

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.

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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."

Fight To The Finish

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.

Fight To The Finish

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

Fight To The Finish

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."

Fight To The Finish

“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.

Fight To The Finish

“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.

Fight To The Finish

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?"

Fight To The Finish

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.

Fight To The Finish

“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.