’re my wife and that I have a daughter? I have to. I can’t chance that someone will take their anger for me out on you.”

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Silence.

“Do you realize,” Nalani softly replied, “that’s the first semi-loving thing you’ve said to me in a long while.”

More silence.

Go to her, I willed TL. Hug her. Tell her you love her.

“I wasn’t the one who left,” TL finally responded, his voice back low.

Nalani sucked in a breath. “How dare you. How dare you bring that up. You know why I left. I *had* to.”

“You didn’t *have* to do anything. I would have helped you. Between the two of us, we had the connections needed.”

Me and Mystic and Bruiser all exchanged a curious glance. What were they talking about?

“It’s your fault,” TL spoke, every syllable riddled with emotion. “Your fault our daughter’s gone. And I’ll never forgive you.”

I put my hand over my mouth. Oh my God. How horrible. They loved each other. They did. I’d seen them together on missions. I’d witnessed the love. This awful thing that had happened to them was making them nasty to one another. Couldn’t they see that? They should be united over this, not driven apart.

“My fault?” Nalani’s voice broke, and my heart hurt for her, for him, for them both. “You son of a bitch,” she cried. “How dare you blame this on me?”

“Zandra was in *your* care,” TL shouted, “when she was taken.”

“I know!” Nalani yelled back. “Don’t you think that’s killing me?”

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Her footsteps echoed across the room, and we realized too late she was heading toward the door. She wrenched it open with tears streaking her face and caught sight of all of us.

Immediately, I felt guilty for having intruded.

Firming her jaw, Nalani walked right past us, down the hall, and out the front door.

Me, Mystic, and Bruiser exchanged a pained look before turning to TL.

He stood with his back to us, staring at the wall. “Get me David,” he quietly spoke.

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CHAPTER NINE

The next afternoon Chapling and I walked into the conference room for our last meeting before leaving for Harry Noor. We would trial our program today.

Around the table sat everyone involved with the mission. TL, Nalani, David, Jonathan, Mystic, Bruiser, and Red.

Chapling and I took seats to TL's left.

TL closed the door and remained standing. "I am too close to this mission emotionally to run it successfully and efficiently. I've had an in depth discussion with David and have decided effective immediately that he is in charge. However, I'm still going on this mission. As previously outlined, I will be playing the role of trainer. I'll also be acting as mission advisor to David, but all decisions will come from him, not me."

Whoa. I was totally not expecting that. I looked across the table at David's focused expression and thought what a stressful mission to be in charge of. I mean, my God, we're talking about TL's daughter here.

With a nod to David, TL sat, and David stood. "Okay, team, I am going to outline the mission and then give the floor to Chapling and GiGi." David began walking around the table, placing green folders in front of each of us.

I opened my folder to see a giant picture of Zandra right on top. I began leafing through the other papers—standard things we should know for the trip. Information on location, parties involved, aliases, mission details, equipment list, etcetera . . .

David set the last folder in front of Bruiser. "First, let's briefly recap things. Last Monday, TL and Nalani's seven-year-old daughter, Zandra, was taken from her maternal

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grandmother's home. We still have no idea what they want. TL and Nalani both have many enemies. So the kidnapper could be anybody.”

“Myself, Mystic, and TL traveled to the abduction site,” David continued. “It was there that Mystic saw images of the Demise Chain fight club. Unfortunately, he saw no images of Zandra, but he knows without a doubt that he needs to be involved in the Demise Chain if he is going to find Zandra.” David looked at Mystic, and he nodded his agreement.

“TL and I immediately dove into researching the Demise Chain,” David went on. “Between Red's input and our own research, we've discovered a few things. First, it's a closed club. You have to be invited in. Harry Noor is the owner of the club and the owner of a handful of fighters labeled Warriors. Recently, he put the word out that he's looking for some new Warriors. He also put the word out he's looking for a computer specialist to design a program that will identify top notch fighters that can be his Warriors.”

“Obviously, the better his Warriors are, the more money Demise Chain makes.” David glanced at me and Chapling. “Additionally, this computer specialist will be able to advise his Warriors during a fight what to do differently, all based on technological physics. And that sets the ground work for the mission. GiGi and Chapling will be leaving tomorrow to interview with Harry Noor, show him their new program, and get hired on. Two days after that, Harry and his new computer specialist will be meeting and testing prospective fighters.”

David nodded to Mystic. “Mystic and I will show up with our personal trainers, Jonathan and TL. GiGi and Chapling will have their program rigged to identify Mystic and I as top notch fighters. Harry Noor will bring us in as Warriors, and we will officially become Demise Chain competitors.”

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David turned his attention to Nalani and Bruiser. “Now for the ladies. There are no women fighters allowed. And the only way ladies are allowed in the audience is if they are on the arm of an invited guest. However, fighters are allowed to have wives and girlfriends at their sides. Bruiser will be traveling as Mystic’s girlfriend, but clearly, her role is our fighting consultant. All of us will be wearing hidden communicative devices. Mystic and I will be counting on her to coach us through our actual fights, along with the input from the Combat Thrash Program.”

“Nalani has already secured a job within Demise Chain as the hostess. She will be our one inside person, serving as back up, on guard for anything that might happen. Because of their personal connection to this mission, Nalani and TL are the only two who will be in disguise.” David rolled his chair out and took a seat. “Once Mystic starts interacting with the fighters, he’ll know what our next move is, who has Zandra, and where she is. Obviously, we’ll regroup and go from there.”

“The format of Demise Chain,” David continued, “is that fighters go up against each other, the winners move on to the next round, and so forth. By the end of the night there is a grand winner who is awarded the purse. Currently there are six Warriors. They all fight each other as well as the visiting competitors. Harry Noor could care less who wins, just as long as it is one of his Warriors.”

“Red is going to be here at home base ready to give input as needed.” David opened his folder. “Now for aliases. Jonathan will be Trainer Jones. TL, Trainer Tim. Nalani, hostess Nan. Bruiser, girlfriend Bee-bee. I’ll be Warrior Daniel. Mystic, Warrior Michael. Chapling, computer specialist Charlie. And GiGi, computer specialist Gertrude.”

Gertrude? I nearly rolled my eyes. What a horrible name.

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David looked around the room. “Before I turn things over to our computer team, are there any questions?”

Chapling raised a pudgy finger. “Um . . . what if something goes wrong? I mean, there’re not a lot of definitive details here. Who’s to say GiGi and I are going to sufficiently wow Harry Noor with our brilliance? I mean, well, of course we’re brilliant, but do you all not see this whole mission hinges on us?”

“And,” he continued rattling, “if we don’t secure that job, the whole thing is down the drain. What do we do then? Huh? Huh? Okay, and if we do, by some act of God, get the job, our program might have a glitch in it and not identify Mystic and David as top notch fighters.”

Chapling glanced at me. “Not to say our program will have a glitch.”

“It won’t,” I assured him.

“Oh!” He threw his hands up, completely ignoring my reassurance. “And once Mystic gets his next image, what are we all going to do? Just walk out of there? And what about our trainers, TL and Jonathan? What if Harry Noor doesn’t allow them?”

“And—”

“Chapling,” I interrupted, “everything’s going to be okay.” Sheesh, he reminded me of me. This was what I must look like in one of my frantic states. “I know the mission isn’t cemented and certain things hinge on other things, but that’s just the way it goes. You can’t know for sure what’s going to happen every second. You just sort of roll with it and have the confidence it’ll succeed.”

“But . . .” Chapling’s voice trailed off, and then a few seconds later he blew out a shaky breath and nodded. “Okay. Okayokay.” He gave everybody a guilty shrug. “It’s my first mission.”

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“You’ll be fine,” TL spoke.

I reached over and rubbed Chapling’s back. “You’ll be fine,” I whispered.

“Plus, Chap, we’ll have several more briefings. One when you get done meeting with Harry Noor, another one after Warriors tryouts, another one when Mystic sees what he needs to see. There’ll be plenty of communication throughout the different stages of this mission.” David closed his folder. “At this time I’d like to turn things over to our computer team.”

Chapling and I both pushed back from the table and made our way over to the wall inserted flat screen.

“Daisy,” Chapling addressed our ranch’s main computer. “Show time.”

GREETINGS, she typed in big bold letters across the center of the wall screen.

I turned to our team. “Tomorrow we’re meeting with Harry Noor. Some of the world’s best program designers will be there, too. The competition will be tough.”

“But,” Chapling interrupted. “Smart girl here hacked into all their computers and knows what fighting program they’ve all designed.”

I smiled. “We’ve, basically, taken the key components of their program and coded it into one I’ve affectionately deemed the Combat Thrash Program. Okay.” I stepped to the side of the screen. “Without further ado, I’d like to introduce the Combat Thrash Program. Daisy, do your thing.”

Daisy cranked on the speakers, and out poured hard rock. On the screen, shooting in as if someone was throwing a ball of video, were flashes of actual fights timed to the music thumping the room. Clip after clip ending with one man hitting another, and his blood spraying out to transform into animated 3-D.

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Then the screen divided into a dozen small boxes, each displaying two animated men fighting. The screen flashed, much like a camera does, x-raying through the animated men to show their muscular skeletal.

The music trailed away as the animation continued, and Chapling and I turned to our team.

“We’d like to ask Mystic to come up,” I said, nodding to him.

“Daisy,” Chapling prompted, “may I have the Influence Sway Skins?”

A tray slid out from below the wall mounted screen, and on the tray sat a slim, rectangular box.

Chapling took the box and opened it. “These are one-of-a-kind devices, made exclusively for this mission. They will provide us with an image of Mystic’s muscular make up, record and measure his strapping intensity and breadth, and in layman’s terms give us a thumbs up or down if he’d be a good fighter.”

I nodded. “Clearly, Mystic simply standing here while we measure him doesn’t give us an indication of his reasoning skills. Which is why we’ll also be recording his cognitive thought processes as he engages in a two minute mock fight with Bruiser.”

“Mystic,” Chapling addressed him, “if you could take off your shirt and roll up your jeans.”

While he did that, I waved Bruiser up. “When Mystic and David actually go in front of Harry Noor, they’ll be expected to engage in the same sort of mock fight with one of the Warriors. This will give Harry a visual of them actually in action and us the data we need to inform Harry Noor if Mystic and David are good fighters. Which, of course, the answer will be yes.”

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I watched as Chapling placed wireless Skins all over Mystic's body. "Nice color," I complimented him. He'd changed the Skins from white to skin color.

"Thanks." When Chapling finished, he stepped back. "Daisy, record adroitness aptitude now." And then he nodded for Mystic and Bruiser to begin.

In the corner of the conference room Bruiser and Mystic threw some phony punches, kicks, and elbow strikes, each taking turns with offensive moves and defense blocking. At the two minute mark Chapling stopped them.

A large 3-D image of Mystic's muscular structure appeared on the screen. "This," I pointed to the screen, "is Mystic's image. Daisy," I commanded our computer, "show us excellence."

Patches of translucent yellow slowly filled his image, from his toes all the way up to his brain.

"The yellow represents a match between excellence and Mystic's body composition, including his brain patterns." I turned to the screen. "Daisy, give percentage."

99.9 PERCENT.

I smiled. "As you can see, Mystic matches the best fighters in the world at a ninety-nine point nine percent."

"Which," Chapling put in, "is a fib."

"A fib," I agreed, "that will get Mystic a slot as a Warrior."

Chapling clapped. "Okay, now for the best part."

I turned to our team. "Like we said, everything we've showed you thus far is basically a combination of what all the other program designers will be doing. But we've got something they don't."

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“Daisy,” Chapling spoke, “finale please.”

A life size hologram of Mystic appeared on top of the center of the conference table.

Every one of my team members simultaneously pushed away, their eyes wide in amazement.

Another image popped up of a *huge* man. “This is—”

“Utotiz.” Bruiser interrupted. “He holds the world title in MMA.”

“Based on the data we just took of Mystic, and all known information on Utotiz, we’re going to see these guys in action. Daisy,” I told the computer, “fight.”

Both holograms moved at once, coming toward each other.

Utotiz jabbed his knuckle between Mystic’s nose and mouth.

Mystic unleashed an upward kick at Utotiz’s head.

Utotiz feinted a kick, then rammed his heel into Mystic’s shin.

Mystic executed a double punch to Utotiz’s chest.

Utotiz grabbed Mystic’s arm and wrenched it behind his back. He took the waist band of his jeans, lifted Mystic high above his head, and threw him to the ground.

Blood went flying through the air, and I took that as my cue to stop the hologram.

Mystic swallowed. “Was that my blood?”

Chapling cringed. “Utotiz *does* hold the world title.”

“Obviously, when we get in front of Harry Noor,” I addressed the team, “Mystic and David’s hologram will succeed in submitting whomever they have a hologram fight with.”

David put his finger in the air. “Now what about the other portion of this? Actually advising the Warriors during a fight.”

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I nodded. “Well, of course our program has thousands and thousands of combat data. Very simply, we’ll be recording the fights as they occur and advising the Warriors on what to do when. Watch.” I turned to the wall inserted screen.

“Daisy, phase two of Combat Thrash Program,” I requested.

Two fighters appeared on the screen.

“This is a film taken from an underground fight club in Russia,” I told my team. “These fighters are approximately two minutes into a fight.”

While the fighters continued grappling, a smaller screen split off and to the left, turning the men into an animated image.

I pointed to the man with red hair. “Any coach can tell that man what to do differently, but we can tell him *exactly*. Notice the dark haired man has the red haired man in a shoulder lock. Any coach would tell red hair to front roll out of it as an escape, but based on both men’s physiological make up, in this instance red hair should front roll out to the right at a thirty degree angle.”

“Daisy,” Chapling commanded, “show thirty degree escape versus normal.”

Another animated box moved off and to the right. The one on the right showed the normal response with red hair front rolling and dark hair twisting his wrist to keep him in place.

The animated box on the left showed the revised response with red hair front rolling at a thirty degree angle, successfully escaping the shoulder lock, and gaining top ground.

“Wow,” Bruiser exclaimed. “That is too cool.”

Chapling and I shared a smile. Getting kudos from Bruiser was the slam dunk.

Around the room everyone gave their approval and congratulations, and Chapling and I exchanged a pleased look.

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“Obviously,” I pointed out, “when Mystic and David are fighting, Chapling and I will be there with our program to advise them what to do and what not to do. Our advice combined with Bruiser’s will give them the knowledge needed to succeed.” I looked around the room.

“Questions?”

Everyone shook their heads

David nodded. “It goes without saying, you two have done a superb job.” He stood.

“You’ll fly out at 0900. Dismissed.”

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CHAPTER TEN

At 0900 the next morning, Chapling and I boarded our plane to Washington State.

And he was not okay.

Chapling swallowed. “Gi-GiGi?”

“It’s Gertrude,” I reminded him in a whisper.

“G-Gertrude?”

“Yeah, Charlie?”

“I-I think I’m going to be sick.”

I yanked my attention up from the magazine I held. “*What?* No.” I waved my finger at him. “You’re not going to be sick.”

He swallowed again. “I’m not?”

I shook my head. “No.” *God*, no. Because if he got sick, then I would sure get sick.

“What are you nervous about? You’ve flown before. *I’m* the one who hates flying.” Or at least I used to.

Actually, *hate* flying would have been the operative word. I loathed it. Dreaded it. Wanted to hurl every time I thought of it. And, in fact, had passed out the first time I found out I would be getting on a plane.

My parents died in a plane crash, so it didn’t take a genius to figure out my phobia.

But since joining the Specialists I had flown eight times, and this flight marked my ninth one. I was getting to be a bit of an expert at this flying thing. It wasn’t so bad anymore. Or, at least, that’s what I had convinced myself of.

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My cell buzzed, and I looked at the display. David's usual preflight message to me.
BREATHE.

Chapling's cell buzzed, and he looked at his display. BREATHE, C, BREATHE.
Smiling, Chapling held it up for me to see. "David."

I held mine up. "Me, too."

And then we both sat there for a second, grinning like goofs.

Chapling tucked his cell away and a few seconds later he began fidgeting again.

"What's wrong now?"

"It's not the flying. It's the," he looked around before leaning in, "the mission. It's my first, and I'm really," he waved his hands, "nervous."

I gave him what I hoped was a comforting smile, and recalled how TL always talked to me when I felt uneasy—in a sort of talking-me-off-the-ledge way.

I put my magazine aside. "I know its nerve racking. *Believe me*, I know. Not only the travel and the assignment, but the fact this whole thing hinges on us. *And we're on our own*. There is no TL for guidance."

Chapling leveled with me a 'look'. "You call that helping?"

I laughed. "Sorry. Serious, though. Think of everybody back at home base. They've got our backs. If anything goes wrong, we simply contact them, and the Army rolls in. Not really, but you know what I mean. TL has more resources than the President, it seems. He won't let anything happen to us. I couldn't think of a better person to have on my side. Well, except maybe genius, Adara Hamalitz."

Chapling's eyes widened. "Oh, no kidding. Wouldn't that be cool? Man, I've got a whole list of people I'd love to break bread with, and Adara Hamalitz definitely makes my top three."

Fight To The Finish

“Break bread with?”

“Lunch. Have lunch.” Chapling snapped his fingers. “You know the first thing I’d ask him?”

I shook my head.

“To explain that experiment he did back in 1899 with movement of molecules.”

My jaw dropped. “I’ve always wondered about that to.”

And so the conversation went, discussing the great minds of the world, both past and present. Their theories, their experiments, their discoveries. We were so into the conversation we never even realized the plane took off, flew through choppy skies, and landed two hours and fifty-three minutes later.

We exited the airport and took a taxi to Harry Noor’s mansion in Tea Cup, Washington. Because this would be a day trip, we brought only our laptops. Roughly forty-five minutes later we pulled into one side of the town and right out the other.

Seriously, we did. It was that small.

I counted a few one story homes, a grocery, a post office, a hardware store, oh, and a lingerie parlor, strange enough.

No red light. Not even a stop sign.

Okay, small would be the operative word.

I did spot a sign that said Harry Noor, Mayor.

The taxi drove down a dirt road lined by huge trees.

“Those are Douglas Firs,” Chapling informed me.

I looked over at him. “I didn’t know you knew about trees.”

He shrugged. “I’m from Washington.”

Fight To The Finish

“Really?” I’d been working with Chapling over a year and hadn’t even known that small, personal part about him. Frankly, there was a lot we didn’t know about each other. “How long did you live in Washington?”

“’til I got married and moved away.”

“You’ve been married?!” Oh my God. I would have never guessed.

He nodded. “Yeah, but me and Sophia, we were so young.”

“Was Sophia your childhood sweetheart?”

“Nah. She was doing a photo shoot in my home town. That’s how I met her.”

I raised my brows. “Photo shoot?”

“Yeah, Sophia Packard? You ever heard of her?”

My jaw dropped. “Sophia Packard? *The* Sophia Packard? As in the cover model?”

Chapling nodded and glanced out the window. “Oh good.” He clapped his hands. “Looks like we’re here.”

The Sophia Packard. Holy cow. I laughed. “We *really* need to have lunch sometime and just talk.”

Smiling, he nodded. “That sounds great.”

The taxi pulled up in front of a mansion, or palace I would think better described it. It sat so out of place in little Tea Cup, Washington that it was purely laughable.

Sprawling a good half acre and towering at three extended height stories, the stone structure probably could have housed the entire population of little Tea Cup *and* the surrounding towns. Why one man needed this monstrosity stretched beyond my comprehension.

As the taxi pulled through the gates, the driver let out a whistle. “What does this person do for a living?”

Fight To The Finish

“Investments,” Chapling and I answered in unison.

And actually, according to our records, that was exactly what Harry Noor filed on his taxes every year. Investment Broker. I supposed there wasn't a category labeled Underground Fight Club Owner and General Abuse of Mankind.

The taxi pulled to a stop and an *enormous* tattooed man opened the door.

Chapling got out first, dropping his head back to look up at the man. “You're big. Reallyreally big. How big are you?”

“Six five,” he answered in an unusually high pitched voice.

Chapling must have thought it, too, because he shot me a humored look.

I paid the driver and slid out next. I was a tall girl, and this guy was huge. But next to Chapling, he looked like a giant.

Chapling held his arms out to his sides. “You're wide, too. You probably shop at one of those big and tall places, don't you? Or is it big and wide?”

I elbowed Chapling to the side. “Ignore him. He doesn't get out much.”

Huge-tattoo man laughed, and it took me off guard. First, because he had all his teeth (for some reason I thought he wouldn't), and second, because I hadn't expected him to laugh. I'd expected a serious, stern nod, or a blank look at least.

I mean, weren't guards supposed to be perpetually angry?

But then, who's to say he was a guard. He could be a visiting relative. The lawn man. The pool man. The—

I gave my head a little shake. I was getting *way* off track.

I held out my hand. “I'm Gertrude and this is Charlie. We're here for the program design demonstration.”

Fight To The Finish

Huge, tattooed man nodded. “I figured with the laptops and all.” He turned toward the mansion-slash-palace. “Follow me.”

Up the stone entryway we went on steps so wide Chapling had to take two foot steps for every one stone step. Huge-tattoo man opened a wooden front door, and we stepped in behind him right into a narrow hallway.

For some reason I had imagined large open spaces, but as we walked down the long narrow hallway, small rooms opened off the right and the left. Cramped rooms, but incredibly tidy, like no one had ever stepped foot in them: bedrooms, living rooms, kitchens, bathrooms. It was the oddest design I think I’d ever seen. Surely, the small rooms connected somehow to make bigger suites.

And, weird enough, the rooms sat empty. Not that I’d expected anyone, but with such a large house it sure seemed like there should be someone.

We continued on down the eternally long hallway and finally came to another wooden door, much like the front door to this mansion. Huge-tattoo man opened it to reveal a stairwell.

He stepped to the side. “Take those stairs down and you’ll find everybody.”

I smiled at him. “Thanks.”

He grinned back. “You’re very welcome.”

His response made me chuckle. This man just didn’t seem like the type to grin and laugh and be polite.

The door closed behind us, and we descended the steps.

“Nice guy,” Chapling commented, and I nodded.

Fifty two steps later (not kidding, there were a lot, and yes, I really did count), we came to another wooden door.

Fight To The Finish

“Going to be a chore going back up those,” Chapling mumbled as he turned the door’s knob.

It swung open, and we found ourselves in a room I estimated to be about half the size of a football field.

Chapling stepped in. “Good grief this is big.” He looked around. “And dirty.”

I nodded as I stood, taking everything in. The entire place looked like it was in dire need of a good scrubbing. Dingy concrete spanned the entire floor with suspicious stains all over. A non-caged octagon that looked about twenty years old occupied the center of the room with rows of metal chairs surrounding it. Equipment, like Bruiser had back at the ranch, but in much poorer quality, sprawled the back left corner.

“You’d think with all his money,” Chapling mumbled, “he’d clean this place up.”

“You’d think,” I agreed. Honestly, I was afraid to touch anything.

Off to the side was an arched open doorway with PRIVATE posted above it.

Chapling motioned to the back right corner, and I saw Harry Noor there with the other computer programmers. “Looks like we might be the last to have arrived.” Blowing out a nervous breath, Chapling nodded. “Here goes nothing.”

As we made our way around the octagon toward the group, I glanced around, taking everything in. Surely there had to be another way in or out of this place besides those stairs we’d just come down.

We approached the group, and I counted seven program designers plus Mr. Harry Noor.

“I’m giving each of you,” he was saying, “fifteen minutes. No more, no less. At the end of everyone’s presentations, I will immediately make my decision.” He looked straight at me and Chapling. “You’re late.”

Fight To The Finish

I smiled. “I’m sorry, our—”

Harry Noor flicked his hand through the air. “I don’t care. I hate explanations.”

O-kay. For such a sweet-looking-little-old grandpa, he was sure rude.

Off to my left, one of the computer nerds snorted his immature amusement. What was this, competitive elementary school?

Harry Noor looked me up and down first, then Chapling, and then came back to me.

“You don’t look like a program designer.”

I glanced behind him at the myriad of stereotypical geeks, and then with a shrug said, “You’d be surprised what’s in this brain of mine.”

He barked an overly loud laugh, and everyone jumped a little.

Well, at least I’d amused the guy.

Harry Noor motioned for me and Chapling to sit with the others on the floor. “We’ll start with the first to arrive and end with blonde-brainy and her little friend.”

Chapling and I exchanged a glance. We were the last to go—exactly what we had hoped for. We’d sit back, watch all the others, and then make last second adjustments if need be.

Geek #1 went first. Tall, skinny, bald, glasses. He nervously stuttered his way through his presentation, and five quick minutes later, took a bow.

Chapling looked at me. *A bow?* he mouthed, and I held back a smile.

Harry Noor shook his head. “You can go.”

As if he’d been expecting the dismissal, Geek #1 hurriedly mumbled his thank you, packed up his stuff, and scurried off.

I wanted to tell him he’d done an okay job, the poor, insecure, nervous guy. But I figured I’d better just keep my mouth shut.

Fight To The Finish

Geek #2 went next. Medium height, heavy, long hair, glasses. A little nervous, too, his presentation lasted ten minutes. A presentation I'd grade about a C. Okay, maybe C+

When he was done, Harry Noor flicked his hand through the air. "You can go."

"B-but—"

Harry narrowed his eyes. "Go."

Geek #3 went next. Short, scrawny, shaggy hair, glasses. He took the full fifteen minutes, doing, in my opinion, a bang up job.

But, of course, we knew what kind of job he would do, as well as all the others. I *had* hacked into their computers after all. I knew more about them than they probably did. I even knew their eye glass prescriptions.

Harry Noor motioned for Geek #3 to sit back down. "Stay for now."

Chapling and I exchanged a slightly worried glance.

Geek #4 and 5 did their thing, and Harry Noor sent them home.

Geek #6 stayed—the one who had snorted when we first came in. The dweeb.

Geek #7 went home.

And then it was our turn. We stood, and knowing we only had fifteen minutes, we plunged right in.

"We've traveled all around the world," I fibbed, "obtaining data for our Combat Thrash Program."

"She came up with that name," Chapling happily supplied, and Harry merely looked at him.

Clearing his throat, Chapling gave me a boy-isn't-he-a-fun-one? look to which I launched right back into weaving my excellent introductory tale to Mr. Harry Noor.

Fight To The Finish

Chapling busied himself setting up the laptops, and when he was ready, he gave me the signal.

We did everything exactly as we had in the conference room yesterday. Using Daisy (that for security purposes we temporarily renamed Darlene), we commanded our laptops to begin the music, video, and animated introduction.

When it finished I asked Geek #6 (the snorter), “Would you mind coming up?”

Geek #6 shook his head. “No thank you.”

“Do it,” Harry Noor commanded, and I couldn’t help but smirk.

We stripped him down to his boney chest and attached the Influence Sway Skins. A 3-D image of his muscular skeletal appeared.

“We’ll measure strapping intensity and cognitive thought processes,” I told Harry Noor, “as he engages in a two minute mock fight with me.”

“*What?*” Geek #6 squeaked.

With a nod, Harry sat forward in his chair.

Geek #6 and I began our mock fight. Or more like I threw punches and kicks and he yelped and dodged. When we finished, I commanded, “Darlene, percentage of match to excellence, please.”

0.25 PERCENT.

Chapling and I both laughed, we couldn’t help ourselves.

Geek #6 tore the Skins off and threw them to the ground. “Not funny.”

I turned to Harry Noor. “As you can see, he clearly is not suited for fighting.”

Harry smiled. “Clearly.”

Fight To The Finish

“During the creation of the Combat Thrash Program,” I explained to Harry Noor, “my data was entered into the system. We’ll use that for the finale.”

Chapling and I exchanged an excited look.

He pointed his laptop toward the octagon in the center of the room. “Darlene, finale please.”

A hologram of me and Geek #6 appeared in the octagon. We approached each other, or rather I approached him, and basically beat him into the ground while he scrambled his weenie little self out of the way. I had to admit, I looked pretty darn good up there.

The hologram fight ended. I turned to Geek #6 and batted my lashes. He sneered back.

Chapling glanced at his watch. “Sorry, we went over our fifteen minutes.”

Harry Noor waved him on. “No problem. Finish up.”

That had to be a good sign.

Quickly, we explained the rest of the program pertaining to the advisement of fighters during an actual competition. Using the same footage from Russia that we’d used yesterday in the conference room, we showed the dark haired man fighting the red haired one. We illustrated the shoulder lock and demonstrated the success of rolling out at a thirty degree angle versus normal.

When we finished I powered down and turned to Harry Noor. “It’s all based on a person’s unique geometrics and the intermolecular attraction of all elements involved.” I smiled. “And that concludes our demonstration.”

Harry didn’t say anything. The two remaining geeks didn’t say anything. I didn’t say anything. Chapling didn’t say anything. Everyone just sort of looked at each other.

More quiet seconds went by and still nobody said anything.

Fight To The Finish

Finally, Chapling bowed.

And I held back a smile. Leave it to Chapling. I looked down at him, and he gave me an I-thought-maybe-that's-what-I-was-supposed-to-do shrug.

Harry turned to the Geek #3 and #6. "You can go." He turned to me and Chapling. "Congratulations. You're hired."

Fight To The Finish

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.

Fight To The Finish

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.

Fight To The Finish

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.

Fight To The Finish

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.

Fight To The Finish

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.

Fight To The Finish

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*.

Fight To The Finish

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."

Fight To The Finish

Mystic and the fighter slowly turned away from each other, giving that whole I'm-meener-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.

Fight To The Finish

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.

Fight To The Finish

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.

Fight To The Finish

“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.”

Fight To The Finish

CHAPTER TWELVE

With the fights being tomorrow night, we checked into a hotel. After we dropped our things, we met in TL and David's room. Bruiser and Nalani had already checked into the hotel and were sitting on one of the beds waiting. I noticed TL seemed even more tense than usual.

With a slight smile to everybody, Chapling and I busied ourselves setting up our laptops with a LCD projector that turned our screens into a large image for everyone. Right as we finished, Mystic and Jonathan came in.

"The kidnappers have made contact," TL announced as soon as everyone was seated. "Not more than ten minutes ago."

No one said a word.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Nalani whispered.

With a pained look, TL shook his head and handed Chapling his phone. "It's on there. Project it up for everybody."

Chapling connected TL's phone to our laptop, and few seconds later an image flickered into view up on the wall. I stared at the long brown object, trying to figure out what it was and then realized . . . "Oh my God."

A long, curly lock of Zandra's hair had been placed around a note different than the others. SHE MIGHT ALREADY BE DEAD.

"Nooo," Nalani moaned, putting her hands over her face.

TL sat down beside her and pulled her into his arms. I watched as they clung to each other, neither one looking at the image on the wall. I was so relieved to finally see them pull together, to comfort each other, instead of pushing the other away.

Fight To The Finish

David motioned for Chapling to cut the picture. “Get a trace on that,” he said, and Chapling got down to work.

“Okay,” David said, nodding to me. “Bring up the club’s layout.”

I clicked a few keys, and a diagram of the fight club popped up, complete with the octagon and all.

“All this is new.” Using a laser pointer, David circled the locker room area. “As you can see from the dozens of small rooms, the fighters are kept completely separate until they actually walk onto the octagon. To reiterate, it is imperative for Mystic to make it to the end. That is the only way he will be able to interact with as many fighters as possible and see what he needs to see regarding Zandra.”

David highlighted two stairwells before drawing our attention to the one Chapling and I had used. “This one is where the patrons enter and exit.” He highlighted the other one. “This entrance is located inside the locker room area and is used by the fighters and their trainers. From the outside of the mansion, this would be a side entrance.”

I glanced over to Nalani and TL to see them still hugging, yet giving David their undivided attention.

“And this is used by Harry Noor.” David put an X over an elevator. “It drops him in a private room in the locker area. All three entrances are highly guarded. Once Mystic knows where we’re going next, TL will make contact with officials on the outside. They will be ready to raid and bring Demise Chain down.”

“Mystic,” David went on, “had an opportunity to interact with a couple different fighters. Unfortunately, he did not secure the next clue to Zandra’s whereabouts.”

Fight To The Finish

David continued speaking, debriefing Nalani and Bruiser on the events of the day, how the tryouts went, and other miscellaneous things.

When he was finished, I raised my hand. “Harry gave us a list of all the fighters that will be there tomorrow night. We uploaded the list and have been compiling data.” I clicked a few keys. “Let’s see competitors and stats.”

Numerous video boxes popped up on the screen, showing individual footage of tomorrow’s competitors including the visiting fighters and the Warriors. A list of their stats appeared beside each video box: height, weight, reach, age. And in the middle of them all towered Utotiz.

“We’ll be merging this information with our Combat Thrash Program,” I told the group. “We’ll have a best guess of what that fighter is going to do before he does it.”

“Great.” David glanced around the room. “Questions?”

Everyone shook their heads.

David turned to Chapling. “Anything yet?”

Staring at the screen, Chapling shook his head. “Whoever the kidnappers are, they’ve got computer knowledge. I can’t trace the origin of the picture. It’s set to relay through hundreds of internet protocol addresses. By the time I trace it to one, its programmed to echo to another.”

I let out a frustrated breath and heard someone do the same.

“Okay,” David redirected us a few seconds later. “Lets review this fighting footage. These are the people we’re going up against tomorrow. We need to be as familiar with them as possible.” With that, David nodded to me to bring up the first fighter.

* * *

Fight To The Finish

The next afternoon Chapling and I arrived back at Harry Noor's mansion. To my surprise the huge, high-pitched guy met us as our taxi pulled in.

Supported by crutches with his ankle in a cast, he opened the door for us. "Welcome."

"How are you?" I asked as I climbed out.

Smiling, he nodded. "I'll survive."

I couldn't imagine him doing anything mean to anybody. I couldn't imagine him as a 'bad guy'. But then I'd encountered quite a few 'nice' people since joining the Specialists that had turned out to be bad.

Minutes later, we entered the fight club area. And throughout the next few hours a couple of workers showed up. One guy began sweeping the dingy floor and another walked around the octagon, squirting stains, unsuccessfully wiping them up. A third guy busied himself setting up more metal chairs. I found myself wondering, and more than curious, how this whole night would play out.

And what if Mystic never did secure our next clue?

My God, what then?

At some point Harry emerged from the locker room area and came straight to me and Chapling. "Here," he said, handing us small boxes.

Chapling and I opened them.

"An earpiece?" Chapling asked.

"To communicate with the Warriors during their fights," Harry responded.

Chapling looked at the earpiece. "But . . . that's illegal. That's cheating."

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Harry didn't respond to that, and instead inched closer. "Why do you think I hired you, you idiot? I want you telling my fighters what to do and what not to do. That Combat Thrash Program better come through for me tonight. There's ten million dollars at stake."

He inched closer, purposefully intimidating Chapling. "Let's put it this way. You make me happy. I make you happy. I profit. You profit. Got it?"

Chapling swallowed. "Got it."

Harry turned his glare on me.

I put my earpiece in. "Got it."

Jerk. I wanted to tell him these bulky devices were *so* last year.

"I've already met with the Warriors," Harry informed us, "and they know to listen to whatever you tell them."

He'd met with the Warriors? That meant David was here. And Mystic, and the rest of my team. Just that thought made my insides do a little happy dance.

Harry tapped his ear. "I'll be listening, too." He pointed across the club where a table had been set up with cameras and other computers. "I want you over there. No one is to know what you're doing. If they ask, you're filming the fights." With that, he walked away.

Chapling looked up at me. "I don't like him," he whispered.

"Me neither," I whispered back.

Across the club, the door we'd come through opened, and a woman stepped through.

Wearing fish net stockings, a tight mini jean skirt, and revealing silver tank top, the blond haired woman sashayed through the door. She had a snake tattooed on her right arm and a motorcycle on her left. In red high heels and matching nail polish and lipstick, she swung her kinky hair out of the way.

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White trash popped into my mind first as she popped her gum and looked around the place.

“Oh, she looks too great,” Chapling commented.

“Who? *Her?*” He needed his eyes checked. This woman definitely did not look great. Cheap, sure, but great? Not so much.

“Her and TL both did a great job with their disguises.”

“*That’s* Nalani?”

Chapling looked up at me. “You didn’t know?”

I shook my head and glanced back across the club to where she stood. Oh my God, she *definitely* was unrecognizable.

Harry caught sight of Nalnai then and waved her over. They’d met, of course, when she’d been hired on as the hostess. With her rough-around-the-edges look, she fit right in with this underground, seedy place. She was the perfect woman to greet people later on when they showed up.

Chomping her gum, Nalani strolled across the club straight toward Harry Noor. From my distance I couldn’t hear what they were saying, but they exchanged handshakes.

A few more words and Harry disappeared back into the locker room area. Probably to threaten and verbally bash his fighters.

Nalani spun on her heel toward us and crossed the distance between us. Completely in role, she held her hand out to us. “I hear you guys are the computer nerds.” She pumped each of our hands. “I’m Nan, the new hostess.”

Blowing a bubble, she rubbed her ear lobe between her thumb and forefinger indicating it was time for us to activate everyone’s earpieces for communication. Each of us already wore the

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transceivers, which were tiny moles on the inside of our ears. Dr. Gretchen had implanted them yesterday before we left the ranch to board our planes.

Through wireless connection, they communicated with a microphone embedded in our back molars. And as a back up, a microphone had also been injected into the lymphoid tissue between the mouth and the pharynx (Dr. Gretchen's terminology).

At the last second, Dr. Gretchen had advised two transceivers and two microphones because of the nature of the mission. With fighting, there was no telling what would get knocked out or disabled.

Everyone had agreed. Hence a transceiver in both ears, and a microphone in a molar and a tonsil.

As Nalani headed away, Chapling squatted down in front of his laptop sitting on the floor and programmed our team to begin transmission. Looking over his shoulder, I saw that he also hacked into Harry's frequency, assuring his ear pieces would not cross with ours.

"Brilliant," I mumbled.

"Thanks, smartgirl." He did a few more clicks. "It looks like the Warriors are wearing receivers. They can listen, but they can't speak to each other. Harry's voice and our voices are the only ones they can hear." *Click, click, click.* "I'll create a toggle feature to mute our voices when we want to talk without Harry listening."

"Charlie, check," Chapling began routine assurance all technology was working.

"Gertrude, check," I parroted.

"Nan, check."

"Tim, check."

"Jones, check."

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“Bee Bee, check.”

“Michael, check.”

“Daniel, check,” David finished, and I couldn’t help but feel reassured at hearing his voice.

Chapling and I grabbed our things and headed over to the table Harry had designated us to be at.

Through my ear mole, I heard a door open.

“Michael,” Harry Noor grunted. “Do you have your earpiece in?”

“Yes I do,” Mystic answered.

“You will stay in this room until someone comes to get you. You will not leave until then. And let me remind you, you *will* listen to the advice my computer specialist gives you. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Mystic responded. “I understand.”

Then there was a pause, and I listened hard, trying to figure out what was going on.

“I watched you closely,” Harry finally continued, “in the tryouts. And I can say I’m duly impressed. Michael, I do believe you’re going to win me ten million dollars.”

Okay, that was good. Harry needed to be impressed with Mystic.

“I will,” Mystic confirmed.

“And you,” Harry spoke, “you are not to give Michael advice unless I tell you. After tonight, I doubt I’ll need any of the trainers. That Combat Thrash Program is going to take us to the top.”

TL didn’t verbally respond, but I imagined he was nodding or something.

“Now, who is this?” Harry asked all gentlemanly.

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“This is my girlfriend, my good luck charm, Bee Bee.”

“Hi,” Bruiser greeted Harry in that fake sweet voice she did so well. “It’s so very, very nice to meet you.”

“Likewise,” Harry returned the greeting. “Come with me, dear, and I’ll escort you out.”

I heard the door open and then close, signaling Harry had left Mystic’s room.

“That guy’s something else,” Mystic said.

“Hm.” TL agreed.

A few seconds later, Bruiser appeared from the PRIVATE archway. Wearing an innocent, flowery sundress, sandals, and her red hair in a long braid, she grinned up at Harry as he escorted her to a seat.

She looked all of her sixteen years, and definitely not any older. And yet Harry seemed entranced by her, hanging on her every word. Hypnotized, mesmerized, spellbound.

Then it occurred to me . . . *ick*. What a pervert, all in to a sixteen-year-old.

Harry touched the tip of her nose. “You sit right here. I’ll get you a virgin daiquiri,” he told her, almost as if he was relishing the fact she *was* so young and sweet and innocent.

“Gag,” Bruiser mumbled after Harry had walked off. “What a pedophile.”

More time went by and Harry escorted other fighters’ girlfriends and wives out. None of them looked as innocent as Bruiser, and none of them garnered the attention Bruiser received. Harry, literally, was waiting on her hand and foot.

A few minutes later someone turned on music, filling the club with hard rock.

More time ticked by and the room slowly filled up. Nalani greeted the men and their dates as they entered through the stairwell. I imagined the patrons probably enjoyed entering that way. It added to the underground, secretive, fight club aura.

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As I sat beside Chapling at our table, I surveyed the people milling about. They ranged in age from twenties to eighties. Strange enough, some of the men wore suits and others dressed as if they were going clubbing, yet others wore jeans. The women, too. Pants, skirts, dresses, high heels. Some wore their hair up, others loose and down. From what I could tell, all nationalities were represented, everyone from African American to Hispanic to Caucasian to Asian.

And everyone came across like they were on their best behavior. I didn't know what I had expected in an underground fight club, but manners weren't it.

Harry appeared some time later dressed in jeans with holes and a fashionable shirt. I glanced at my watch. 9:00 p.m. The fights would start promptly at 10:00 p.m.

Harry Noor had no date on his arm as he worked the crowd. He shook hands with the men, politely pecked the women on the cheek, laughed, and talked. Unfortunately, our Warriors mikes hadn't been activated, so I had no idea what he was saying.

He gave every appearance of the perfect gentleman. Just watching him, one would never guess he ran Demise Chain.

Through our mole earpieces, Nalani made sure she repeated back everyone's names. And when people weren't looking, she'd describe what was going on. I knew she was doing the narration for the benefit of our team back in the locker rooms.

9:45 p.m. Almost show time.

Harry and Nalani led certain patrons to reserved seating, and the rest remained standing around the octagon.

"Oh, hi, Mr. Noor," I heard Bruiser greet through our earpieces.

I leaned to the left to see through the crowd. Harry had come to stand behind her.

He put his hand on her shoulder. "Are you doing okay, my sweet dear?"

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With a big dimpled grin, she held up her half empty, daiquiri glass. “Just swell.”

I almost laughed.

Harry tapped her shoulder. “It’s about to get gruesome. Should you want to hide your eyes, you come find me.”

Bruiser batted her lashes. “kay.”

“She does that too well,” Chapling mumbled.

Harry climbed the few steps to the octagon. The hard rock music slowly muted in time with the club’s lights dimming.

Everyone quieted.

I glanced around the club and up the walls to the ceiling, curious where the sound and light technician was hidden.

“What are you looking for?” Chapling asked.

“The sound and light person.”

“Harry’s a techy guy. I’d say there isn’t one. I’d say it’s all controlled by a remote in his pocket.”

I looked up to see Harry’s hand in his pocket as he fiddled with something, and a spotlight gradually grew to illuminate him.

I glanced over at Chapling. “You’re too good.”

Smiling, he shrugged. “I try.”

“Welcome,” Harry greeted the crowd through a mike attached to his shirt. “Welcome to Demise Chain.”

A scurry of excited conversation floated across the crowd.

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“Many of you are return spectators, and others are first timers. No matter your seniority, everyone is treated the same at Demise Chain. As you know, there are no rules, there are no rounds. The fighters compete until one goes down.”

Someone in the crowd grunted a yell.

“You will see every competitor tonight. There will be time to place bets before each battle. And the last remaining fighter will go up against . . .” Harry paused, I was sure to build suspense. “Utotiz, the world MMA title holder.”

A whispered, eager bustle danced through the crowd.

“The winning purse is the biggest one we’ve had yet . . .” Harry paused again. “Ten. Million. Dollars.”

Someone sucked in a breath. And then someone else. Then the whole crowd erupted in buzzy chatter. I imagined all the high rollers cha-chinging money in their brains.

Harry Noor held his hands up to quiet the crowd. “Without further ado, I bring you a Warrior up against a visiting fighter from Yugoslavia.”

The crowd erupted in a roaring cheer as the spotlight turned to the PRIVATE archway.

The mike in my ear that Harry had given me crackled, signifying it had been turned on. Chapling rechecked our frequency, assuring the adjustments he’d made were still there.

I turned my attention to the archway, hoping beyond hopes it wouldn’t be David or Mystic first.

Fight To The Finish

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A tall, lanky competitor jogged through the archway. I recognized him from the footage we'd compiled as a visiting fighter from Yugoslavia. A short, pudgy man followed behind and I assumed he was the Yugoslavian's trainer.

In my peripheral vision, I saw Chapling's fingers race across the keyboard as he pulled up all information on the Yugoslavian fighter.

The spotlight followed the Yugoslavian as he jogged through the crowd, weaving his way to the octagon. He trotted up onto the octagon, and the spotlight left him to illuminate the archway again. One of the Warriors walked through. With a hard expression, and an even harder body, he strode with purpose through the crowd. Not once did he take his gaze off the Yugoslavian in the octagon.

People parted, slapping his back as he passed them. This Warrior must be a popular one.

He stepped up onto the octagon, the spotlight faded, and the entire fighting area became illuminated.

I looked from the Warrior's lethal expression over to the Yugoslavian. Although he hid it well, I definitely picked up on a hint of oh-my-God-this-guy's-huge.

In the middle of the octagon stood Harry Noor. He pointed to the Yugoslavian. "Patrons of Demise Chain, I'd like to introduce you to our Yugoslavian competitor."

The Yugoslavian raised his arms, but no one cheered.

I kind of felt bad for him.

Harry Noor pointed to the Warrior. "And one of our Warriors, fighter Sean."

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The crowd erupted in yells and screams, and Harry made his way off the octagon. The crowd continued yelling, and the club filled with hard rock music. The two fighters stood on opposite sides, glaring at each other. As soon as Harry gave the go ahead they would charge.

Chapling tugged my shirt, bringing my attention down to the computer screen. The Combat Thrash Program had picked up a medical file from last week on the Yugoslavian. He'd been to a surgeon regarding a bulging disc in C4 and C5. Quickly, I scanned the file before reviewing the program's suggestion. It recommended the Yugoslavian's neck as the target area to begin.

Chapling and I exchanged a look. I didn't want to tell the Warrior to go after the Yugoslavian's neck. He could permanently paralyze the guy.

"Why aren't you giving fighter Sean that information?" Harry said from behind us, and we jumped.

"B-b-because . . ." Chapling's voice nervously trailed off.

With an agitated sigh, Harry said into his earpiece. "Sean, go after the neck." And then he turned to us, and his whole face morphed into an evil that seemed rooted in his soul. "*Don't* screw me over. You will regret it if you do."

Quickly, we both nodded. "Yes, sir."

One more threatening look, and Harry walked off.

Chapling and I didn't say anything to each other, just turned our attention back to the octagon. I had this sick feeling deep in my gut that something bad was about to happen.

The hard rock music continued screaming while the fighters glared at each other. The build up made the crowd go wild. Exactly what Harry wanted, I was sure.

Then the music stopped. A loud horn went off. And the fighters charged.

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The Warrior grabbed the Yugoslavian's head on both sides, gave it a yanking twist, and the Yugoslavian fell limply to the ground.

I sucked in a breath. "Oh my God."

"D-d-did he just break his neck?" Chapling stuttered.

The crowd jumped to their feet, roaring, possessed by the graphic show they'd just seen.

"Good job," I heard Harry congratulate Warrior Sean.

Wide eyed, heart thundering, I stared at the Yugoslavian's lifeless body. And the realization struck me hard. That could have been David or Mystic.

Shaking my head, I turned to Chapling. *No*, I mouthed, aware of our earpieces. *David and Mystic can't do this.*

Someone grabbed my arm and turned me around, and I found myself staring into Nalani's calm, focused eyes. *Yes. They. Can.* She mouthed back.

"Report in," I heard David request.

Nalani turned her back to us and the crowd and calmly recounted everything that had just happened. While I listened to her speak in monotone, I searched for Bruiser through the still cheering crowd.

Completely in role, she stood by her chair clapping right along with everyone else. I drug my gaze off of her and over to the Yugoslavian who was being dragged away by two club workers. I looked back at Bruiser to find she had stopped clapping and was staring through the crowd right at me.

"Everything's going to be okay," she softly mumbled.

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Slowly, I nodded, although I didn't mean it. How *could* everything be okay? I'd just watched a man uselessly die, and it was highly probable I would see more. And Chapling and I were here to help that happen.

Glancing behind me, I noticed Nalani had walked off. I *click, click, clicked* on the laptop, disengaging our earpieces, and turned to Chapling.

"I'm not doing this," I told him. "I'm not giving advice that will lead to someone else dying. The Combat Thrash Program isn't about that. This mission isn't about that. This is about finding Zandra."

Chapling nodded, looking more serious than I could recall him ever looking. "We're in control back here. No one knows what our computers are churning out. We give whatever advice we want to give and leave it up to the fighters to battle it out. That's the way it should be anyway. Unless it's Mystic or David, of course. We'll give them whatever they need to survive this ridiculous show."

"And if Harry comes back here again?" I asked, already knowing what I would do.

"We'll have two versions of the program." Chapling *click, click, clicked*, creating another version. "The real one for us, and the fake one should Harry come back. There's no way he's going to be privy to the real data."

"And our team? We're making this decision without them."

Chapling continued clicking. "I've known TL a long time. This is what he would want. And I'm going to tell him right now." Chapling reengaged our earpieces, leaving Harry's frequency turned off.

Fight To The Finish

I listened as he told our team what he and I were going to do. He sounded more authoritative than he had since I'd known him, leaving no room for discussion or questions. He'd made up his mind and no one was going to tell him otherwise.

I was proud of Chapling.

"Affirmative," David agreed after Chapling had finished.

"Affirmative," TL backed him up.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

The hard rock music cranked up again, and we reengaged Harry's frequency. The Yugoslavian had been taken away, and the spotlight shown bright on the archway. I held my breath, hoping it would not be David or Mystic.

"I'm up," David said into our earpieces, and my heart paused a beat.

A guy the height and weight of David stepped through. I recognized him as a competitor from England and immediately brought up his data. He made very little show as he trotted up to the octagon.

The spotlight switched over to pick up David as he came through with his trainer, Jonathan, close behind. Shirtless and dressed only in kickboxing shorts, David jogged across the floor and up to the fighting area. His face looked hard and mean. Definitely a face *I* wouldn't want to see staring back at me at the start of a fight.

"This guy likes to stand up," I told David, repeating back what the Combat Thrash Program was giving me. "His ground skills are poor. So take him down quick. He's also never gotten out of a leg lock. If you can get him in that, you'll submit him. He always starts out with a kick. And he's never thrown the first offensive move. He's a defensive guy. He waits for you to come to him."

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“Turn it around on him,” Bruiser added. “Wait for him to go first. He’ll throw that kick. Take him down with that, and dislocate his hip.”

I looked at my computer screen, and sure enough, that was exactly what the Combat Thrash Program had recommended. But dislocate his hip? Was that really necessary? Yes, I reminded myself. This was a battle to the end. We had to get rid of as many fighters as possible. Dislocating a hip paled in comparison to death.

I repeated the things Bruiser had said for the benefit of Harry listening. He’d thrive on the dislocated hip thing.

The hard rock music faded away. Harry Noor did the introductions as both fighters lightly bounced from foot-to-foot. Harry left the octagon, the horn sounded, and neither fighter moved.

My gaze bounced between the two of them as they continued volleying from foot-to-foot, staring at each other across the octagon. The crowd yelled, cursed, wanted them to move, but neither one of them did anything.

Finally, the English fighter moved forward, slowly making his way across the matt to David. David continued bouncing, watching the guy approach. I looked at the guy’s face and picked up on a hint of hesitancy and confusion. Probably because no one had ever waited for him to do the approaching.

As expected he threw a kick. David grabbed his lower leg in mid air, leapt up, snaked both his legs around the English guy’s one, and fell straight back, bringing them both to the ground. With the English guy’s foot tucked under David’s armpit, he used his hands and legs to twist the English guy’s leg.

He squirmed and clenched his jaw, trying his hardest to wiggle out.

Fight To The Finish

I brought my concentration down to my laptop and read off what the Combat Thrash Program was recommending. “Yank his leg and twist back the other way, and you’ll dislocate his hip.”

David gave a hard yank, followed by an immediate jerk in the other direction, and the English guy let out a yell. David released him and boinged to his feet, completely unharmed from the match.

The crowd cheered, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Good job” Harry complimented into our earpieces.

Still in role, David threw his arms up in victory and then turned away from the injured man and jogged off the octagon. A couple of club workers helped the guy down and the hard rock music cranked up again.

Two more fighters came out, bloodied each other up, and one got knocked unconscious. The night continued with the same routine. Fighter after fighter. Hard rock music. Harry. Loud horn. For the competitors that were Warriors, Chapling and I gave them a cleaned up version of Combat Thrash Program strategy. Enough to allow them to win, but not enough to do real damage to other fighters.

In between it all, Nalani was giving up-to-date verbal reports for the benefit of our team members back in the locker room.

David didn’t make another appearance. And Mystic hadn’t come out yet. But with over twenty competitors, this night would definitely be a long one as fighters were dwindled down to the remaining two. There seemed to be no set schedule as Harry picked and chose who would fight who.

Fight To The Finish

Chapling and I continued updating the Combat Thrash Program as it collected information from all the fights going on. When it finally was time for Mystic or David, we'd have even more data to assist them with.

"I'm coming out," Mystic said into our earpieces.

I watched the archway, and into the spotlight stepped a Warrior. The same Warrior that Mystic had gone up against during tryouts. The one he'd made 'friends' with. In fact, this was the first time all night that two Warriors were fighting each other.

Chapling muted our mikes. "Not good. This guy knows Mystic's technique."

I nodded. "I know."

"I want Michael to win," Harry said into our earpieces. "I've turned off the other Warrior's communication. As of seconds ago, he'll hear nothing from us."

What a double crosser. "And I bet he didn't tell the other Warrior of his plans."

Chapling shook his head. "I can't stand this guy."

"Let's hope all the Warriors gang up on him afterwards."

Chapling turned our mikes back on while I studied the Combat Thrash Program. It pulled up medical records, past fights, preliminary strategies. This guy had a wife and five kids. Sheesh. What the heck was he doing involved in all this?

The money, I reminded myself. Bad pays good.

The spotlight illuminated Mystic as he stepped through the archway. Unlike the other fighters, his expression held peace, confidence, and a hint of secretiveness, like he knew something no one else did. Strange enough, his calm facade came across more menacing than the others.

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He seemed to float across the floor as he made his way to the octagon. I glanced beyond him to see his trainer, TL, following close behind. Mystic stopped right beside Bruiser and gave her a big boyfriend-girlfriend kiss to which Bruiser shyly smiled. I bet Harry just *loved* that one.

Mystic stepped up onto the octagon and both fighters stared at each other across the space. At this point the other Warrior had to know he'd been cut from communication. He had to know he was going to lose this fight. I felt bad for him, with the five kids and all. Plus, he'd sort of made friends with Mystic.

I would make this as painless as possible for the guy.

“Okay,” I began, studying my laptop screen. “Michael, do not use meridian points. This guy knows that strategy. He likes to grapple, so keep him up on his feet. He’s a weak kicker, strong puncher. He’s got a long reach. He’s also had more head injuries than any other fighter tonight.”

“Hence the cauliflower ears,” Bruiser added.

I continued, “The Combat Thrash Program says a right elbow strike to the left ear is your preliminary best bet. Knock him unconscious.”

“If you feel the strike from your shoulder all the way to your hip,” Bruiser put in, “you know you’ve got it. If not, you better follow through with another one.”

I glanced through the crowd to Bruiser who had her hands over her mouth, pretending worry, using it as a cover to continue speaking. “Start slow, fists up. Since you’ve used pressure points on him, he’s going to be focused on blocking you from touching his body. Confuse him with some easy punches. Allow him to get one in, make him feel like he’s winning. Then feint left, elbow strike like GiGi said, and be done with it.”

The hard rock music faded, Harry introduced them, and the horn sounded.

Fight To The Finish

Cautiously, fists up, they both moved toward each other. Mystic did exactly what Bruiser coached. He threw an easy combination: left jab, followed by a straight right, then a left hook. The Warrior expertly blocked with counterpunches. He landed one to Mystic's eye, breaking skin, causing a gush of blood.

"No big deal," Bruiser commented. "A little blood. Some Vaseline and tape and you'll be all good."

Then Mystic feinted left and landed a right elbow strike to the Warrior's left ear.

Muscles rippled down Mystic's side in a ricochet affect and I knew he'd landed a solid one. The Warrior stumbled back, right off the octagon, and landed on the front row. A woman squealed as she jumped to get out of the way and the Warrior passed out.

Mystic raised his arms in victory and the crowd cheered.

"I wish someone else would die," I heard a guy comment.

I wanted to punch his lights out.

With a bloody eye, Mystic left the octagon, and I breathed another sigh of relief.

The fights continued as more competitors got disqualified.

"It's almost to the end," Chapling commented, and I nodded my agreement.

I wondered when David or Mystic would come back out, and who they'd be up against next.

"I'm coming out," Mystic said into our earpieces.

"Me, too," David commented.

Chapling and I exchanged a glance. *They're going up against each other?*

Fight To The Finish

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“I’ve disengaged Daniel’s earpiece,” Harry said. “I want Michael to win.”

Good thing, seeing as how it was our mission to make sure Mystic won.

“Let’s make this look good,” David commented as he came through the archway.

I didn’t bother looking at the Combat Thrash Program. There really was no point. They both knew who had to win. But Chapling and I pretended to be doing our jobs in case Harry was watching.

Mystic came out next with a couple of butterfly bandages on his swollen eye. Strolling across the floor, he stopped here and there to shake hands with people and exchange slaps on the back—anything to give him a glance into their eyes.

“This is what I recommend,” Bruiser began. “Take no more than a minute. We don’t want to wear Mystic out. Give the audience a little show with some shadow moves, pulling the force before complete execution. David needs an injury, something to the face. And do a throw or two to make things look authentic.”

“And *don’t* tell each other what you’re going to do,” Bruiser warned. “Whether you’d mean to or not, you’ll react before you should and give yourselves away.”

Good advice.

“Oh, and break open Mystic’s cut again,” she commented on a side thought.

Now, that’s not very good advice.

Harry introduced David first, then Mystic. The hard rock music faded, the horn sounded, and both guys cautiously came toward each other. Slowly, they circled, fists up, sizing the other one. They threw a few sparring punches, like Bruiser had suggested.

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Then David grabbed both sides of Mystic's head and brought it down as he rammed his knee up.

Chapling and I both sucked in a breath.

"Nice," I heard Bruiser say.

Blood trickled down Mystic's face, and I realized David had broken Mystic's cut back open. Again, just like Bruiser had instructed.

Mystic swung his leg forward up between David's legs and swept to the left, knocking David to the ground. Before David had time to react, Mystic scrambled on top and pressed his forearm into David's throat.

With strained faces the two guys glared at each other as Mystic continued choking David. I watched David's face grow more and more red and thought maybe Mystic was doing a little *too* good of a job at the choking thing.

"O-kay," David wheezed.

"Sorry," Mystic mumbled.

Wedging his hands between their bodies, David dug his fingers into Mystic's sides and shoved him up, following with his knee. Mystic went flying over David's head and thunked onto his back.

Both guys quickly shot to their feet.

"Go ahead," David encouraged. "Make it look good."

Mystic came at David, throwing a series of punches to his face, succeeding at bloodying him up.

Cringing, I watched yuck gush from David's nose and hoped Mystic hadn't accidentally broken it.

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“Okay, let’s end this thing,” Bruiser instructed. “Harry liked when you did pressure points. Do David and reset him without Harry knowing. David, you stay down. Let the club workers drag you off.”

Mystic whipped behind David and poked his finger into his lower back, sending David crashing face first to the matt.

I gritted my teeth praying *that* didn’t do even more damage to poor David’s face.

The crowd roared in excitement, and I kept my gaze glued to David’s lifeless form. Mystic made a show of walking around David in victory, jabbing him with his bare toes. I knew he was resetting his meridian points. And in just a few minutes David would be back to normal.

Mystic jogged from the octagon, and the club workers climbed up for David. They drug his body across the floor and back through the PRIVATE archway.

I listened closely, waiting for David to speak, but heard only silence. What if something had gone wrong? What if Mystic had hit the incorrect pressure point? What if he hadn’t reset things properly?

Harry went through the motion of introducing more fighters. But I didn’t hear a single word as I ducked my head and pressed my mole ear piece, listening for signs of David.

Thank God for Chapling who expertly handled things because my focus was shot.

More minutes ticked by, and I couldn’t take it anymore. I muted our Harry communication and asked, “David?”

“He’s okay,” Jonathan reported in.

I breathed out and looked over at Chapling. “He’s okay.”

Chapling smiled. “I heard.”

The fight started and ended within thirty seconds with a knock out.

Fight To The Finish

“I’m good,” David finally notified all of us as the unconscious fighter was being dragged away.

“This is it,” Chapling told me. “Mystic versus Utotiz.”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Harry announced into his mike, “the fight you have been waiting for. If you haven’t placed your bets, now is the time. Ten. Million. Dollars. The biggest purse yet.”

I scanned the crowd to see men signaling the club workers. I assumed they were placing and taking bets.

Harry pointed at Mystic still standing on the fighting area. “You’ve seen Michael in action tonight. You know what he’s capable of. This is a fight to the finish. A fight to the death. Someone will not make it out alive.”

The crowd roared with a rush of primal adrenaline, and Chapling and I exchanged a glance.

Mystic will make it out alive, Chapling mouthed.

I gave one affirmative nod. Mystic would indeed make it out alive. Utotiz was going down.

Harry directed everyone’s attention to the archway. “And now let me introduce Utotiz, the world title holder in mixed martial arts.”

The spotlight illuminated the archway and out stepped Utotiz. Seven foot one. Three hundred and thirty one pounds. Like many of the other competitors, he had a bald head. Unlike the other ones, he had no tattoos. I knew from my research that he’d never lost a fight. He looked different from the last film footage I’d seen of him. He seemed heavier, like he’d put a layer of fat on over his muscular frame.

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With the hard rock music blaring, Utotiz slowly made his way to the fighting area. No one slapped his back or tried to shake his hand. In fact, they gave him quite the wide berth. Truth be known, I would've, too. This guy did not look like someone to be messed with.

A hard expression on his face, he stepped up onto the octagon, and I swore I saw it vibrate.

Mystic knew everything there was to know about Utotiz, but I repeated anyway, "Utotiz has no known method. He'll get you standing up. He'll get you down. He's skilled in all areas of MMA."

"Hence the reason why he's the title holder," Bruiser added.

"Combat Thrash Program," I continued, "is recommending he make the first move and then predictions will be made from there."

"I agree," Bruiser added. "If he starts out with a strike, he'll likely try to take you down. If he starts with a kick, he'll try to fool you by keeping you up. He's a python. He'll snake his way around you and squeeze the life out of you. Be careful. And with his adrenaline pumping, he may be immune to meridian point strategy."

The horn sounded and both guys cautiously approached. They got within six feet of each other, and Mystic suddenly stopped. Utotiz took another step closer, and Mystic just stood there. Another step for Utotiz, and Mystic simply stared into his eyes.

"Mystic?" Bruiser hesitantly spoke.

Another step for Utotiz, and Mystic's face glazed over.

"Michael," Harry hissed. "What is your problem?"

Utotiz took another step, and Mystic's arms fell to his sides.

I watched in horror—what was Mystic doing?—and suddenly I realized . . .

Fight To The Finish

I muted Harry's mikes. "He's got an image of Zandra," I told my team.

With an evil smirk now, Utotiz closed the miniscule gap between them. Mystic's eyes slowly lowered and I immediately recognized that expression. He was hearing something. His mother? Zandra?

Utotiz reared back and slammed his fist into Mystic's jaw, sending him spinning to the ground.

"Michael!" Harry yelled. "Get up!"

Mystic just laid there, completely in a trance.

The crowd screamed and yelled for Utotiz to finish him.

"Mystic!" I hollered.

"Mystic," TL encouraged, "get up."

"What's going on?" David asked from back in the locker room.

Utotiz slowly, cockily climbed on top of Mystic. In a dominating stance, Utotiz straddled Mystic's thighs, reared back again, and slammed his fist into Mystic's jaw. Blood went flying through the air.

The crowd cheered.

Utotiz slammed his other fist down. Mystic's head flew to the left.

The crowd grew louder.

"Son of a—" Harry growled.

Another fist from Utotiz, and Mystic's head flew back the other way.

Frantically, I searched through the crowd for TL and saw him shoving his way through the people trying to get to the octagon.

Again and again Utotiz brought his fists down, slowly pulverizing Mystic.

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“Someone do something!” I screamed.

In my peripheral vision I caught sight of Bruiser’s red braid as she slipped through the front row and leapt onto the octagon. She flew across the matt, caught air, and landed a spinning kick to Utotiz’s head.

He went sailing off Mystic and landed a few feet away.

The entire club quieted.

Letting out an inhumane grunt, Utotiz got to his feet and slowly turned to face Bruiser.

She stood in her sweet little sundress with her long red braid down her back. Surprise flicked across Utotiz’s face at the sight of her. Her expression held focus, concentration, and a hint of cockiness that she knew exactly what she was capable of.

Seeing their size difference made me think back to the first couple of days we’d lived on the ranch. She’d gone up against Jonathan in a brief sparring match and had effectively kicked his butt. It had reminded me of David and Goliath.

Same thing applied here. Utotiz outweighed her by more than two hundred pounds. And he stood over two feet taller.

I’d seen Bruiser in action. I knew what she was capable of. But I had my doubts. She’d never gone up against someone of this caliber.

She reached back, unzipped her sundress, and stepped out of it. Pulling her shoulders back, she stood in a blue sports bra and tight-fitting, blue, boy cut shorts. She kicked her sundress to the side, making it more than obvious she wanted a fight with Utotiz.

I’d seen her body many times, but her incredible lean definition always amazed me. Every muscle on her tiny body stood out visible.

Fight To The Finish

Someone in the crowd yelled, showing his approval. He wanted to see David and Goliath, too. Then someone else, and someone else, until the entire club filled with cheering.

I searched through the crowd for Harry and found him standing off to the side, closely studying them.

TL stepped onto the octagon and went over to Mystic. He leaned down and grabbed him up in a fireman's hold. As TL carried Mystic off, he passed Bruiser and gave her a nod of approval for her to go ahead and fight. TL wouldn't have done that if he wasn't completely sure of her capabilities.

My gaze followed them as they disappeared through the archway. A trail of blood dripped from Mystic's face and it sent a pang straight to my heart. I hoped Bruiser annihilated this guy.

"Do you want to see these two fight?!" Harry yelled into his mike.

The crowd cheered even louder.

The horn went off, and Bruiser shot across the mat. She dove between Utotiz's legs, hooking her feet on his ankles, and sent him face first into the floor. She whipped around, grabbed his right ankle, and snaked her body around his lower leg. With every muscle standing out in striation, she twisted his ankle.

If it weren't for the earpieces we wore, I wouldn't have heard the ligament pop because the crowd was cheering so loud.

Arching his back, Utotiz swung his left arm and knocked Bruiser off of him. She rolled across the floor and boinged to her feet, using her hand to wipe a spot of blood from her mouth.

Wasting no time, she rushed him right as he was getting to his feet. She flipped up, wrapped her ankles around his neck, and corkscrewed her body down the front of him and

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around the back. Digging her fingers into his hips, she twisted hers and his body in opposite directions until another pop echoed through our earpieces.

Chapling cringed. “His neck?”

I kept my attention glued to the fight. “I think so.”

Utotiz sucker punched her in the kidney, and she released him and rolled away. I got the impression it wasn’t the kidney punch that made her release—I’d seen her take a lot worse. She was simply ready to move onto another maneuver.

Utotiz moved, favoring his good ankle, trying to hold his neck in place. Although he hid it well, I definitely saw traces of pain trail across his face.

Bruiser ran toward him. Utotiz threw a punch. Bruiser dodged it, grabbed his wrist, and swung her body behind him, taking his arm with her. She wove her legs around his bad ankle, bracing herself behind him, and twisted his lower arm. Utotiz stumbled forward, his arm and leg locked by her little body, and tried to shake her off.

Through my earpiece she grunted with exertion, and I glanced down at my laptop screen. According to the Combat Thrash Program she was trying to dislocate his shoulder, using his bad ankle for leverage.

“Raise his arm up twenty degrees,” I read the program’s recommendation, “and twist again.”

She did exactly what I said, and another pop echoed through my earpiece.

Bruiser released him and took a few steps away. “Thanks, girl.”

I smiled.

Utotiz turned to face her. His nostrils flared, and I saw anger, frustration, embarrassment, and irritation cross his expression. Favoring his good leg with his dislocated arm hanging at his

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side, he stood fuming at her. Bruiser walked a slow, wide circle around him, sizing him up. He tried to follow with his neck and body, but ended up just standing there while she strolled around him.

She's dislocating all of his major joints, I realized as I stared at Utotiz's disjointed limbs. What a brilliant strategy.

The longer Bruiser stood there looking at him, the louder the crowd cheered.

Bruiser walked straight up to Utotiz, stopping a foot away. She stared up into his eyes with a somewhat pleasant, yet curious, you're-so-going-down expression.

Utotiz held her stare for a good solid minute. Then with a sneer, he cleared his throat and spit right in her face.

Bruiser reached up, wiped the spit from her cheek, and flicked it back at him.

Quicker than I'd seen him move so far, Utotiz brought his good arm back and punched her in the face, sending her spinning away through the air. Wasting not a second to recuperate, Bruiser spun right back, landing the heel of her right foot square with the knee of his good leg.

Letting out a deep growl, Utotiz fell to the mat. I looked down at my computer and zoomed in on the image of them. She'd completely knocked his kneecap loose, leaving it floating on the side of his leg.

I swallowed.

With an ankle gone on one leg, knee on the other, dislocated shoulder, and a popped neck, Utotiz laid on his back with only a good arm left.

Bruiser walked over to him and braced one foot on each side of his hips. She stood there, looking down at him, while he struggled to sit up. Slowly, she lowered herself until she straddled him, copying the dominating position he'd done to Mystic.

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Using his good arm, Utotiz latched onto her neck and squeezed.

With a clenched jaw she looked at him. “This is what you get for beating up one of my best friends.”

She flailed into him, punching his face right, left, right, left, right, left . . .

The crowd roared and screamed and yelled.

Right, left, right, left . . .

And Utotiz slowly lost consciousness.

Fight To The Finish

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The doors to the underground club flew open, and cops rushed in. “Freeze!” They yelled, pulling guns, chasing people who had began to run.

I looked up at the octagon to see Bruiser climbing off Utotiz. Our little dynamo had just defeated the world title holder in mixed martial arts.

“Team,” David spoke, “come back to the locker rooms.”

Nalani joined me and Chapling, and together we made our way around the club toward the PRIVATE archway. None of the cops bothered us, probably because they had our pictures and knew we were one of the good guys.

People screamed and ran, but really, how stupid was that? This was an underground club. There *was* no place to run.

Off to the side, a cop had Harry pinned against the wall as he searched him. That was the least he deserved. This night of Demise Chain events was probably the cleanest ever. Only one person had died.

We rallied back in the locker room area and from there exited to an awaiting van that Red drove. Mystic had regained consciousness, but his face was badly beaten. All of my team members had gotten their share of nicks and bruises from missions, but Mystic looked the worse. It hurt my heart to see his lumpy eyes, gashed cheeks, and split lip.

My poor, peaceful, non-violent Mystic.

I moved to sit beside him as the van bumped along, and I reached out and took his hand. He smiled through his swollen face to assure me all was okay.

Fight To The Finish

No one spoke as the van continued moving along. A while later we pulled off the main road and wound our way through a heavily wooded path. The van pushed through a blanket of dark greenery and came to a stop in front of a one story log cabin.

I peeked at my watch. 5:00 a.m.

Red jumped out and came around to open the back of the van. My team filed out and into the log cabin.

“This is a safe house,” TL informed us as he turned on a few lamps.

We all took seats around the living room of the log cabin.

Chapling got his laptop out and I followed his lead.

“You’re up,” TL told Mystic.

“I saw it in Utotiz’s eyes,” Mystic spoke from my right. “He’s the brother of the kidnapper. His sister took Zandra as retribution to something that happened to her in the past. I don’t know what that event was, but it was incredibly significant in her life. Utotiz only just found out about the kidnapping, which explains why I didn’t see anything in him while I was studying film footage of his fights.”

“Zandra’s unharmed,” Mystic assured TL and Nalani. “She’s scared. But she’s unharmed. She’s right here in Washington State. Utotiz has a cabin on Mount Mission. That is where his sister is holding Zandra.”

David turned to me and Chapling. “Get us a satellite image of the cabin. And get us everything you know about this sister. I want a picture ASAP.”

With a nod, Chapling and I dove into cyberspace. While we clicked away, our team continued discussing the situation. I blocked out their voices and concentrated on my work . . .

“Okay,” Chapling announced. “Satellite image secured.”

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He depressed a button on the side of his laptop, and out slid a slim three-by-one inch projector. He pointed the projector to the wall above the fireplace and an image appeared. He manipulated the picture, rotating it, zooming in, until a small cabin came into view.

Supported by stilts and tucked into the side of the mountain, the cabin sat surrounded by thick Washington trees. A wall of glass spanned the front of the cabin, looking out over the mountain, the trees, and the valley below.

Chapling manipulated the satellite and zoomed through the early morning shadows to view through that wall of glass. Darkness filled the interior of the cabin, and Chapling switched to infrared.

An image of a woman came into view as she slept on the couch. Beside her was a shotgun.

Chapling scanned the loft of the cabin, zooming in on a double bed. An image of a little girl came into view as she slept with her arms wrapped around a stuffed doll. Her foot stuck out the bottom of the blanket displaying a rope tied around her ankle and secured to the bed.

Nalani gasped, and I glanced over at her. With her hands over her mouth, she stared at the image of her daughter and her eyes welled with tears.

“She’s okay,” Nalani whispered, looking over to TL.

Nodding, he didn’t return Nalani’s glance, just kept staring at the image of his daughter.

My laptop dinged, and I checked it. “I have the background. Her name is Kimberly Tanner and she is Utotiz’s older sister.” I emailed Chapling her image and he projected it up onto the wall as well.

“Kimberly is thirty-eight years old,” I continued. “Five foot three inches. One hundred and thirty pounds. Brown hair. Hazel eyes. She has been in and out of mental institutions since

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the age of twenty-one when a freak accident took her baby girl. She's recently been released from a private facility in Georgia. She was released just days before Zandra was taken. She received a computer science degree from the University of Georgia. And it says here, she's married to an IPNC agent." I looked up at my team. "That's weird."

TL pushed out a heavy breath. "I know her."

Every person in the room gave TL their full attention.

"Kimberly Tanner?" Nalani closed her eyes. "Oh my God."

Rubbing his head, TL slowly lowered himself to the corner of the couch. Slumping forward, he braced his elbows on his knees and stared at the wood floor beneath his boots. "I was twenty-one years old. Brand new to the IPNC. We were on a mission right here in the states. Kimberly Tanner was in the wrong place at the wrong time. With her baby in her arms, She stepped right into the line of fire. *My* line of fire."

"And you killed her baby?" Bruiser whispered.

TL nodded, still not looking at any of us. "Yes, I killed her baby. She was only four months old."

No one said a word as it all sank in. I thought about the missions I'd been on and the situations I'd been in. Accidents could happen at any time. Accidents *had* happened. But killing a baby? Oh my God. How had TL dealt with that tragedy?

"The IPNC paid her money. *I* paid her money. I've checked in on her throughout the years. Made sure she had the best treatment." TL shook his head. "It wasn't enough. I didn't do enough. I thought she'd come through everything okay."

Fight To The Finish

“Well, her computer degree and her marriage to an IPNC agent explains how she knows about Zandra.” David motioned for Chapling to turn off the projector. “How in the world did she end up marrying an IPNC agent?”

TL pressed his fingers into his temples. “It happened shortly after the accident. One of the agents got emotionally caught up in the situation, visited her at the hospital, ended up marrying her.”

Out of pity? I wondered. Or out of love?

“That IPNC agent isn’t involved in this,” Mystic spoke up from beside me. I turned to see him staring at Kimberly’s picture on my laptop.

“How do you want to handle this?” David asked.

Finally, TL looked up. “I’m going in alone.”

* * *

It took us four hours to cross the state and weave our way up Mount Mission to where Kimberly Tanner was holding Zandra. A half mile away we stopped the van on a dirt lane that led to the cabin. I imagined in the winter these switch-back roads would be impassible.

Me, Chapling, Mystic, and Bruiser stayed in the van. Jonathan, Red, David, and Nalani got out and quietly made their way through the trees to surround the small house.

We still wore our mole earpieces for communication. No one carried a weapon. TL had insisted. He was going in alone.

In the van we brought up satellite imaging and zoomed in on the house. Kimberly Tanner was up now and sitting in the kitchen drinking coffee. Up in the loft, I didn’t see Zandra on the bed. The rope that had been tied around her ankle dangled free. The bathroom door was closed, so I assumed she was in there.

Fight To The Finish

Chapling detailed everything we were seeing for the benefit of our team.

On our laptop screen, we watched as TL stepped from the woods, approached the front door, and knocked.

Kimberly jumped up, grabbed the shotgun from the couch, and ran over to the door.

“She’s got her shotgun,” Chapling reported.

Kimberly peeked through the side window to see who it was, caught sight of TL, and ducked down. Cradling the shotgun, she crouched below the window, wide eyed, trying to be very quiet.

TL knocked again. “Kimberly,” he spoke softly, “I know you’re in there. I’ve come unarmed. Put the shotgun down. Let’s talk.”

Kimberly blinked a few times, swallowed. Then in one quick movement, she stood up, cocked the gun, swung the door open, and pointed it right at TL’s head.

He didn’t move. I knew TL. He could have easily disarmed her and gotten this whole thing over with. But he cared for Kimberly. It mattered to him what he had done to her. It still haunted both of them. That one horrible event had changed their lives forever.

“Where’s Zandra?” he asked in that same calm tone.

“In the bathroom.”

“Is she okay?”

“Yes.”

TL moved forward, and Kimberly backed up, still holding the gun to his forehead. Once inside, he closed the door.

“Where’re all your people?” She nodded toward the bank of windows that looked out over the mountain. “I thought for sure you’d railroad in here with your entourage.”

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“They’re out there,” he spoke truthfully. “They can hear everything we’re saying. But no one is armed. I assure you.”

Kimberly snorted. “So you’re here to talk me off the ledge, so to speak?”

TL didn’t answer that question. “Kimberly, I want my daughter back. I know why you took her. You wanted me to feel the pain that you felt when I killed your daughter.”

Kimberly squeezed her eyes closed. “Shut up.”

“I did kill your daughter, Kimberly, and I’m so sorry. You and I both have lived with that tragedy for seventeen years. If I could rewind the time, that is the absolute one thing I would change. But I can’t rewind the time. And taking my daughter won’t make you feel better.”

“YES IT WILL!” she screamed, startling everybody in the van.

TL didn’t even blink at the outburst.

Kimberly’s eyes shot open, and she pressed the gun firmer to TL’s forehead.

He got down on his knees and looked up at her. “You want to kill someone. Kill me. Let my daughter go. My wife is here. She wants our daughter back, too. Take me. Let Zandra go.”

Shaking, Kimberly stared down at TL. Her finger twitched on the trigger as she gazed into his eyes.

“No,” she whispered. “No. No. No.” Tears began streaming down her face. “N-n-no.”

Shaking violently now, Kimberly continued pressing the gun to his head, holding his stare. “NO! NO! NO! NO!” She let out a gut wrenching scream and swung the gun away.

A shot boomed and glass shattered. Everyone in the van flinched. I immediately brought my attention back to the satellite image on the laptop screen.

The cabin’s wall of glass had a huge gaping hole in it. Kimberly stood with her back to TL, gripping the shot gun.

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Still on his knees, TL reached a hand out. “Kimberly, give me the gun.”

She didn’t respond.

“Kimberly.”

With a calmness she hadn’t had seconds ago, she turned around, pointed the shot gun at TL, and pulled the trigger.

I gasped. Then immediately I realized nothing had happened.

TL remained on his knees, silently gazing up at her.

She reached in her pocket and pulled out a shot gun shell. Keeping her eyes leveled on TL’s, she reloaded the gun.

“Kimberly,” TL softly requested, “don’t do this.”

I got the impression TL had seen something in her eyes that we couldn’t see.

Kimberly turned her back to him, swung the barrel up and into her mouth, and squeezed the trigger.

Bruiser sucked in a breath.

“No,” TL whispered.

I squeezed my eyes shut.

“Daddy?” Zandra cried.

Fight To The Finish

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A month had gone by since that tragic day on Mount Mission. Kimberly Tanner had died. I'd thought a lot about it over the weeks. Thought a lot about that final tragic scene. Could things have been done differently? Yes. Would it have made a difference in the outcome? Who knew? But I had come to the conclusion if Kimberly Tanner hadn't taken her life on that mountain, she probably would have committed suicide someplace else.

I think she went to that cabin knowing how it would all end.

I'd watched TL closely over the past month. He'd seemed distant, for sure. I hadn't talked to him about what had happened. No one had. I could only imagine what demons he was battling over the whole thing. He'd probably relived and questioned those last few moments constantly since it had happened.

And now as I sat here outside with everyone, I watched TL and Nalani with Zandra. I wondered what all had factored into his decision to leave The Specialists. That's right, I did say leave.

TL resigned. Effective tomorrow he would no longer be living here at the ranch, which was the purpose of today's picnic—a goodbye party for TL. Was it solely Kimberly Tanner that had made him resign? No, probably not. I was sure it was many things. Kimberly, Nalani, Zandra, past experiences. He'd had enough. He was ready to move on. Understandably.

So who would be in charge? Red. It seemed fitting as he had helped raise lost kids just like us. I suspected he needed it, this lifestyle, the change, the activity, the focus. He'd been out of things for too long.

And Red's right hand person? David, of course.

Fight To The Finish

“Kelly?”

From my spot on the ranch’s front steps, I glanced up. “Hey, Randy.”

He smiled. “I’m leaving. Just wanted to say bye.”

I stood up and gave him a hug and felt . . . friendship. Nothing more. It made me smile.

“You take care, you. I’m sure we’ll see each other again.”

“I’m sure.”

“Randy.” David approached. “Heard you’re leaving. Wanted to tell you good luck.”

The two guys exchanged a hand shake.

“Take care of this girl,” Randy said, nodding to me. “She’s a bit of a klutz.”

‘Hey!’ I defended myself.

Laughing, Randy saluted us and headed off to his awaiting cab.

With a wave, I watched the taxi pull away before sitting back down on the steps. David took the spot beside me and together we lapsed back into quietly taking in the picnic fun.

Off to the left, Beaker sat under a tree visiting with Parrot and his mother. His mother had moved into a small house in town and they saw each other a couple times a week. She’d gained weight since her return from slavery. Her hair had grown out. She looked happy and healthy. So did Parrot.

To the right sat a long table piled with sandwiches, salads, fruit, chips, drinks. As usual, Wirenut stood nearby grazing on the food. Beside him, Cat said something and he poked her in the ribs. They both laughed and then Cat took off running and Wirenut chased her. He threw a carrot stick at her back, and she sped up. Their goofiness made me smile.

Fight To The Finish

All the members of Team One, Adam, Piper, Curtis, and Tina were playing a two on two badminton game beside the barn. Although Adam hid it well, he kept cutting sideways glances toward Bruiser. Hmmm . . . I was curious to see how that little romance would evolve.

Jonathan came out of the barn with Dr. Gretchen on his heels. Although I couldn't hear them, their body language spoke volumes. Dr. Gretchen planted her hands on her hips and barked something to his back. He waved his hand through the air in a bug-off answer. She barked something else, and he spun around and got right in her face. Neither one of them said a word as they snarled at each other. And then Dr. Gretchen grabbed his T-shirt and yanked him back inside the shadows of the barn.

I laughed to myself. Wonder what *they're* doing?

A splash had me glancing right to the pool where Mystic had been giving Chapling swimming lessons for the past hour. In that patient way of his Mystic explained to Chapling *again* how to tread water, and Chapling flailed his arms. It was hard to believe Chapling had made it all the way to his mid thirties and never learned to swim.

Beyond the pool TL and Nalani bounced a volleyball with Zandra, Bruiser, and Red. Nalani looked the happiest I think I'd ever seen her. And although there was clearly a lot on TL's mind, he came across happy, too.

"You're going to miss TL." I stated the obvious to David.

"Very much. He's made the right decision. It's time to focus on his family."

"Will you stay in touch with him?" I asked.

David shrugged. "Doubt it. They'll have new identities. Live in a new country."

"I'm sure TL will find some way to keep up communication. Encrypted emails. Secret messages."

Fight To The Finish

David smiled. "I hope so." He looked over at me. "Guess who I saw meditating yesterday?"

I shrugged.

"Bruiser."

"You did not!"

David chuckled. "I did. And guess who was shadow boxing in the barn the other day?"

"Mystic?" I guessed.

David laughed again. "Unbelievable."

I laughed with him. "Amazing is what it is."

Mike Share, David's dad, came out of the house and caught sight of us. "Hey kids."

We both smiled.

He scooted past us. "Sissy and I are going to the movies later. Wanna join us?" he asked David. "A little family bonding?"

David smiled. "Sure."

Mr. Share continued on, crossing over to the tree to join Beaker, Parrot, and his mom.

"How long's your dad in town?"

"Just for the week. IPNC's sending him to Alaska on Sunday."

"I'm glad for you." I was glad for all my teammates. We'd arrived here a year and a half ago quite the hodge-podge group. And look, just look, at the interesting twists and turns our lives had taken.

We'd grown, we'd developed . . . coming here, joining The Specialists, was hands down the best decision I'd ever made. I finally had a family.

"GiGi?"

Fight To The Finish

“Hm?”

David turned to me. “I’ve been trying to figure out how to say what I want to say and . . .” he sighed. “I’m just going to be blunt.” He took a deep breath. “I want you back. I don’t want to be just friends. I miss you.”

My heart paused a beat, and my insides went to liquid mush. “Oh, David.”

He reached out and took my hand. “You’ve got me all twisted up inside. I don’t quite know what to think of you, Miss GiGi.”

I smiled. “I never wanted to be just friends to begin with.”

Closing his eyes, David brought my hand to his lips. Slowly, he pressed a kiss to each knuckle and then rubbed his cheek across the back of my hand.

I stared at the side of his face, drinking in his slight stubble, his handsome dark features, his delicious scent. My stomach whirled as he opened his eyes and stared deeply into mine. They did that sexy crinkly thing and I fell a little more.

“Whadaya say,” he whispered, “when I get home tonight from the movies, you and I go on a late night picnic in the moonlight.”

I swallowed. “Sounds great.” Sounded heavenly, actually.

The sound of an engine had us glancing away from each other and down the driveway to the gate. It swung open and a banged up beetle bug drove through. It putt-putted up the driveway and came to a stop in front of the ranch house.

I tried to see who was inside, but the windows were unusually dark tinted. The door opened, and a tall blonde woman climbed out.

She propped her sunglasses on top her head and gazed at me across the top of the beetle bug. “Hello, Kelly. I’m your sister.”

Fight To The Finish

I didn't move from my spot on the front step. I couldn't move. Numb with shock, disbelief, and joy, I stared across the driveway at my older sister. *My older sister.*

David nudged me out of my staring trance, and slowly, I got to my feet.

I didn't remember crossing the gravel. I didn't remember rounding the front of her Beetle Bug. I didn't remember anything as I stood in front of her staring up into her familiar eyes.

She shut the door of her car and turned to me. One corner of her mouth tilted up in a half smile as she returned my stare. She stood taller than me with a slender, athletic build. Her blonde hair was darker and her skin tan. Her face was similiar, yet different. She wore no make up, only a slight sun burn.

Swallowing I held out my hand. "Hi."

She took my hand. "I'm Sandy."

"Sandy," I repeated, and then we both moved at once, pulling each other into a warm, snug embrace.

A good solid minute later, we pulled apart, and I gazed back up into her face. "You look like dad."

She smiled. "So do you." Shaking her head, she huffed out a laugh. "Unbelievable. I have a baby sister."

"You didn't know?" For some reason I thought she had and because of top secret reasons chose not to have a relationship with me all these years.

"I didn't even know I had a dad until a few years ago."

I furrowed my brow. "What are you talking about?"

Fight To The Finish

“Our dad and my mom were married. They got divorced and she moved to Europe. She never told him she was pregnant. She had me and raised me in Germany. From day one she told me my dad was dead. That’d he’d died in a car accident.”

“That was a lie.”

Sandy nodded. “She didn’t want me to go looking for him, I guess. When I was eighteen she broke the news to me that she was a secret agent for the German government. She recruited me into the life.”

Sandy took the shades off her head and slipped them on over her eyes. “Years later I figured out I could make more money working independently and so I broke from the German government.”

“How did you find out about dad?” I asked.

“I decided one day to research who he was, his death. And that’s where it all unfolded. I found out about his connection with the IPNC, Eduardo Villanueva, and I discovered he had a wife. I also found out they’d died in a plane crash. I never knew about you, though.” She smiled. “Good job leaving clues in cyberspace so I’d find you.”

I grinned. “Thanks.”

Sandy shook her head. “And to think of all the years we could’ve had together.”

“Well, just think of all the years to come.”

We both smiled at that.

“So you never knew dad?” I asked.

“No, I’m sorry to say.” She reached out and took my hand. “But I’m looking forward to knowing you.”

Fight To The Finish

I squeezed her hand. “Me, too.” In my periferial, I saw everyone standing around staring at us. With a big smile, I turned to them “Hey, everybody! Come meet my sister!”

THE END

Thank you to all my fabulous readers who made this series such a success. I hope this installment brought you what you were hoping for in this final book. I'm sad to say goodbye to GiGi and all her friends, but all good things do come to an end. Keep your eyes on my website for next year's release, tentatively titled EM.

~Shannon Greenland