

CHAPTER FOUR

We walked down the blue glowing tunnel that led out from Mystic's room and stepped back into the hallway. Mystic abracadabrad his fingers over the filing cabinet, and it slid back into place.

Mystic, Bruiser, and I followed David through the underground corridors back to the elevator that we all had used when coming down here. David punched in his personal code, and we stepped inside.

Bruiser and I exchanged a questioning glance. "But what about her room?"

"Your room," David answered, "is on Sub Floor Two."

"Sub Floor Two?" I perked up. Cool. I'd wondered what else was on that floor.

One, of course, was our ranch level. Sub Two contained Parrot's room. Sub Three, I'd discovered while prepping for my last mission, was the clinic where Dr. Gretchen worked. And we'd all known what was on Sub Four since day one—our conference room and the other secret rooms.

David pointed to the elevator's control panel. In the center of it was a small black box which looked like a camera. "This is an exhalation analyzer. It is programmed to read your DNA via your breath. Step forward and breathe into it."

An exhalation analyzer? And here I'd always thought it was a camera.

"Freakin' A, that's cool." Bruiser stepped up to the analyzer and breathed a quick, fast breath.

The elevator ascended, stopped at Sub Two, the door opened, and Bruiser's mouth simultaneously dropped.

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I peered over her head—being tall always had its advantages—and into, well, a gymnasium was how I supposed it would be described. Then again, the only physical training room I'd ever been in was our barn where we had daily PT. So I wasn't exactly an expert when it came to identifying work out rooms.

“Where's Parrot's room in relation to this?” I asked.

“On the other side of the wall.” David motioned his head across the room. “Separated by five feet of concrete.”

Mouth still open, Bruiser slowly stepped into the enormous room.

This place was bigger than all the other secret rooms. Octangular in shape, I estimated it covered over one hundred square feet. A fighting rink sprawled the center of the room, bordered by thick wire mesh. It had a red floor with some sort of Asian symbol painted on it.

Bruiser wandered off to the left, and I watched her as she found her way around the room in a sort of daze. She passed by a wall with an assortment of weapons: swords, knives, throwing stars, numb chucks.

She reached up for a sword, and taking it from the wall, turned to David. “Sparring?”

He nodded. “They're dull.”

With a nod, she continued around the room, idly swishing the sword through the air. She passed by punching bags, a collection of body pads, hanging rings, a rack of dumbbells, and came to a stop at the edge of a section of bamboo flooring.

Kicking her running shoes off, she stepped onto the bamboo and gave a slight bounce. A slow smile curved her face as she turned to all of us. “Oh, yeah.”

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And then she launched into a series of spins that looked like a cross between martial arts and gymnastics. I'd seen her in action many times, but her speed and agility always left me speechless.

She came to a stop just as quickly as she had begun and wandered off the bamboo and over to a book shelf. She stood for a second perusing, and then reached up and slid one free. She opened it and flipped through. "Sa-weet. The latest meridian book."

I turned to David and Mystic. "Meridian?"

"Pressure points in your body," Mystic answered. "Used in holistic healing and martial arts among other things."

"Hmmm." It sounded like Mystic and Bruiser's specialties shared similarities. Of course, I wouldn't point that out to them. They were the antithesis of each other.

While Bruiser continued looking through her books, I took in the rest of the room. A shower in the corner, a climbing wall, dangling ropes, thick poles I assumed were for some workout reason, and like Mystic's place, Bruiser had a desk and computer.

Like I said, I knew next to nothing about gyms, but this seemed pretty darn cool.

Bruiser closed the book and with it tucked under her arm, turned to David.

"Unbelievable. There's not one thing I can think of that I don't have."

David smiled a little. "Well, if you do think of something, just let me or TL know, and we'll get it for you."

Bruiser grinned. "Can I have an endless supply of chocolate?"

David gave her a playfully disciplinary look. "Within reason."

She laughed and started bouncing in place. "Can I stay?"

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David nodded. “Not long. Remember we have a meeting with TL. Dinner and rest and we start first thing in the morning.”

She gave another bounce. “Is this where we’re training for the Demise Chain mission.”

David nodded again.

Bruiser headed over to a punching bag. “Oh, goodie,”

David stepped back into the elevator, and Mystic and I followed.

Mystic pressed the Sub Four button and the doors closed. “I’m heading to my room.”

David started to say something and Mystic held up his hand. “I know dinner and rest and we start first thing in the morning.”

David smiled his acknowledgment. The elevator descended, Mystic got off, and the door closed, shutting David and I alone in the elevator.

Immediately my stomach kicked in with nervousness.

Neither one of us moved to punch in our code, and I detected uneasiness in him, too.

“Do you realize,” I softly said, “this is the first time we’ve been alone in a month?”

Smiling a little, he turned to me. “And this will probably be the last time we have an alone moment until after this mission.”

I nodded, understanding if we were going to finally talk about things, now was it. “Can we talk?”

Folding his gorgeous, muscular arms over his beautiful chest, he leaned back against the wall. “Yes, let’s.”

“I thought—” he started at the same time I said, “You know—”

We both laughed a little, and he motioned me to go ahead.

“You know,” I began again, “the last real conversation we had was over a month ago. And we both know how that played out. I told you about Professor Quirk and you told me you needed time to think. And then you got sent away on a mission, we exchanged a few text messages, no phone calls, and here we are.”

David nodded. “Being a Specialist doesn’t give much time for other things, does it?”

I chuckled a breath. “That’s putting it lightly.”

He smiled at that. “And so?” he prompted me.

I sighed. “David, I guess at this point I just want to know what’s on your mind. I know you’re not happy about Professor Quirk, but let me remind you *he* kissed *me*.”

David nodded. “I know that, GiGi. You’re a beautiful, intelligent woman. Guys are going to hit on you. That’s just a fact of life.”

I tried not to get flattered at the beautiful part, but I *was* a girl after all. “Then why do I feel like we’re going to break up over this?”

He didn’t respond, just kept looking at me.

“David?” And then it dawned on me, and my heart paused a beat. “*Are we breaking up?*”

“GiGi,” he quietly sighed. “It wasn’t the kiss. It was never the kiss.”

“Then what?” I asked, surprised that I could talk with a huge lump forming in my throat.

“It was the ‘we clicked on an intellectual level’ part. That really hurt.”

I swallowed. “Oh, David. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean—”

With a shake of his head, he held up his hand. “Tell me what you want.”

For you to touch me, to hug me, to tell me we’re okay. But instead, I shook my head, unable to collect my suddenly spinning thoughts. *What can I say to save this? What can I do?*

“That’s just it,” he softly responded. “I don’t think you know what you want.”

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I want you, I wanted to say, but instead responded, “What do *you* want?”

He gave me a sad smile. “You shouldn’t have to ask me that.”

“But . . .” hadn’t he just asked me that exact same question?

“And now,” David continued, “with Randy temporarily here, I don’t know. I just don’t know.”

I swallowed.

“I don’t know what else to do.” He closed his eyes. “I thought we were fine, great in fact. Then this thing with Randy comes up. Now he’s here, and obviously there’s something between you.”

“What? No,” I denied. “We’re friends, that’s all.”

David’s expression softened as he gazed at me, not saying anything.

Finally, he nodded. “Truth be told, GiGi, somewhere deep inside I knew this wouldn’t work. Dating, living under the same roof, working for the same organization. It’s too much. It’s too close.”

Pushing off the wall, he ran his hands down his face and sighed. “Yes, we’re breaking up. I’ve been thinking and rethinking the whole problem for the past month. Usually, I don’t take so long to make decisions. But I find myself acting out-of-character when I’m around you.”

I didn’t like him labeling me as a problem. But, weird enough, I experienced a spark of hope that he acted ‘out-of-character’ around me. Surely, that had to be a good sign that he thought of me special enough to act so differently when he was around me.

David reached around me, punched in his code, and the elevator began ascending. “Yes, it’s definitely not a good idea for people who work together to date.”

“That’s what Randy said,” I mumbled and then immediately realized I shouldn’t have.

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David shook his head. “Nice, GiGi.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Listen, we work to close together for there to be any awkwardness between us. So,” he held out his hand, “friends?”

I felt like I was back in the cafeteria with Randy.

David lifted his brows, waiting.

And so I did the only I could. I reached out and took his hand. “Friends.”

* * *

Dinner and a good night’s sleep did not happen to me. All I could think of was David. I played and replayed every moment we’d spent together. Every word we’d spoken. Every kiss, every touch. Come five in the morning, I’d had about enough of my wildly running thoughts. I got up, dressed, and made my way down to the lab. I did the only thing I could to forget about David, I dove into my Demise Chain assignment.

I had exactly six days before I went in front of Harry Noor with my state-of-the-art program. Mystic and David had exactly eight days until tryouts, eight days to learn how to be world class fighters. *Plenty of time*, I tried to convince myself.

I spent hours researching something I never thought in a million years I would. Fighting. I watched countless videos that had been filmed all over the world, some legal, some not so much.

I poured through archived files of the library, the internet, and, believe it or not, the History channel. I played a few fighting video games. I analyzed programs that were currently on the market. I hacked into servers to find out which software developers Harry Noor, the owner of

Demise Chain, was meeting with. And then I hacked into those developer's computers to see what they'd come up with.

I knew TL didn't like me hacking things without prior approval, but this was for him and his family. He wouldn't mind.

Back to my research . . . I took notes. I cross referenced those notes with other notes. And then I found myself with a whole list of questions for Bruiser.

List tucked in my pocket, I walked into our bedroom and found her laying on her bed with her head buried in her pillow.

"Hey," I said, plopping down beside her on her bed. "Why aren't you training?"

"We're on a ten minute break," she mumbled into the pillow.

"What's up with you?" She rarely, if ever, looked down and out.

She let out a long, loud sigh. "GiiiGiii," she whined, "I don't want to do this."

"Do what?" And then it dawned on me. "The mission? But why? It's fighting. It's what your specialty is."

"I'm not going to be fighting. I'm going to be Mystic's stupid girlfriend." She rolled over. "I'll be standing on the sidelines looking all dumb and airheady."

I laughed. "Who says you have to be dumb and airheady?"

Bruiser heaved another sigh. "TL. Just a few minutes ago before he told us to take a break."

"What?" That didn't make any sense.

"He says Harry Noor likes his girls sweet and innocent and a tidbit dumb."

I laughed again. "What? But you're not going to be Harry's girl, you're Mystic's."

Bruiser wiggled up on the bed. “I know. But TL wants to do everything possible to be in Harry Noor’s good graces. He doesn’t want to do anything to raise flags, piss anybody off, etcetera.”

I nodded. “Well, that does make sense. Mr. Noor *is* the owner of the Demise Chain, and we want to get into the fights. And we definitely need to play all of our cards right. And if TL thinks your being sweet, innocent, and a little dumb will contribute to that, then he knows what he’s talking about.”

With a groan, Bruiser dropped her head back. “Why do girls always have to play the sidelines? I can fight better than David and Mystic. *I* should be competing, not them.” She slammed her fist into her hand. “I’d bust some people up.”

“Bruiser, you’re not on the sidelines. You’re part of a top secret mission to save TL’s daughter.” Hello? Did she not see this? “I’ve been on four missions now, and you’d be amazed what roles people play and how they all fit together into a sort of puzzle to solve the greater problem.”

“I mean, my God,” I continued, “Jonathan was my modeling agent in Ushbania. Do you think he really liked that? And me? Ug. I was a model? And Nalani in Rissala was a greasy, toothless boat captain. And Beaker in Barracuda Key a cheerleader? Can anybody say snort? And then down in the Junoesque Jungle, I had no control. I was just another female, serving the guys, sitting in the back. My point is, it all comes together in the end, and every role is just as important as the next.”

“I hear what you’re saying.” Bruiser scrunched up her face. “It’s just . . . well, fighting is my one true talent. I’m not as smart as the rest of you guys.”

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“What? What are you talking about? That’s absolutely ridiculous,” I argued. Bruiser was one of the smartest girls I knew. And funny. And great to be around.

“Hey.” Mystic stuck his head in. “Can I come in?”

We both waved him in.

He lowered himself to his usual spot at the foot of Bruiser’s bed. And folding his legs up, he took what I referred to as his meditative position.

We both stared at him, waiting . . .

“This mission is against everything I believe in. Everything my parents taught me.” He looked up at us. “And I’m trying to figure out a way to tell TL I can’t fight. There’s got to be a way to get me in that room without requiring me to fight.”

I almost rolled my eyes. Why did it seem like it was my job to convince my team members to go on missions? When had I become the ranch’s Psychologist?

“I know,” Bruiser agreed. “I’m not happy about this either. I say we both go and talk to TL. There’s got to be some other way. And, dude,” Bruiser reached over me and bopped Mystic in the head, “I can’t believe you don’t want to fight. I’d give anything to be in your shoes.”

“Guys.” I held up my hands. “TL would not design a mission and put you into a role unless he felt you were fully capable. And he’s certainly not going to redesign a mission based on your uncomfortableness. Believe me, I know.” I felt like a broken record. Hadn’t I said similar things to all my other team members?

“It’s an honor,” I continued, “to be chosen.”

The both just looked at me.

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“Listen,” I said, none so gently. “This is part of our new life. It comes with it. God knows I’ve done things I didn’t want to.” I got up off the bed. “That’s the bottom line. So you just have to suck it up.”

They both scowled at me.

I walked from the room, feeling like a crabby butt for my harshness, and not quite understanding why I had gotten so irritable with them. I guess I just didn’t have the patience right now. Maybe it was the whole thing with David and Randy. I didn’t know.

“Jeez, Kelly, can you be any less understanding?”

I turned to see Randy leaning against the hallway wall.

“Everybody gets scared when they’re prepping for their first mission, especially when it’s out of their realm of comfortable zone. Everybody experiences second thoughts.” Randy pushed up from the wall.

David came out of his bedroom. “I agree with Randy.”

Great, now I felt even worse.

David knocked on my open bedroom door. “Hey, guys, can we talk?”

Mystic and Bruiser waved him in and Randy followed.

With a sigh, I turned and walked off, feeling more and more horrible about myself with each step. I needed to apologize. Next time I saw them I would.

* * *

That evening I found myself in my lab pounding my head. Give me something to hack or a code to break and no problem. Design a state-of-the-art, not-like-anything-else fighting program from scratch? Sheesh. What did they want from me?

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I had a ton of questions and knew Bruiser had the answers, but after what had happened earlier, I didn't feel comfortable approaching her. Or Mystic for that matter.

Chapling sat over in the corner behind some patch panels. I couldn't see him, but I knew he was testing (on himself) the Influence-Sway Skins (his creation, his term) that he'd taken from Dr. Gretchen and tweaked to fit our needs. The Skins would not only record muscle aptitude, they would give us a multi dimensional image of the skeletal. If they worked, we'd use them in conjunction with the Combat-Thrash program (my creation/my term) that I had yet to fully develop. The program that would coach any fighter to greatness.

“OW!” he yelped.

Guess the testing wasn't going so well.

My cell buzzed and I looked at the display.

* * * TL's stat code.

Chapling waddled out from behind the patch panel, rubbing his chest through his T-shirt.

“I need to find someone else to test things on.” He squinted his eyes at me.

I held my hands up. “No. Nonononono.”

He smiled. “Let's go. Did you get the stat code?”

I nodded and followed him out the computer lab and down the hall to the conference room.