



Chapter One

“Race you to the top.”

Theron Wade watched his squad mate and best friend, Sienna Rossi, clap her chalky hands together, sending up a cloud of white dust. They were in the Enclave gym, standing in front of a large climbing wall.

Usually, they’d be out fighting the aliens who’d invaded the Earth a year and a half before. But while their squad was on standby, there’d been no mission that morning, and Sienna had challenged him to some climbing.

She smiled at him. That was Sienna. Always happy and sunny. Even after the invasion and all the destruction and fighting, she was like a ray of sunshine. He still remembered the first day he’d seen her among the panicked and shell-shocked survivors milling around at Blue Mountain Base. She’d been calming crying kids and touching people’s shoulders.

Today, she had her curly, dark hair clasped at the back of her neck, and her curvy little body covered in black leggings and a purple tank top.

Theron grunted, slapping some chalk on his own hands. He wasn’t supposed to be concerned with what she was wearing, or what was beneath her clothes.

Sienna faced the climbing wall, crouching a little and stretching her neck from side to side. “Loser owes the winner ice cream.” Her nose wrinkled. “I know you’ll want chocolate ice cream with nothing on it, but when I win, Big T, you’ll owe me an ice-cream sundae. With the works. Whipped cream, chocolate syrup, and sprinkles.”

Sienna and her damn sprinkles. She was addicted to them. He was listening to her words, but his gaze was drawn to her body again. Her tight workout gear highlighted her curves, and when she bent over to stretch, he had a perfect view of her ass.

He jerked his gaze away. “How do you stay in shape when you’re always eating chocolate and ice cream?”

She wiggled her curvy butt and grinned at him, clipping the safety line on the wall onto her belt. “I’ve got a good metabolism, and I train hard.” She reached over and clipped his line on. “Ready?”

He nodded, but before he focused, she shot away, climbing up the wall like a spider.

Theron cursed and followed her. She was the best climber on their squad. Fast, nimble, and fearless.

“La miglior difesa è l’attacco,” she called back.

He loved it when she spoke Italian with that lyrical accent. She spouted enough of her mother’s and grandmother’s sayings that he’d started to pick up a little of the language. “The best defense is a good attack?”

“Sì!”

She was well ahead of him as he scaled the wall. She moved steadily, finding each hold and pulling herself upward.

“You’ll have to move faster than that!” She laughed down at him.

The sound speared into him. He glanced up, and again his gaze went straight to the perfect curve of her ass. He imagined peeling that stretchy fabric off her, uncovering smooth, bronze skin. He imagined his big hands palming those curves.

Theron’s foot slipped. He muttered a curse and regained his footing. He heard her laugh once more. He continued moving upward, but ahead of him, Sienna crowed with glee as she reached the top.

“I win!” She grinned down at him, her face flushed. Just how she looked in his nighttime fantasies when he’d finished fucking her.

Blowing out a harsh breath, Theron paused beside her.

He didn’t remember when he’d started wanting her. Most days it felt like forever.

“Now, I’m going to test out these little babies.” She pulled out a pair of black gloves. He saw the palms of them were shiny as she pulled them on.

“What are they?” he asked.

“Experimental climbing gloves. Noah Kim and his team made them for me.” She lifted her gloved hands and wiggled her fingers. “I’ve nicknamed them gecko gloves. They have synthetic adhesion, that mimics how a gecko sticks to a wall.” She reached down and unclipped her safety line.

Theron’s heart kicked his ribs. “Sienna.” Noah and his team of genius geeks were good, but it was still a long fall.

“It’s fine.” She pressed her palms to the smooth wall between handholds...and stuck there like a gecko. She flashed him another smile and started climbing down.

Yeah, he wanted Sienna. But he couldn’t touch her.

There were so many reasons why. She was his squad mate, his best friend, and on top of all that, she was sweet and kind and light, and he...wasn’t.

Theron knew himself pretty well. He wasn’t a talkative, easygoing man, and he had...darker tastes. Tastes that would leave sweet Sienna horrified. No, he wouldn’t be good for her. She needed a nice, regular guy who’d do everything she wanted and make her smile.

“Theron?”

He looked down and realized she’d reached the bottom. She was watching him, her brown eyes narrowed.

He grunted, reached for his belt, and let out his safety line. He zipped down to the ground.

“Are you okay?” She pressed a hand to his arm. “You’ve been edgy lately.”

“It’s been quiet.” He shrugged a shoulder. “Aliens are laying low since the last confrontation, and it’s been too long since I had a good fight.”

She nodded, but didn’t look convinced. She walked over to their things, stripped off her gloves, grabbed a towel, and mopped her face. “We need to find a way to stop this *oura* device.”

He grabbed his own towel, and blotted the perspiration away. She wasn’t wrong. The *oura* was an alien globe the Gizzida had developed that could control human minds. They’d both seen it used on their friends during the last alien attack. The squads had managed to bring one of the functioning gold globes in, and he knew the geeks in the tech squad were doing their best to figure out how it worked, and find a way to nullify the globe’s effects.

“What we need is to find this secret weapon of theirs,” he countered.

The *oura* was a problem, but they had an even bigger one. The squads had very vague intel that the aliens had invented some sort of secret weapon. A weapon capable of wiping out the last surviving pockets of humanity.

There weren’t that many humans left. Survivors had huddled together in places like the Enclave, and other military bases around the world. They were fighting to survive, and they were fighting back. Theron had dedicated himself completely to his squad, and to fighting the Gizzida.

His way of making up for fucking up. His muscles locked, darkness rising in his chest. For not saving his family, or his fellow Army Rangers.

“God, I wish we knew what it was,” she said.

Her voice snapped him out of his black thoughts. He moved over to a small fridge by the wall and grabbed a couple of bottles of water. He tossed her one.

He needed to focus on his job, but first, he needed to blow off some steam. He decided he’d head back to his quarters and pound his punching bag for an hour or five. Then he’d shower and jerk off. He’d imagine his hand sinking into Sienna’s curls and holding her still as he fucked her mouth.

Shit. He wasn’t touching Sienna. There was no way he was going to ruin their friendship, or their working relationship.

She was too important to him.

Sienna slung her towel around her neck and watched Theron.

Her squad mate was huge, over six-and-a-half feet tall, with broad shoulders and muscular arms. He could bench press her. She knew because they’d tried it once, in front of the rest of their squad, laughing with them.

Theron didn’t say a lot and tended to stay in the background. But once you got a good look at his rugged face and steady hazel eyes, he caught your attention. He had this way of looking at you like he was cataloguing everything about you—inside and out. She watched him rub the towel over brown hair that was neither long nor short.

She could imagine him as a big, quiet teen, running herd on his foster brothers and sisters. He’d told her bits and pieces about being adopted at five, and all the other kids his parents had fostered. Sienna knew that steady, solid Theron would have been the perfect protective big brother.

His gaze flicked her way, and she caught a glimpse of the starburst gold in the green before he quickly looked away.

She frowned. Her friend wasn't acting like his usual self. To most people in the Enclave, he probably looked no different than normal. But she sensed a fine tension vibrating in him, the stiff way he held himself. For a big man, Theron was usually pretty graceful.

He tipped his water bottle back and her gaze zoomed in on his throat, watching as the muscles worked. His damp gray T-shirt clung to his perfectly formed muscles.

Sienna felt a curl of heat through her belly. It was official. She was lusting after her best friend.

And she knew he wanted to fuck her brains out.

She let out a shuddering breath and took a cooling sip of her own water. She was still reeling from that revelation. And he didn't know that she knew.

It had happened during the Enclave Christmas party a few days ago. Theron had stormed out of the gathering, and she'd followed his grumpy, antisocial ass back to his quarters, planning to drag him back to the celebration.

Instead, she found herself standing at the door to his room, watching as he pulled a large—a very large and very hard—cock out of his trousers and stroked himself.

She'd been frozen, watching those long pulls, desire flaring in her hard and fast. She'd instantly gone damp between her thighs, and when Theron had come, he'd called out her name.

Sienna blew out a breath. She'd stood there trembling, turned on, and shocked that this was her *friend*. Shocked that she'd wanted to slide to her knees in front of him and take him inside her mouth, and drink every drop of what he had to offer.

"The aliens will attack soon," Theron said, startling her out of her dirty musings, his voice a deep rumble.

She nodded, trying to refocus on their conversation. "General Holmes and Niko have every drone in the air, searching for any sign of the *oura*, or clues about this mysterious weapon." She hoped to hell Theron couldn't tell that her voice was huskier than usual.

He gave a single nod. His face reminded her of granite—tough and unshakable. Looking at him now, she couldn't tell that this was the man who'd called her name as he'd orgasmed.

Maybe the night of the party had been an aberration? He'd never said anything, or gave her any indication he was attracted to her. Sienna was used to guys showing interest.

She sighed and set her water down. Usually nice guys. She was pretty and cute, and she'd never had to work hard to get a boyfriend. But the attraction never lasted. The guys she'd been with, especially since the invasion, couldn't seem to make sense of her. Pretty woman and soldier. They just couldn't accept her as both.

It was the story of her life. So she liked nice things and could also handle a carbine. She liked colored sprinkles on her ice cream, and could also kill a man in about thirty different ways.

She'd confused her family, too. Her big, sprawling Italian family had been all about togetherness, babies, and food. Everyone had known everyone else's business. Her mother had wanted Sienna to take over the family restaurant in Rome. Her older sister had three kids and another on the way, and her younger sister had just gotten engaged, when the aliens had attacked.

Intense sadness hit Sienna like a ballistic round. God, her sweet nieces and nephews. Her family. Rome had been heavily bombarded during the early waves of the invasion. As far as Sienna knew, her entire family had perished.

It had taken her a long time to accept the fact that they were all gone, now. The pain was a hard ball in her chest that never quite went away. But her squad had helped. All the members of Squad Nine had become her family. They'd helped fill the gaping hole inside her.

And that included Theron.

She remembered that day he'd staggered into Blue Mountain Base. He'd fought through several raptor patrols just to make it there. He'd been covered in blood, and he'd looked so alone, so broken. She now knew he'd lost his family that horrible day.

Theron was the first person she could just sit with and either talk and talk, or enjoy companionable silence...and it always felt right.

But as she looked up at him—the man she'd depended on and trusted with her life for the last eighteen months—she realized she needed something more from him.

Except for the two of them, the gym was empty, and Sienna decided it was time for her to finally test the waters. She yanked her tank top over her head.

A sharp hiss of breath. "What are you doing?"

She grabbed a towel, blotting at her chest. "I'm hot and sweaty."

He was staring at her. No, he was staring at the sexy black whisper of lace she wore.

She cocked her hip. "What do you think of the lingerie?"

“Put your top back on.”

She pouted at him. “Don’t you like it? It was a mysterious gift from a Secret Santa. You should see the panties.” Liking the shocked panic on his face, she hooked her thumb in the waistband of her sports leggings.

A big hand clamped on hers. “Sienna.” A warning tone.

She looked up and froze. The gold in his hazel eyes had intensified, and his face was taut and strained. A rush of heat flooded her belly.

“Most guys think I’m into pastel lace—pink, baby-blue, seafoam—but someone thought this suited me better. What do you think?”

He just stared at her.

“Theron?” she murmured.

He inched closer, heat pouring off his big body. She felt the coiled tension in him, like he was about to explode into action. Like he was about to yank her into his chest and finally touch her.

All of a sudden, the gym doors flew open, and Mackenna Carides strode in.

The second-in-command of their squad was even shorter than Sienna, but every inch of her was tightly packed muscle. Mac had no trouble putting any of the male soldiers on their ass during training.

“Roth wants everyone in the squad locker room,” Mac said. “Now.”

Theron backed away from Sienna. “We have a mission?”

Sienna sighed and grabbed her tank, yanking it back over her head. “Did the drones find something?”

Mac nodded. “Apparently. I don’t have all the details yet. Five minutes.” The dark-haired woman strode for the door. “I have to drag Cam out of the pool. See you there.”

Sienna straightened her tank. Theron had turned away from her, gathering his things, pretending nothing had happened.

She stared at his wide, muscled back. There was something between them, something he was ignoring, and something she couldn’t resist.

It was time she decided exactly what she wanted to do about Theron Wade. She just wasn’t sure what the hell that was yet.

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