

The Swords of an Angel

THE GUARDIAN'S FALL CHRONICLES

BOOK 1

Urania Sarri

THE SWORDS OF AN ANGEL

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CHAPTER ONE

The Wrong Side of The Wall.

“THERE IS NO NEED TO WORRY, Madison. Your training will resume according to schedule. This is just a slight change.”

The broad, reassuring smile highlighting the finality in Jake’s words distracted me, but only for a second. And that was all it took; when I opened my mouth to protest, Jake was already handing me the printed training schedule.

“I don’t really have a choice, do I?” I asked instead.

Jake pursed his lips, his eyes desperately scanning the gym lobby for an escape.

“To be honest, no. Jerome is the only available trainer at the moment.” His hand landed heavily on my shoulder. “You’ll be fine. As I said, just a slight change.”

I silently cursed once more my former personal trainer, Matt, who seemed to have vanished for five days without giving anyone a heads up -me included. I had run out of any possible -and ridiculously absurd- excuses to put forward to Jake, the guy who ran the Academy gym, to avoid Matt’s substitute. That piece of paper was in fact, my defeat.

Jake’s attention was now drawn to the treadmill section.

“HEY, STEVE! ELEVATION IS NO GOOD FOR YOUR KNEE INJURY!” he shouted.

“Look,” he glanced at me briefly, “I have to go.”

“But, Jake...” I struggled for the words that’d make him stop and listen to me.

My time was up. Jake just gave me a thumbs up before turning away.

“I’ll see you tomorrow. Chill out. You’ll be fine,” he said over his shoulder.

Letting out a heavy sigh that I hoped he could hear, I looked at the piece of paper he’d given me. Did he just say tomorrow? Great! My first session was scheduled for the following morning.

I made a ball with the piece of paper in my hand and barely managed to resist the urge to throw it away.

“Slight change. Just a slight change,” I tried to reassure myself when the gym door closed behind me.

Slight or not, I had never liked change. That may be because I had too many changes in my life, all of them falling into the category of not being controlled by me. And although I would admit that not all changes in my life so far have been for the worse, the day I met Jerome was definitely the best of the worst changes that have ever happened to me. Best, because it’s been my only window to happiness. Worst, because the way it altered both our lives led to a dead end, crashing us into an enormous wall; one that would always keep our happiness on the wrong side.



They say that the moment you are born is forever carved in the subconscious part of your brain, but it is impossible to recall it, at least under normal circumstances. I, on the other hand, have absolute memory of the day I was born -or rather reborn- in the murky water that flooded the streets of Hopkinsville after the hurricane hit. I have total memory of feeling cold and paralyzed, sinking deeper and deeper into the dark, muddy water. I can still recall my terror when things that must have been sinking along with me crashed into my body, pulling me deeper. I can still remember fighting for my life, struggling for one more breath and, finally, giving up. Until, all of a sudden, I was summoned back to life. That summon made me strong enough to kick hard whatever was drawing me deeper and try to surface. I still remember the feeling; the need for just one breath; the strong hands that pulled me up, and then nothing. All the memories from my life till then sank in the flood, and I surfaced a new person. Madison StClaire,

a.k.a. the amnesia girl was born that day. Past-free. Before that, nobody knows what my name was or where I came from. Unsought. That's how I've always thought of myself. Nobody was looking for me. Nobody was missing me. A human Lost and Found item that nobody needed.

Two months later, the Sisters of St. Claire's Convent practically adopted me after they had tried all possible means to locate my family. In the years I stayed at the Girls' Shelter the nuns ran, nobody looked for me; the outcome of the investigation on my past was that my family was part of the statistics; two more digits to the number of the hurricane victims. It didn't help that I could not remember my surname. Because I knew I had a first name. It was carved on a silver bracelet they found around my wrist. As for my surname, the Sisters gave me one.

The Sisters of St. Claire's Convent took care of orphan girls from all around the country, but I was the only girl in the Shelter who had suffered the hurricane nightmare. That, however, didn't make me any different from the others; each one of us had gone through our own tragedy. It was at the Shelter that I met Megan and Blue. The two girls became my friends from the very first moment I met them. Even more, they became my only family. Sister Merentith, the closest to a mother figure for the three of us, used to say that we matched like a three-piece-puzzle. And so we should. We all knew loss. And grief. In that stark building, we were able to feel almost like little girls with normal lives just because we had each other; there was a feeling of strength that grew among us as and although we never talked about it I am certain that all three of us could feel it.

When we turned eighteen, the Sisters decided that Brassington Academy was the best way to proceed with our studies. The Academy was a non-profit institution founded by the family of Sir Conrad Darnell Brassington, the Convent benefactor. So, we left the Shelter forever, and the Academy became our home for the following two years. The Sisters' farewell gift to me had been a generous amount in my account in Brassington Bank. Having Martial Arts as an obligatory course of my foundation year was the only pitfall in the Sisters' contribution to my future.

And this is how I found myself in the boxing ring, fighting my new coach -the guy

I had struggled to avoid.

Jerome.



That first session with him was absolute torture. As if weight lifting and rope jumping had not been enough, Jerome took me to the exercise mat. “Now show me what you’re capable of,” he said, arching a brow at my flustered face. I only nodded and joined him on the mat, already aware of my incoming mortification. I had worked hard to build the image of the constantly sulky girl who had no time for jokes. It had been easier to establish those barriers around me this way. I just had to let people know that I didn’t care about anything else but getting on with my studies and achieving the grades that would get me a scholarship to the military school. That was the plan. To become a joke myself? Definitely no part of it.

Hard as it was, I made another effort to concentrate on the fight. Had it been my regular trainer I was fighting against, I’d have no distraction issues that made me forget any self-defense techniques I’d taken a painful couple of months to acquire. As if that wasn’t enough, I couldn’t help thinking that there had to be some kind of a plot against me that morning; Jake was probably avoiding me because he was out of sight when I arrived and Jerome -the sulky, dark semi-god version of a trainer- showed up instead, determined to take over my training with just a nod of his head and two simple words.

“Come on.”

Thinking that any other option besides trying to get along with Jerome would make me seem even more immature, I followed him to a warm-up session that didn’t seem necessary to me; I had been too warmed up from the very first minute he stood close to me or watched me run on the treadmill. When I eventually spotted Jake standing by the vintage pinball machine in the lobby a few minutes later, I thought about asking once again if Matt was back. Yet, I dismissed the thought the moment I caught a glimpse of Jake’s and his friends’ grins as they cast side looks at Jerome and me. It seemed that my inconvenience had become a joke among the muscular trainers. And the worst part? The whole thing had been my own mistake. I’d made a big issue of it. So, what if the most detached, mysterious, stunning guy became my trainer?

I have to admit that I could not tell what made me dislike Jerome so much. I'd never exchanged a word with him during the couple of months I hung around at the gym, following my obligatory fitness program. Lack of verbal communication, however, didn't mean that there was no communication between us at all; not if the annoying, weird prickling on the back of my neck that always came with Jerome's scrutiny every time we worked out in the same section of the gym counts as a way of communication, or the way my heart stuttered whenever his dark eyes accidentally met mine. Thankfully, this didn't happen very often as the charmingly aloof hottie was always upstage, indifferent to the female students of the Academy who struggled for his attention. So, there it was; I avoided him because I didn't like that he made me apprehensive and uncomfortable whenever he was around.

Well, that was only part of what made me feel awkward, lose my focus first and then my balance on the exercising mat, as Jerome tried to test my reflexes in a hypothetical attack. The thing was this guy was too attractive in his black judo pants and matching vest to have him train you. Besides, self-defense involved too much of physical contact and ... closeness. It didn't help that I had left too much of my skin exposed with my white gym shorts and pink athletic tank-top. Darn heat!

And here I was now, all flustered and glowering, fighting Mr. Six-Pack, aware of the fact that his friends were only pretending to be interested in the vintage pinball machine while they were, in fact, eyeing Jerome and me among whispers and chuckles. Great! More distraction was not exactly what I needed, not since the thought that I could play pinball on those killer abs had occurred to me. Ugh! I shook my head to get rid of the incongruous images that made me lose focus. With my flexible body, I had always been capable of confusing my opponent in order to strike. And I could strike hard; amazingly hard for my slim figure, as Matt used to say. Now my muscles refused to flex, and I melted away every time Jerome exerted the slightest pressure on me, my thought flying to how much I'd like to set free his shoulder-length, silky black curls that were pulled back in a ponytail, or what the strange tattoo on his forearm stood for.

Almost kneeling in front of him after a blow, I took my time to stand up. I felt tingles spread on my arms when Jerome grabbed them to pull me up.

"You keep losing your balance. Bend your knees!" he barked at me.

I took a defensive pose; well, I tried.

Jerome lifted a hand to stop me. “No. I want you to attack me this time. Show me some kicks and punches.”

I made no effort to impress him, but I hoped I would be better at attacking him than defending myself against him. Of course, Jerome blocked all my blows with anticipated easiness.

“Now that’s something you don’t see every day!” I heard Jake behind me and lost my focus as I clumsily attacked Jerome’s chest with a blow. He took advantage of my distraction and grabbed my arm to swirl me around, making me turn my back to him. I tried to elbow his ribs and kick his knee at the same time, but my feet did not seem to be in the right place. I lost my balance, pulling him over me as I fell to the mat with a thud.

I was hyperventilating under his weight, but I made no real effort to move. His dark eyes fazed me, and I lay underneath him, utterly dazed as his perfect face was excruciatingly close to mine.

Jerome looked pissed. “Never. Lose. Focus.” I took in the warm, chocolate breath that hit my face as he talked.

“Am I really seeing this? Has Madison made our mighty Jerome fall?” I heard Jake among chuckles and cheering somewhere behind me and I knew I had to move.

“Madison?” Jerome asked, locking his eyes with mine, ignoring the teasing of his friends.

“Yes?”

“You can let go of my vest now.”

It took me a second, but my eyes widened as the words sank in. My fingers were gripping his vest; it probably happened as I fell and tried to get hold of something to support myself.

“Oh! Sorry,” I mumbled.

I released him, and Jerome came to his feet, offering his hand to help me up.

“I wouldn’t do that, pal. I think you’ve pissed her off,” Jake kept on teasing.

Jerome cast his friends a warning look.

“Don’t pay any attention to them. They are really bored lately. They’d pick on anyone just to make their day.”

“That’s okay,” I said bashfully, still avoiding looking at the gang behind me.

“I think that’s enough for now. Some stretching to cool down and we’re done,” Jerome said, grabbing a clean towel from the hanger to throw to me.

I wiped my chest and the back of my neck noticing he was not sweaty at all. There I was, melting and breathless while he seemed calm and fresh, smelling like a candy shop. My eyes scanned the room for an escape.

“My friends are on the stretching part too. Mind if I join them?” I said, nodding towards Megan and Blue at the back of the room.

Jerome turned to where I’d nodded and then back to me. He searched my eyes for a moment before his face turned to the usual aloof expression saying “Sure. No problem. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Relieved, at last, I took my mortification to my friends. They were the only ones allowed within my inflexible barriers and being close to them always calmed me down; made me feel safe.

I found Blue slowly bending forward, trying to touch her toes with the tips of her fingers.

“What the heck just happened down there Mads?” Blue asked.

My hopes that the humiliating incident would have gone unnoticed vanished.

“I fell. That’s what happened.”

I could still feel the heat on my cheeks. It didn’t help that Blue exchanged a naughty look with Megan before saying “Too much chemistry between the two of you?”

I chose to ignore the question. “You know what? I know people who’d call his training method torture. I wish there were a way to get rid of it all,” I complained instead.

Megan chuckled behind me. “Should I remind you, you’re the one who wants to be G. I. Jane?”

That used to be the plan, I thought. It seemed so distant now. “I’m not so sure what I want to be anymore. How come from the three of us I’m the only one having to take this Martial Arts course? Why can’t I just join you in the regular fitness program?” “Apparently, we don’t need Martial Arts for a career in journalism!” Megan laughed as I lost my balance again, trying to curl my leg backward by pulling my foot to the level of my hip.

Frustrated by my unparalleled clumsiness that morning, I gave up stretching to take

a sip from my water thermos. When I found out it was already empty, I threw it a little harder than I intended. I was aiming for the corner where the girls had stashed their backpacks, but it hit the floor instead.

Both girls looked at me alarmed. They weren't the only ones; everyone around us was now staring at me.

"Geez, Mads! What's wrong with you today? And why do you have to be so grumpy?" Megan said, trying to keep her voice down. I wasn't just grumpy. I was furious. And the fact that I could not tell why I was behaving like that made things worse.

"Gym sucks! I wish Matt didn't have to go," I mumbled. That was totally childish behavior, I knew it. But I couldn't stop myself. "Do you know how many girls in this room envy you? Matt was hot. But Jerome is scorching!" Blue giggled. "He must have a girlfriend. Guys like him are never available."

Megan came to her feet and wiped the sweat off her chest. "If he has, he must be keeping her locked away because nobody has seen her."

Blue gestured for a towel. "How do you know?"

An innocent smile lit up Megan's face. "I did my research when I heard he was working out with our Mads."

At that point, I decided I'd had enough. "That's it. I'm done here. Are you coming?" I threw my towel at Blue and made for the showers; the girls' giggling following me until I reached the door to the locker rooms.

It was then that it first happened.

I paused and turned with the strange sensation that someone was whispering my name. The instant I turned, my eyes met Jerome's angry stare. Leaning against the wooden racks on the wall, he kept glaring. I felt my blood boil. I glared back at him when I saw his mouth twist into a wry smile, his gaze shifting to my body and back to my face.

"I know what you are."

I should be worried about the fact that I heard voices, but instead, a sudden surge of rage overwhelms me. Every cell in my body wanted to shout at him: **STAY AWAY FROM ME!**

His face changed into a frown that made me snap. What the heck?

In the locker rooms, I tried to convince myself that it had just been my imagination; it had to be, right? Otherwise, I had to consider the possibility that I was in the wrong place.

“Really Madison? A shrink’s couch?” The voice was still there. I couldn’t say if it was a man’s or a woman’s voice. It came as a whisper and that made it even more creepy.

“Ok. Let’s not panic,” I was talking to myself, walking back and forth along the aisle until my heartbeat slowed down.

I took a deep breath. “You’re okay. You’re okay,” I tried to reassure myself.

Whatever was going on with me, I was certain I could overcome it. I’d made it in the past when I had to overcome so much more. First, I had to find a way to block out that voice. Second, I should keep this to myself; a visit to a therapist was the last thing I needed. Third, I should not let Jerome get under my skin. Seriously, I could not blame him for everything. On the other hand, if it was him that made me hear voices, he seemed to have a strange influence on me; it might be a good idea to ask for a transfer as soon as the semester started.

I made a mental note to call my advisor the following day.

CHAPTER TWO

Punching Bag

THAT CALL DID NOT END WELL. Mrs. Blake, my advisor, strongly recommended against dropping the training program. The fitness evaluation was taking place during the first week of October, and Mrs. Blake insisted that I complete the intensive training course if I intended to start the Academy on a competitive basis. Then she reminded me how important my grades in the Academy would be in order to get the Brassington scholarship for the military school.

“You’ll get better at this,” Blue tried to cheer me up when I told her about my advisor’s ultimatum. “Just give it some time, and you’ll get used to Jerome’s methods. The Military school is what you’ve always wanted.”

I wondered what she would say if she knew what my real problem with training was.

“Matt was not so demanding,” I said instead. “He helped me explore my limits. Jerome seems to be challenging me the whole time.” Blue gave me a quizzical look. “That’s not what really bothers you, is it?”

I should have expected the question. It was the first time I was keeping secrets from my friends, and I probably wasn’t a good liar. Yet. That was the perfect moment to tell Blue the truth. But how could I explain something I wasn’t sure I could explain to myself in the first place?

“What do you mean?” I asked. “Besides the fact that every muscle in my body aches?”

Blue gave me a wicked smile. “Well, just forget about him now. Let’s get dressed. There’s a band playing at the Waves tonight. I’m sure a night out will make you feel better.”

A girls’ night wasn’t enough to make me forget the voices, Jerome, and that menacing shrink’s couch. But being around Megan and Blue always made things easier. The bond we shared was very special, and it was getting stronger year by year. There

was a funny part; like the way we completed each other's sentences. But there was a darker part too; there had been times we could literally feel each other's emotions; even physical pain. But that was our secret. A secret we'd only shared with Sister Merentith. I used to think that a large part of that bond came from our wounded past. A wound carved from the suffering of loss.

Megan's parents had died in a car crash when she was eight years old. The only thing that bonded her to her past was a family album left by her grandma, her only relative, who'd died shortly after her parents' accident. I never told Megan, but I had always thought it was really strange to have only one photo of her parents in it. As I never told her that with her curly blonde hair she didn't look at all like her Latino parents.

Blue had never met her father, as he'd left her mom before Blue was born. She'd never talk about her mom either, except for that one time when she told us that her mother was an alcoholic who had died in her sleep. Blue had been the one to find her. Like Megan, she was only eight years old when that happened. On her sixteenth birthday, she changed her name from Maggie to Blue. It was the day she dyed her blonde hair in a light blue color. With her porcelain skin and green eyes, she looked almost ethereal; like a fairy that popped out from the pages of a storybook.

The Waves club was close to the Academy, and that made it very popular with students. It often hosted live shows with indie groups. Otherwise, the owners would always find a reason to have a party. Megan worked part-time waitressing there, so we had made it our favorite hang-out.



The night turned out far better than I had expected. The club was teeming with summer-school, Academy students, and only a few locals; sweaty bodies that swayed to the Latin rhythm the band played.

I was savoring a strawberry mojito when I saw Jake wave at me, holding up a bottle of beer. I waved back and tried to hide my surprise when I saw him push his way among the crowd towards me. He looked cute in his loose jeans and black t-shirt. Like Jerome, he wore his hair in a ponytail, but his hair was fair; nothing like Jerome's ebony silk.

All of a sudden, the memory of Jerome pressed against my body made me sigh.

“Hey,” Jake said leaning closer.

“Hi, Jake. I’ve never seen you here before. Are you sure you’re in the right place?”

Jake didn’t miss the bitter edge in my voice and smiled awkwardly. “I guess I deserved that. Listen, I wanted to apologize... For the other day... At the gym?”

I rattled the ice cubes in my nearly drained glass. “No need to. It was just...”

“Unacceptable. Totally unprofessional,” he added.

I chuckled. “Honestly, what was that? Like, did you make a bet on who would fall first?”

Jake’s eyes widened at my words. “Wow! You’re good! What gave us away?”

Not exactly the answer I hoped for. “You did. Just now.”

“Oops!” he said, and I watched him try to wash down the bashfulness with a desperate gulp of beer. “I’m the worst when it comes to apologizing. I just...”

“Forget it, Jake, please. I’m just joking.”

“Good. Because I promised Jerome, I’d apologize.”

“He made you do this?”

Another gulp of beer. “No. But he agreed it was the right thing to do. Did I mention I’m here on behalf of the whole gang?”

“We’re okay. Really.”

“Good, good. Because we should be taking our job more seriously. Jerome’s words.”

“Of course. Training is a responsible job, I guess.”

Only for a brief moment, Jake squinted skeptically in the dim light.

Beer interval again. “I hope that incident won’t put you off; about your training I mean.”

“Absolutely not,” I said, thinking about all the other strange things that did put me off.

When the awkward phase wore off, Jake asked about my courses in Brassington Academy; that led us to discuss my training program. Before I knew it, I was asking about Jerome’s whereabouts, but Jake shrugged and told me that last time he saw Jerome, he was at the gym pool. Giving me a puzzled look, he asked what I thought about Jerome training me.

“He’s tough,” I said.

Jake nodded with a lopsided smile. “He has to be. He’s one of the best.”

I wasn’t sure how to respond to that.

“Don’t worry. You’re in good hands,” Jake continued. Attempting to shift the topic, I asked him about my previous trainer, Matt. I didn’t make much out of Jake’s evasive answers. It seemed that Matt had found another job in some place Jake was not eager to reveal. He did, however, convince me that Matt wasn’t coming back to Brassington Hills.

A few minutes later, I watched Jake leave, thinking that I should be feeling relieved that Jerome was not around. I recalled his dark eyes and the warmth of his body against mine during our torturous training. I drained my glass in one sip.

“What did I miss?” Blue took Jake’s place next to me.

“Not much. I’m going home” I told her, suddenly losing my good mood. “Are you coming?”

“Sure. I’m not letting you go home alone. That break-in the other day has creeped me out.”

I couldn’t argue that. Finding the door of the apartment I shared with the girls wide open and everything inside turned upside-down had caused a lot of worry to everyone in the guesthouse. Nothing was missing; of course, none of us had any valuables anyway. The police had not found any fingerprints, either. That made everyone think the whole situation could be just a freshman prank.

The following training sessions with Jerome were even worse. There was more rope-jumping and weight-lifting but no voices, no challenging stares and, basically, no touching. Jerome, always taciturn and imposing, selected his training methods in a way that kept him at a safe distance from me. I, on the other hand, wasn’t sure how that made me feel. Part of me was relieved that there was less awkwardness, but there was that other part that felt neglected and disappointed.

Until a couple of weeks later when things between us changed. The moment I saw Jerome that morning, I thought that something about him was different. Same hairdo, same black outfit, same pinball abs; yet, there was something about him that made him more appealing. Besides, he *was* smiling!

Of course, training was still hard. When I could not feel my arms and legs after a

program of weight-lifting, Jerome gave me a pair of red boxing gloves and pointed to the punching bag.

“I’m not happy with your muscle strength.” He looked at me briefly. “I don’t know what you’ve been doing with Matt all this time.”

“Well Matt acknowledged the fact that I’m not going to the Olympics,” I said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Jerome blinked, looking at me like I’d just said the craziest thing.

Thinking that this could be my window to come out clean, I went on. “I mean...” I cleaned my throat. “Look, I’m not exactly the kind of girl you...” I stopped before the wrong word came out. “... expected. You must have got that by now.”

I watched his expression change from surprised to amused as the words sank in. “How do you know what I expected?” he asked.

“Look, I’m here because I have to, not because I like it.”

Jerome arched a brow at me questioningly. “So, this attitude of yours, it’s not because of me?”

“I don’t have an attitude. And why would it be because of you?”

“Oh, come on I! I know you didn’t want me to train you.” I suddenly realized I wasn’t ready for that much honesty. “I just...” Once again words eluded me; apparently, I could not lie to him.

Jerome chuckled. “It’s okay. I tried to avoid you too.”

“You did?”

“No offense, but I’m not good at working with others.”

“Same here.”

He gave me a rueful smile, his eyes never leaving mine. “The guys thought you had a thing for Matt.”

“What? This is ridiculous!”

The night at Waves flashed back to me with my persistent questions about Matt’s whereabouts and Jake’s suspicious look.

Jerome just shrugged and headed to the boxing ring. “If you say so.”

“No, wait!” *This is really embarrassing*, I thought. Jerome stopped and turned to face me. “It’s not about Matt, and it’s not about you. It’s just... It’s this thing I have. I need to have a steady routine around me. Whenever there’s a change... I just don’t do

well...It makes me..." *Okay, maybe I should drop Martial Arts for an intensive vocabulary course.*

"Insecure?"

He'd said the right word. I could never admit it to myself, but when I heard him say it, it felt like a weight was lifted off my chest.

"So, you don't like training. What else don't you like?" Jerome asked.

I thought about how honest I should be with him.

"Fighting?" I said, without even thinking about it. Not totally true. Part of me had always loved fighting. I could recall some pretty messy wrestling matches back at the Shelter, not exactly the normal practice in the PE class. These always took place in the changing rooms or the dorms.

"Why don't we find out?" He threw a bottle of water to me. "Hey, I'm sorry if I put you in a spot here. I mean, I can only imagine how tough amnesia must be."

I braced myself for the pity attack that always ensued when my amnesia issue came up. I hated that part. But there was no expression of pity coming from Jerome. He just turned to the punching bag and held it steady.

"You look pissed again," he said.

I felt my body stiffen. "I'm not."

"Pissed is good," Jerome ignored me. "We can work with that." He gave me an irresistible smile. "Go ahead. Take it all out on the bag. Think of it as the reason for your amnesia." He raised a brow adding, "Or as me if it works for you. Let your anger out on it!"

He leaned slightly forward. "And, for the record, I'm not fond of sporty girls."

I rolled my eyes, convincing myself that I had only imagined the flutter in my stomach. To think of the punching bag as Jerome, would make me feel much more than anger and I meant to spare myself the mortification, at least for that day.

"You want me to visualize the hurricane that almost had me drowned?"

"You think it was the hurricane. I'm saying it's ...this bag," Jerome smirked.

I hit the bag, softly at first and then I kept on harder and harder. Jerome was watching me intently, and I tried to focus on the bag, hitting hard, almost forgetting where I was and discovering how I was enjoying the blows. One blow after another, my mind must have gone blank. I was lost in an unprecedented trance, my fists having

a mind of their own, hitting the bag with incredible force again and again.

“Wow! Slow down!” Jerome was standing behind me, holding my arms steady as I tried to jerk away from him. “Madison, what just happened?”

“What do you mean?” I turned to face him.

“I’ve been trying to stop you for a few minutes now.”

I tried to catch my breath, realizing that the muscles of my arms were burning me. My knuckles felt sore and tingling. But that wasn’t what worried me. I was hot, and all flustered up with an overwhelming sensation; an unparalleled hunger. Not a hunger for food but for something else. Something sweet I could not exactly define. Something that was definitely wrong. I tried to blink away the feeling.

“Maybe, I visualized too much?” I said among fast breaths, turning to him.

“I wonder...” Jerome was looking at me, but there was no hint of worry in his eyes. Instead, there was a spark of satisfaction in their darkness and... Could it be desire that made him look at me like he wanted to devour me? And what was that weird attraction, that magnetic pull? It made me move closer to Jerome, pulling my body hard against his.

“This is not the place... Mortals are watching.” His lips had not moved, but I heard the voice again.

I was still fazed by the surge of energy that emanated from somewhere deep inside, as my body responded to Jerome’s unspoken call. I could almost touch the invisible twirl of power that encircled us. There was nowhere else to go but to him; it was never a matter of choice. I just didn’t know it by then.

Jerome took a step back and I felt immediately released. My lungs were on fire and my heart pumped frantically. I closed my eyes in an effort to calm down and re-connect with reality.

“Let it go,” the voice said.

“Madison are you alright? Do you want to take a break?” Jerome was speaking to me, sounding worried. Was it possible that I was the only one who’d felt all that? Well, I *was* the one hearing voices.

Opening my eyes, I studied his face.

“Let it go.”

“Actually, yes,” I said eventually. “Do you mind if we call it a day? I’m not feeling

well.”

He looked concerned for a moment before letting me go.

On my way out, my cell buzzed. Before answering it, I saw that there were two missed calls from Blue. Megan’s voice sounded worried.

“Mads?”

“Hey, Megan.”

“Is everything okay?”

“Fine, why?”

“I had this strange feeling about you and... I had to call. Blue couldn’t reach you either.”

“I was at the gym. I’m on my way now.”

“But, something’s going on, right?”

“I’ll tell you everything. And Megan, tell Blue it’s comfort food alert. I’m in no mood for a healthy diet right now.”

“I’m on it Mads. See you.”