

Seven: Skullduggery

“You know, Zack, for such a sizeable presence, you sure play soft on the inside. That is, if you don’t mind me saying so.”

“Oh yeah? Tell you what there, *Doctor J*, saunter on down the lane at full tilt just one more time and I’m apt to alter that perception.”

“You’re on, big fella. But hey, no flagrant-type fouls now. It’s a good four hour chopper ride to the nearest mainland dentist.”

“Oh, for the love of Peter, Paul *and* Mary Lou, cut the macho malarkey and play already. My high-tops are sprouting mold out here.”

True to his word, Dean Graham made a B-line from the top of the key, past the foul line and directly down the center lane, turning his back to the goal as he was being met half-way by Zackary Gorman, huffing and groaning like an overtaxed freight with his massive, bared chest puffed out and both bulky arms hiked overhead in a slightly askew ‘touchdown’ gesture.

Liza stood near half-court, hands on hips and hair tied snugly atop her scalp in a tight, tar-black ball, her services not required until her lesser-half obtained possession. Unlike her bare-chested male counterparts, both of whom donned long—well past the knee—baggy shorts and high-topped sneakers, she preferred sweats, low-top Reeboks and an official NBA ‘*LA Clippers*’ jersey with *L.Gorman* stitched across its back in bright gold lettering.

The gym was predictably deserted at ten AM on a Wednesday, its tinted glass dome ceiling inundated with a rash of dime-sized droplets from an early morning deluge.

As was normally the case when such a challenge arose, this being their third such counseling session in the past year, it was Doctor Graham versus the Gorman’s in a two-on-one round-ball skirmish, first to twenty—one point per basket—victory awarded only with a spread of two or more points. To even odds somewhat, Liza would not be allowed to play defense at all and only occupy the offensive side from beyond the foul line.

Currently, as Graham’s attempt at a skyhook bounced from the front of the rim directly into Gorman’s enormous mitts, the good doctor was on

the cusp of defeat while staring down a nineteen to fourteen deficit, due mostly to a combination of Zack's pinpoint accuracy within ten feet and Liza's sharpshooting antics past fifteen. Superior athleticism aside—the good doctor appeared to have barely broken a sweat while Zack looked to have just exited a wading pool—the Gorman's double-teaming was nigh on impossible to slow, must less stop if one or the other had the hot hand.

Firing the ball to his better half, Zack immediately took up a prime rebounding position as Graham shuffled frantically back and forth between them, unable and/or unwilling to oblige.

Given free rein to fire away, Liza stepped just inside the top of the key circle and let fly with a relatively spin-less line-drive that managed to bank neatly in despite the overabundance of force applied.

“Game!” she shrieked gleefully, pumping a fist airborne.

“Ohhhh man, that's just *not* right!” Graham groaned, throwing his lean, muscular arms airborne in comic exasperation while collapsing onto one knee, “Island rules say it doesn't count unless you call it beforehand!”

Striding by wearing a toothy grin, Zack applied a light slap to the doctor's left shoulder.

“Island rules, doc? Really? *Ghetto* rules maybe.”

Tucking the ball beneath one arm, Graham sauntered between and then past the husband/wife team on his way towards the side exit.

“Fine, okay, but I don't want to hear anymore fairy tales about that wife of yours having never picked up a basketball in her homeland.”

“Cross my heart,” Liza countered, gesturing according, “soccer is king on Cebu isle, right Zackary?”

Her husband—sweat dripping freely from his chin and tip of his nose and bent over with hands atop knees—regarded Graham with a playful wink.

“No lie, doc. I laid eyes on maybe two, three basketball goals in all my time in the PI, and if memory serves, that was in and around Manila. They love their boxing and baseball gets its due, but logic dictates a male population whose average height is around five-three couldn't give a rat's rear about hoops.”

“Uh-huh, uh-huh. I hear the respective gums flapping but I’m not, repeat, *not* buying the bush-wah they spout.”

Stepping through the exit, Graham waived forward with his free arm as if to blaze an unknown trail.

“Step lively, you two. This workout is just warming up, so to speak.”

With the good doctor out of both sight and sound, Zack and Liza briefly locked eyes, the former nodding weakly while flashing a tiny smile that quickly faded in face of the latter’s bland, utter indifference.

The workout room was equally vacant; a windowless, dimly-lit, two-thousand-plus square foot, fully-mirrored enclosure containing multiple tons of both free weights and state of the art Nautilus, NordicTrack, and Valor fitness equipment.

As Zack strolled towards the nearest weight bench, joining Dean Graham as he slowly affixed forty-five pound discs to either side of a heavy-duty bar, Liza paused at the entrance.

“Off to the little girl’s room. Careful not to sprout hernia’s in my absence.”

Graham lay back and slid beneath the gleaming, solid-steel shaft before obtaining a purposely wide grip.

“Really, doc? Two-oh-five for a warm-up set? Damn showoff. Hey, you snap a rib don’t come bitching to me.”

The doctor paused to secure his grip.

“So, Zackary, how go the retirement plans?”

The big man groaned, shoulders visibly slumped.

“Same old story. All plot, not a hell of a lot of action. I’ve got...some irons in the fire though.”

“Oh? Those investments you mentioned last time we jawed?”

“Affirmative. With a few breaks, I’m looking at hanging out the ‘Gone fishing’ shingle in two, maybe three years.”

“More power to you. I take it Liza won’t fight the change.”

“She’s got some bags packed already, doc, just in case certain prayers are answered.”

The doctor inhaled and exhaled noisily as if on the verge of beginning the set but paused yet again.

“So, Senior Officer Gorman, just between us, come clean. Is she *really* doing all right? I mean, other than that brash, *brave-is-as-brave does* outer persona?”

Taking up prime spotting position, Zack stretched out his arms and levitated bare palms over the bar’s cool, shiny surface.

“Oh, a small portion is still bluster, but yeah, she’s swept away the worst of it.”

Graham paused before a labored, extended exhale.

“Swept away? As in, beneath that plush, shag carpet of her subconscious?”

“You’re the master.”

He heaved the bar upward and lowered onto his chest with great care, the veins in his neck and forehead standing out in thick cords.

Three mostly unstrained reps later, he replaced the bar and pulled himself upright with a resounding huff.

“In other words, she’s buried it.”

“Partially.”

“Not healthy. Certainly not recommended.”

“Like I always say, doc, those multiple diplomas hanging on your wall were neither forged nor pulled from assorted cereal boxes, no sir.”

“Seriously, Zack,” he said as the two men commenced to swap places, “This isn’t exactly a ringing endorsement in terms of my decision to return you...return *her* to active duty.”

Leaning back clumsily, Zack’s buzz-cut scalp barely avoided scraping the bar.

“She’s ready, doc. Believe me, the biggest danger to *both* of our sanities is another week assigned to that damn supply room. Hey, um, do me a favor and pull a ten from each side, will you?”

Graham did so with a mild smirk.

“Hernia paranoia, I presume. How exactly does big, bad *and* wimpy fit into the same colossal package?”

“Just gimme a set or two to warm up, smart-ass,” Zack replied, acquiring a suitable grip, “Now about that recertification thing...”

“Fine. I’ll take your word that she’s ready to dive back in.”

Five relatively easy reps later, the two men stood side-by-side while prepping to swap positions yet again.

“Just between us, it can only a positive for both of us.”

“Really? Why so?”

“Oh, same old garbage, doc,” Zack replied after a short pause and turn of the head to ensure Liza’s continued absence, “We’ve been kind of scuffling lately as far as the warm and fuzzies are concerned.”

“I see. The gambling thing, I presume?”

“Well, there’s that for sure, but...well, there’s something else. She just seems...”

The big man hesitated, checking the weight entrance yet again and only resuming in a strained whisper, “...I don’t know, distracted and increasingly irritable. She...we argued about this particular choice of assignments and I get the distinct feeling I’m to blame for her building disdain.”

Graham’s eyes widened in comic shock.

“*Disdain*? Hey, impressive. Pardon me while I surf the web for a proper definition.”

“Gnaw excrement, egghead,” Zack replied through a wide grin, “I’ll save you the time: She hates this place, plain and simple, and being the one who convinced her to sign on the dotted line, I’m the logical target of sporadic bitch-sessions that can become quite heated.”

Upon fully absorbing Graham’s curt, tight-lipped response, it was Zack’s eyes that briefly grew saucer-wide.

“Not to worry. This too shall pass, that is as long as you’re taking care of business in the sack.”

“Geez, guess I should just go ahead and turn to *Penthouse forum* with any future marital glitches, huh?”

“Penthou-...good lord man, you are *indeed* the modern-day Neanderthal...a walking, talking fossil. Well then, if given access to an operational time machine, then by all means.”

Abrupt, muffled laughter from both men was quickly followed by a simultaneous throat clearing.

“So, what rotation number you up to, Zack? I mean, once I do give you two the green light?”

“I’d have to check the logs, but being that we’ve been riding the bench for a full week tomorrow...” the big man paused, squinting and scratching his head while leaning onto an incline bench opposite the flat model one they were currently using, “...I’d guesstimate somewhere between sectors forty and fifty, that is if the subs have kept pace.”

“And how many sector’s you two cover these days?”

“Seventy-two, boss. Six more than this time last year.”

Graham nodded, contemplating with hands on hips and eyes turned briefly skyward.

“So, being that you cover what? Five or six drops a day...”

“Six. I know what you’re digging at, doc. Once back on active duty, we’d revisit Wolf Isle in four, five days from today.”

“And...well...”

“How do I *feel* about that?”

Dime-sized sweat droplets coating his sleek, ebony frame, Graham shrugged while hapless to fight off a widening smile.

“Well, yes. That exactly.”

“Doc, surely by now you know my resume inside, out and sideways. I worked Riker’s. I worked Joliette. Long before that, wearing a different uniform, I frequented some rather unsavory areas in the Middle East and South America.”

“This I indeed *know*, Zackary, but what I need to kn-...”

“Might sound like a bad Holly-weird cliché, but I’ve shared ample face time with the Reaper.”

“And Liza?”

Her voice echoed within the brief moment of silence.

“What about Liza?”

Head titled, she quick-stepped towards them, pumping her arms exaggeratingly.

“My profession dictates I inquire of you the same as your lesser half, Mrs. Gorman,” Graham replied while loading twin forty-fives onto either side of the bar.

“Stage is all yours, muscles,” Zack whispered, turning to spot, only to be nudged roughly to the side by a series of playful hip-nudges delivered to his upper thigh.

“Back off, big ‘un...I got this,” Liza exclaimed, taking up a similar position as she hovered over the good doctor’s prone form and making it her mission to lock eyes with same, “So I take it our reinstatement depends on the condition of my presumed battered psyche?”

“Reinstatement is but a formality at this point. I just...need to know that your next scheduled visit with Brenda Wolf won’t end with either a retribution-fueled confrontation or...perhaps even worse, an underlying sense of apathy.”

Before an answer was forthcoming, the doctor shoved the bar upward and, between timed huffs, completed a barely strained set of six reps. Liza assisted in securing the bar before concluding in a tone rife with bitterness.

“Really, Hercules? *That’s* the burning question? I’m doubting the same query was aimed at the Gorman possessing a penis.”

“Easy, Z,” Zack began, only to be waved off as Graham arose and began removing the same iron plates he’d previously added. Shooting his wife a stern glance, Zack quickly shifted to the other side to assist.

“Fair question. Actually, I did indeed quiz Zack similarly.”

With that, Liza took a step back and sigh, visibly deflated.

“Fine then. Simple and to the point, doctor; I will not attack the client in the name of revenge nor will I feel the need to half-ass my assigned duties while in her presence. I didn’t know...had never *met* Rimsda...Wolf’s victim. Maybe that has something to do with how I was able...so *quickly* able to cope.”

Graham shrugged, stepping over to a nearby squat rack and ducking beneath a heavy bar already pre-loaded with ninety pounds worth of plates on either side. His purposely winded reply was delivered between labored huffs while aligning the bar behind his neck and atop each shoulder.

“Explanation accepted. No further questions, counselor. I’ll see to it you two are cleared within the next twenty-four hours.”

“Hallelujah,” exclaimed the husband a split-second before pumping the bar airborne and levitating it at eye level. The four reps that would soon materialize were completed with noticeably increased vigor.

“Yeah, yippity-dippity do,” echoed his wife, the words dripping with a copious helping of unrestrained sarcasm.

The doctor concluded his fifth and final rep with a resounding grunt, practically sprinting over to apply a playful, simultaneous clap atop the couple’s respective shoulders.

“More than happy to accommodate, good people. Just don’t make me regret it.”

While Liza’s only reply was an exasperated roll of the eyes, her husband did manage a verbal folly that effectively closed the subject and cleared the way for what remained; a relatively conversation *and* stress-free workout.

“Sure, dad, sure.”

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