

CHAPTER SIX

Dr. Gretchen half-snorted/half laughed. “Jonathan and I don’t hate each other.”

I gave her an incredulous look. “Right.”

She heaved a heavy sigh. “Really, we don’t.”

“That’s not what Jonathan said.” It was low ball of me, seeing as how Jonathan hadn’t said anything one way or another.

Dr. Gretchen’s eyes narrowed to two tiny beads. “What did he say?”

I shrugged and glanced away. “This and that.”

“Listen.” She shoved out of her chair. “It wasn’t *my* fault the spear went through his eye.”

A spear? I concentrated on not showing that I really had no idea what she was talking about. “Not according to him.”

Her entire face clenched. “*I* wasn’t the one who wanted to go spear fishing. That was *his* brilliant idea.”

“Hmmm.” I looked up at her with an expression that I hoped said Jonathan had said otherwise.

Dr. Gretchen jabbed her finger in my direction. “He’s just embarrassed because the shark scared *him* and not me.”

Shark? I waited for her to keep going with the story, but she didn’t. And so I fed her another line. “He said the shark didn’t even faze him.”

“*What?!*” she shouted, and I jumped.

“Of all the nerve!” She turned and took a stomping pace around the room. “I thought he was man enough to own up to things by now.” Dr. Gretchen whipped around and jabbed her

finger in my direction again. “Is he still saying when the shark swam by I was the one who got scared and pulled the trigger on the spear gun?”

I nodded, hoping God didn’t strike me down for all this.

She let out a grunt. “I can’t *stand* him.”

I watched her pace away from me, fists clenched, breathing heavy, more angry than I’d ever seen her. But I still didn’t hesitate from asking, “So what really happened?”

Dr. Gretchen shook her head, and I could visualize her mind reeling back the years. “It happened five years ago. We used to work together in the IPNC. Ten years we worked out of the same division and finally he asked me out. Australia is where we happened to be at the time. Went spear fishing on the Great Barrier Reef. A shark swam by, he freaked in the water, and ran straight into my spear.”

I couldn’t help it, I laughed. “*That’s* how he lost his eye?” And here we’d all thought he’d gotten injured on some top secret mission.

“Yes, that’s how he lost his eye.” She turned to me. “But you want to know the real kicker?”

I nodded. Oh, this was too juicy and good.

“He never asked me out again. He’s too embarrassed.”

A knock sounded on the open door and we both glanced over to see Jonathan standing there.

I swallowed. Oops, bad timing.

Dr. Gretchen grabbed a bed pan and slung it across the room. It sailed through the air to thunk Jonathan smack in the nose.

“Ow!” He grabbed his nose. “What are you doing, you crazy woman?”

“How dare you tell everybody I was the one who,” she quoted the air with her fingers, “‘accidentally’ speared your eye.”

“I didn’t tell anybody anything,” he loudly defended himself.

Dr. Gretchen pointed to me. “Not according to GiGi.”

They both fell silent, and slowly, they turned to look at me.

I gulped a swallow and tried my best for innocence. “Um, I was practicing my getting-information-out-of-someone-when-I-really-don’t-know-anything skill.”

They narrowed their eyes, or, I should say, Jonathan narrowed one eye.

“TL taught a whole class on it just a few weeks ago. How to lead someone in a conversation to get information out of him or her.” I looked between them. “My homework was to practice the lesson on someone.” I gave Dr. Gretchen a big fake smile. “Hope you don’t mind you were that someone.”

It was true. TL *had* taught a whole class, and all of us *had* been given that assignment. I just didn’t realize I was going to do my homework until now.

Jonathan busted out laughing. “How do you like that, Gretch?”

She shook her head, and I got the distinct impression she was growing reluctantly amused with the whole situation.

I swung my legs over the bed, got up, and made my way toward the door. “Well, if you don’t mind telling TL I did my homework assignment, that’d be great.” And then I beelined it out of there before I got into trouble.

“Just remember,” Dr. Gretchen yelled after me, “I can make your medical needs *painful* or *pain free*.”

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I immediately recalled the inoculations me, Parrot, and Jonathan had received prior to leaving for the jungle. Parrot and I hadn't felt a thing. Jonathan, on the other hand, had screamed through every single needle.

As I pressed the elevator button, I gave her a sweet wave that I hoped would smooth things over.

In response, she let out an evil giggle.

Great. Juuust great.

* * *

Even though it was eleven at night, I wasn't tired in the least. Probably because of my two hour nap slash coma I'd been in. And so I headed to my lab, punched in my code, and the door swished open.

Chapling and Randy both glanced up from the corner where the coffee pot sat. Seeing Randy made my stomach flip flop. My reaction to him both confused and bothered me. How was it possible both David *and* Randy could make me feel this way? I never wanted to be *that* girl that bopped from one guy to the next, but this little love triangle made me feel that way.

Randy smiled a little. "Hey."

"Hey," I greeted him back.

It seemed like it'd been a week instead of a day since I'd seen him last.

I pulled out my computer station's chair and took a seat. "What are you doing in here?"

"Having a late night cup of coffee," Randy answered, purposefully rolling his eyes down to Chapling so I would look.

"Chapling?" I noticed his sick expression. "You okay?"

He shook his head, but didn't speak.

“He found out,” Randy spoke for him, “that he’s going on the mission with you.”

“What?!” I broke into a smile. “That’s awesome!”

Chapling shook his head.

“He’s never been on a mission,” Randy spoke for him again.

“*What?!?*”

My surprised outburst made Chapling look sicker. Randy gave me a you’re-not-helping-him look.

“Oh, Chapling.” I stepped forward. “You’ll be fine. I’ll be there, and TL, and David, and everybody.” I walked over to him, leaned down, and gave him a hug. “I promise. You’ll be fine. I’ve got your back.”

Chapling nodded, still not speaking.

“That’s what I keep telling him.” Randy looked me up and down. “How are you feeling? I heard about what happened.”

I waved him off. “Fine. Chapling gets to be the guinea pig next time.”

Chapling half-heartedly chuckled at my joke. At least he’d come out of zombie mode. Actually, he was handling it fairly well. I remembered the first time I was told I was going on a mission. I’d nearly passed out.

“We need to get baseline data on everybody,” I told Chapling, knowing talking work was definitely the way to get his mind off things.

“Already did,” he responded.

“Oh, yeah, when’d you do that?”

Chapling reached for his coffee. “When you were, ya know, passed out.”

I smiled. “Thanks.”

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He returned my smile, looking a bit better then when I first walked in.

“So, Chap, I did have a few questions about the project I’m working on for TL.” Randy nodded to one of the open computer stations. “Mind helping me real quick with some research?”

“Oh sure. Suresuresure.” Chapling waddled across the lab to his station and climbed up in his chair.

“Thanks,” I whispered to Randy, knowing he was trying to keep Chapling sidetracked.

“You’re welcome.”

While the guys logged in and started talking, I situated myself at my station and got down to work.

I lost myself in my own little world, analyzing the baseline data Chapling had recorded. I took the film footage of Bruiser and the guys and turned it into 3-D animation. I applied basic principles of Geometry and physics in analyzing each movement and what could have been done differently for the guys to succeed in their fight with Bruiser.

I tweaked the 3-D animation, redoing the fight, and observed the new results. I watched as an animated figure of Mystic forced Bruiser into a compromising situation. It wasn’t likely that anyone would ever defeat Bruiser in real life, but watching it in animation was really darn cool.

Actually, the whole thing reminded me of a complicated board game. Fighting was definitely a thinking man’s game that used a combination of mathematics and fighting skill to win.

I factored more options and measured the outcomes and angles. I definitely needed more data, both internal and external. I needed to observe more training to visualize their muscle movement from the inside out.

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I turned to Chapling and with a glance around the room, noted Randy had left. “Hey, are those Influence Sway Skins ready?”

Oblivious to me, Chapling fiddled with a new hologram machine we’d gotten a few weeks ago. It portrayed some sort of military game. I wondered why he was fiddling with that when we had a mission to pull together.

“Chap?”

Eyes glued to the hologram image in front of him, he waved his finger incased in a virtual reality wrap and made one warrior stab another.

“CHAPLING?”

He jerked back. “What?”

“Are those Influence Sway Skins ready? I want to get some internal muscular data.”

“Oh yeah. Yeahyeahyeah. They’re ready.”

I nodded. “Good.” And then my gaze wandered to the hologram game as he went back to playing it. Again, I wondered why he was wasting his time when . . .

My thoughts died off as I got drawn in watching one warrior battle another. Once again that obligatory light bulb went off in my head. Hologram. We needed to make the Combat-Thrash program a hologram. Nobody else presenting for Harry Noor was doing a hologram.

My heart kicked in with my idea I couldn’t wait to share. “Chap?”

He didn’t glance away from his game. “Yeah?”

“Are you thinking the same thing I’m thinking?”

“Probably. Incorporate holograms into the Combat Thrash Program?”

“Yep, we’re thinking the same thing.” No wonder he was playing the game.

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Chapling spun on his stool in my direction. He pointed his wrapped finger back and forth between the two of us. “We rock the house.”

I laughed. “That we do.”

* * *

Four days left until Chapling and I went in front of Harry Noor. Six days until Mystic and David did. That’s all I could think of as I strolled into the cafeteria the next morning for a quick breakfast. I ran straight into Mystic and Bruiser. They both gave me a ‘look’. It took me a second to remember that the last words between us weren’t exactly pleasant.

Granted, I *had* apologized to Bruiser, but even I knew that had been a last minute, don’t-hurt-me-too-bad apology. Right before she, of course, had put my lights out.

Without a second thought, I went straight over and sat down across from them. “Listen, I know I lost my patience and was mean. I know it. You know it. Everyone screws up at sometime or another. So can we please just make up and be friends again?”

They both just stared at me.

“Please?” I prompted.

Mystic shrugged as he shoved a chunk of watermelon in his mouth. “I suppose.”

“Oh, gee, thanks.”

Bruiser folded her arms. “I guess I owe you an apology, too.”

I raised my brows. “Oh?”

“You know,” she waved her fingers through the air, “for putting you in a coma and all that.”

“Yeah, well, Dr. Gretchen said my body just didn’t respond to the resetting-the-meridian-point thing.”

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Mystic and Bruiser exchanged a sly glance.

I frowned. “What?” And then it dawned at me. “You didn’t reset my meridian points, did you?”

She smirked. “Not really.”

My jaw dropped. “Bruiser!”

She lifted her hands. “Hey, you want to be all irritated with me and Mystic, it’s the least you deserved.”

My jaw dropped even further. And then, I couldn’t help it, I laughed. After all, it wasn’t literally a coma, more like a very long nap.

Mystic and Brusier exchanged a knuckle tap.

Ha ha. Jokes on me.

Parrot sat down beside me, sliding a small plate of bacon in front of me. “It’s the peppered kind. I know you love it.”

I gave him a smile. “Thanks.”

Parrot took a sip of his cinnamon coffee. Since being introduced to it on our last mission, it seemed to be the only thing he drank nowadays. “What’s so funny?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Nothing. Just Bruiser and her silliness.”

Wirenut sat down on the other side of me. “Hey, no fair having fun without me.”

We all smiled.

“Where’s Beaker and Cat?” Bruiser asked.

Wirenut shrugged. “Something about girl talk.”

“What do you do when you do that?” Bruiser asked, bringing my attention to who she was staring at—Mystic.

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With his eyes closed, he sat peacefully, seemingly lost in some other world. He'd looked like that in the conference room, too.

Mystic didn't respond at first, and right when I thought he *wouldn't* answer, his lips curled into a soft smile. "I'm listening to my mother."

None of us had a response to that, and in fact, didn't even exchange a glance. Our gazes were fixed on Mystic.

His eyelids fluttered open, and I saw peace there. I could only imagine how it would feel to hear my mother's voice.

And then he told us about his mother, his father, his baby sister. And how he'd been raised in a commune in the hills of TN. How people fueled by hate had viciously killed his family, not only blood, but those he had grown up with.

Wirenut spoke next. He shared his horrid past and how he'd watched his parents and older brothers be slaughtered by his evil uncle. He described growing up in boys' homes and the criminal path he'd taken that had finally gotten him recruited by TL.

Bruiser went next, describing abandonment as a small girl and being found by a wonderful man who raised her and other street kids. She told us about learning to fight by this man, Red, and how she hoped to one day see him again.

Parrot picked up the conversation, sharing his past. His mother being sold into slavery, his father dying, his grandmother sick and raising him. He described being manipulated by his Indian chief to translate deals involving children and women being sold into slavery.

Somewhere in the conversation Beaker and Cat sat down. Cat had been raised by the same man who slaughtered Wirenut's family. She'd been lied to her whole life and found her first truth and freedom when joining the Specialists.

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Beaker described her abusive, neglectful mother. How she'd been pegged a drug user in school and no one liked her. How she'd lived out of the locker rooms in the high school and because of a fluke explosion she'd caused, found her way to the Specialists.

And then I shared my story, losing my parents in a plane crash. Moving from foster family to foster family. Being pegged a freak because my IQ made people scared of me. And how David had been my very first friend. David had recruited me into this new lifestyle.

When we finished, none of us uttered a word. But the feeling of family and unity was so strong between all of us, I was sure they felt it, too.

The conversation picked up again as Beaker told us about the very unexpected news that her and David were siblings.

Bruiser dropped a bomb, revealing her and TL were raised by the same man.

Parrot shared stories of being reunited with his mother.

Mystic revealed he'd known all along about our pasts.

Wirenut pulled his shirt up and showed the horrid scar he always hid.

I told them I'd just found out after my last mission that I had a sister.

I didn't know, we didn't know, if we were saying stuff we weren't supposed to say.

Things TL might not want us sharing. But we didn't care. It flowed from us. None of us held back.

We shared our fears, our hopes, our desires. We put ourselves out there, raw and impure.

It was amazing, truly amazing, the level our bond deepened. It was like we'd been waiting for this moment for over a year. Secrets revealed. Souls bared. Each of us knew without a doubt that we would be connected forever.

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Under the table, Parrot took my hand. I grasped Wirenut's, and he clasped Cat's. She reached across the table and took Beaker's, and her and Bruiser linked fingers. On it went to Mystic and back to Parrot, all of us quietly holding hands, and for the first time truly becoming one.

* * *

That afternoon Bruiser wanted everybody to meet outside for the day's training. So carrying my video cam and tripod, I pulled my laptop strap further up my shoulder and crossed the yard to the barn.

That weird sensation hit me again.

Someone's watching me.

Maybe I *was* being paranoid. Stopping in my tracks, I turned a slow circle, searching the ranch's property: the house, pool, the hills, trees, and the fence in the distance that ran the ranch's perimeter. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, but still, that sensation hit me strong.

Mystic came up beside me. "What's wrong?"

I shook my head. "Nothing."

He nodded to the barn. "Let's go."

We entered the barn to see Bruiser in the corner shadow boxing. Before this mission, I, of course, had never used the term shadow boxing, but now I felt comfortable throwing it around.

While she continued doing her thing, I set my cam and tripod up and pressed record.

Bruiser stopped boxing the air and dropped to her fists for a rapid round of pushups. She boinged to her feet and turned around. "Good you're here."

David, TL, and Jonathan walked in behind us.

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Bruiser bounced from foot to foot, like I'd seen athletes do when they were trying to keep their bodies warm. "Okay." She clapped her hands. "Six days left to make Mystic and David competitive fighters. Today we're doing a little bit of everything. Striking, take down, submission. Like I said, MMA."

"And right when you're the most tired," Bruiser continued, "we're taking it outside in the fashion of the Greeks. We're going to throw rocks, run piggy backed with one another, bench press each other, military press wood beams, and squats until you drop. No modern day equipment. We're going to condition our bodies like the warriors used to."

I got exhausted just listening to the rundown.

A shadow flicked in my peripheral vision, and I turned to see an average sized man with a bushy gray beard step into the barn.

"Sounds like the Molly I know," the man said.

"Red!" Molly squealed and sprinted across the barn.