

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.

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.

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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."

“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.

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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.

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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.

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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?*