

CHAPTER SEVEN

BARBARIC

QUIN AT MY HEELS and my father a step behind him, I zipped through the waiting room and straight-armed the door. It swung hard and wide, surprising the restless horde of reporters. En masse, they awakened—stunned, but not silenced.

“Quin!

“Quin?”

“Are you here to support your father?”

“Did he kill Shelly?” Their questions, like the fingers of a spoiled child—grimy, demanding, insistent—kept reaching for him again and again, even as he ignored them.

“Quin, were you afraid of him?”

I kept moving through the parking lot, past our car, until the sharpness of their voices dulled to a collective hum. My father stopped me from behind with a hand to my shoulder. Across the street, in the homeless encampment, a group of a different sort gathered. At their center was a makeshift ring—pieces of chain link fence, scrap metal, tires, odds and ends—assembled in a haphazard circle.

“What’s going on?” I asked. Inside the ring was a teenage boy. I could barely see his face—determined and bloodied—above the onlookers. Jumping, he raised his fist in triumph, as the crowd cheered him, transfixed. His arms were thin, but well muscled.

“Fights,” Quin answered. “Drug fights.” My quizzical expression mirrored my father’s. “My dad told me about it a while ago,” he

explained. "They pit EAM users against each other and take bets. Whoever's left standing is the winner."

My father shook his head. "That sounds barbaric."

I pointed back at the jail, a stone's throw away. "Don't the police stop them?" The line of officers was unmoving. They stared ahead blankly, acting completely unaware.

"They're afraid to. They're totally outnumbered." Quin said. "Same with the media. They won't go near it." He gestured to the raucous crowd. It was expanding, spilling out of the encampment onto the street. A young girl—no more than five—scampered through the tangle of bodies, collecting money. "A lot of them are on Emovere, Agitor, or both."

"Is that—?" Squinting at the ring, my father crossed the street, as if pulled by an invisible thread. I followed him with my eyes.

"Oh . . . my . . . God." I reached for Quin's arm. "Max."

At center stage, Max faced the spry teenager. Now that I was closer, I could see he was just a boy, probably thirteen or fourteen. Next to him, Max seemed weathered, old. Both their hands were wrapped with white cloth. They matched each other's stride, pacing right, then left, fists raised and ready.

"Get'em, J.D.!" The woman's battle cry unleashed a fury from the young fighter. He plowed head first toward Max, his spindly legs turning as fast as a spider's. Max hit the ground hard but bounced back up to his feet, grinning. As an oblivious J.D. waved to the crowd, celebrating, Max pushed him from behind, sending him tumbling through a stack of old tires into a barbed wire fence.

"Boo!" The crowd disapproved of Max's success. When J.D. turned back toward his supporters, his face was scratched, a tear of blood trickling from eyebrow to chin.

"He's going to hurt that kid. We have to stop him," my father said, trying to push his way toward the ring.

Quin and I held him back. "Dad, there's nothing we can do. If you go in there right now, these people will . . ." I looked around me, afraid to say the words out loud. *Kill. They will kill you.*

Undeterred by his injury, J.D. flailed his fists at Max in a wild fury, landing a few punches in his frantic onslaught. I watched in disbelief as

PROPHECY

Max absorbed the blows without a grimace. Instead, he snickered at his young opponent.

“C’mon, Son! C’mon!” The woman clung to the edge of the ring, still imploring J.D. On cue, each time she shouted to him, he attacked with inexhaustible fervor.

“Emovere?” I mouthed to Quin, as J.D. fired off at least fifty punches in rapid succession.

He shook his head. “Agitor. Watch his hands.” Quin was right. J.D.’s hands never stopped moving. Between those rapid-fire flurries, his fingers trembled by his sides. His teeth were clenched, probably grinding. When it was first released, Agitor was marketed as a drug for prolonged excitement. *Constant agitation was more like it.*

“And Max?”

Quin watched Max intently. “I can’t tell. Maybe nothing.” His voice was hopeful. But I wasn’t. Max’s eyes were different—he was there but not there.

As J.D. revved up for one more round, Max lunged forward and leveled him with one punch. He spiraled slowly on his way to the dirt, like water circling a drain. The crowd was silent as a victorious Max did a lap around the ring, laughing to himself, before collecting his winnings at the exit. Furious, J.D.’s mother pushed her way past and helped her son to his feet. He wobbled out, his hands still shaking.

“Max!” My father shouted before I could stop him. He reached out to Max, calling to him again as he passed, but Max kept walking. Heads swiveled in our direction. Suspicious stares followed. Then J.D.’s mother rushed up behind Max.

“Cheater.” She spit the word like a nail. “You’re not fifteen. And you’re not on Emovere. Those were the rules.”

Max giggled, shoving a wad of money in his pocket. “Prove it.” Nonchalant, he spun away from her.

The woman reached in the bag slung over her shoulder and withdrew a gun. “Prove it to him, J.D..” She put the weapon in her son’s quivering hands.

“Gimme the money. Or else.” J.D. had the voice of a boy trying to sound like a man, but when he jabbed the gun into Max’s side, I believed him.

Apparently, Max didn't. "Or else what?" he asked, mocking J.D.'s serious tone.

The moment my father and I locked eyes, horrified, Quin seized J.D. by the wrist, easily disarming him. "What are you doing?" Quin demanded of Max. He gestured around him at the bloodthirsty onlookers. "This isn't you."

Max didn't answer. He reared back and sucker punched J.D. in the face. The young fighter fell hard to the ground. This time he stayed there, unmoving. "Maybe you don't know me as well as you think," Max sneered, as he brushed past Quin. "I don't need your help."

"Look out!" I yelled. A man in the crowd tried to grab Quin from behind, but Quin was too fast, skirting away. He drove his elbow into the man's stomach, leaving him doubled over, gasping for air.

Turning to face the crowd, Quin backed away cautiously. Next to me, my father was frozen, a statue of shock. I pulled him by the hand, and we started running. I could hear Quin breathing right behind us. I didn't look back until we crossed into the jail's parking lot. The mob had dispersed. The ring was empty. Max was gone.