

Eight

~ Time Crunch ~

Zack paced his office at 2:00 in the morning, headset on, squeezing a bright-blue anti-stress ball his mom had given him the previous week. “I’ve been on hold for 30 minutes, soldier. If you don’t transfer me to one of the four people I listed, I swear I will—I don’t care if I spend a month in the brig! I have highly classified and important information they will want to know on the double! ... Yes, I realize I’ve told you this same ‘story’ three times already. Could that possibly mean it’s true? ... For the love of— Transfer me to SO Beita. Now! ... Oh, he’s actually on shift? Thank Hyne!”

He waited for them to transfer the call, certain that he radiated enough thermal energy to power his house for at least a month.

“SO Beita.”

“Thank all that’s holy!” Zack swore.

“That’s my line, sir.”

“Beita, you will not believe the information that just fell across my desk. I need to arrange a meeting with Lt. Rokhart, Cmdr. Leonhart, and Lt. Dwyre immediately. Can someone pick me up in an aerial? Trains aren’t running.”

“I’ll notify the commander as I leave to retrieve you. We could arrange a video conference via aerial if the material is time sensitive.”

“Done and done. I will be at Timber Station.”

“Ten minutes, sir.”

The line terminated. Zack grabbed the discs and printouts and shoved them into his briefcase as another call came in, this one on his cell. “Regal. Talk to me.”

“Mr. Regal—”

The woman’s voice sent an eyebrow soaring. “Sorry, ma’am. Time crunch. Besides, who thinks 2 am is the appropriate time for a conference about classified information?”

“Serra.”

“Pardon?”

“My name. Serra. I detest ‘ma’am’.”

“Noted... Serra.” Zack sealed the case and hurried out the door. “What did you need? Quickly.”

“You seem to be in a rush, so I will summarize. The failed attempts to kidnap prominent

scientists in Centra were a ruse. Candidate Almasy's informant is a high-ranking officer within the terrorist faction behind the ruse. As you suspect, the faction utilized Candidate Almasy in order to raise suspicion of the Gardens and keep the network from succeeding."

"You know where they are, don't you?"

"No, Mr. Regal, I do not. However, I do know that Seifer Almasy is alive. More specifically, I know where we can find the man responsible for leading him into the ambush."

"My apologies, Serra, I just received that information myself. Hence my rude disconnect earlier."

"To be honest, it was I who sent the email."

Zack halted mid-step, then resumed. "Interesting. Concerned with other parties filtering through my emails?"

"Yes. My employers require a certain amount of... discretion when it comes to people knowing who we are. It allows us to do a better job."

Nodding, Zack searched the skies for the promised aerial. "Thank you for the info. I'm on my way to Garden right now to—"

"Yes. I know. I happen to be behind you."

Zack turned, his gaze falling on an approaching blonde dressed in a burgundy and gold uniform. Her startling green eyes shone with a calm intensity that intrigued him. There was something familiar about her face also. He closed his mobile phone. She did the same. "Your flair for the dramatic gives me pause." They shook hands. "You are definitely a blonde."

She smirked. "Thank you for alleviating any doubt."

"My pleasure—" He looked up at the sound of the approaching aerial. "Damn. The kid is fast with that thing." He motioned toward it. "Care to join me?"

"That was my intention."

"Naturally."

§

2:11AM Balamb time. The halls of Balamb Garden were quiet, the night security officers making the only sound as they patrolled the open campus. Suddenly the sound of thick boots connecting with the tiled floor echoed around the lift area. Yawning, Commander Squall adjusted his jacket as he waited for the lift to arrive.

In a dorm room near the commander's, Lieutenant Eryn Dwyre was fast asleep. She had collapsed into her unmade bed still wearing her uniform about an hour ago, falling asleep as soon as

her head connected with her pillow. Her dorm room was the polar opposite of her squeaky clean office. Books and half-filled notebooks cluttered her desk as well as the floor surrounding the head of her bed, clothes strewn about the floor. The windowsill was home to an overflowing ashtray... Eryn's worst habit. She had numerous framed pictures scattered around the room, some even hung on the walls. Her favorite picture was one of her with Jaxon Crest at Trabia. The two of them smiled at the sleeping SeeD from her nightstand. Her alarm clock and cell phone lie beside the metal-framed photo.

She had worked late again. It seemed every night had become a late night since the new developments in Seifer's case. While she liked the work, she had always been a fan of sleep.

Suddenly her cell phone rang, its tone shrill and annoying. She was instantly awake, sitting straight up in bed to blindly reach for her lamp in the pitch black room. She squinted at the sudden brightness and grabbed the phone.

"Dwyre," She answered groggily.

"ERYN,"

She flinched at the sound of her own name, "Fujin."

"MEETING. SECURITY. FIFTEEN MINUTES."

She nodded her understanding before hanging up the phone. While she tried to rub the sleep from her eyes, she only succeeded in smearing the little makeup she still had on from earlier. Eryn groaned, her hand now smeared black from her mascara. She stumbled into her bathroom, tripping over and swearing at the objects on the floor in her path.

Ten minutes later she was on her way to security. For once she was thankful that she had fallen asleep in her uniform. Sure it may have been a bit wrinkled, but it got her to the meeting on time. Eryn glanced around as she waited for the lift to arrive. She always found it a tad disconcerting when Garden was quiet like it was now. She turned her attention to footsteps behind her and smirked when she saw Fujin with two cups of coffee in her hands.

"How'd you know?" Eryn asked as she accepted the caffeinated offering.

"HUNCH," Fujin replied, taking a sip from her own cup.

The two rode the lift down to Garden's lower levels in silence, both still trying to wake as they sipped their coffee. They started down the hall and came to the conference room they had used before, each taking their respective seats on either side of Squall. Eryn smiled into her cup at the site of him. His normally spiked hair was flat and hanging in his eyes. He tried to push his hair to the side, but it was no use. He shook his head in defeat and sat back in his chair.

"Marshal is on his way back with Zack Regal and his mystery source," he said, his voice deeper and grainier than usual. He had probably been asleep when he got the call as well.

“Hmm. She must not sleep much.” Eryn said, taking another sip of coffee.

The three turned their attention to the door as Zack and his source entered— All eyes focused on the blonde stranger that stood before them, though she wasn’t a stranger. They had seen her before. She looked almost identical to Seifer Almasy.

§

A movement in the room tickled the edges of my consciousness, pulling me out of the grog and fog where I was afraid to dream. When I opened my eyes, I didn’t see Marshal or Zell. I saw Zack. Hiding my disappointment, I sleepily smiled.

“Sleeping Beauty awakens.” He sat on the bed. “I’ve heard of beauty rest, but this is ridiculous. You already have half the male population eating out of your hands. What are you doing still in bed?”

Half the male population? What planet does he live on? I smiled wider and rubbed my eyes as I sat up. “Hello to you, too. What brings the infamous Zack Regal to my bedside?”

“Had a meeting with the commander and his followers earlier this morning, after which I decided to come and see how you fared. I’ve heard nasty rumors that you aren’t being a very cooperative patient.”

I grabbed Bonny from my bedside table and hugged her close, snuggling my face into her fuzzy softness. “Do you know how many times I’ve been a ‘patient’, Zee? It’s no fun, now or then, and I just want it to stop.”

Zack sent Bonny a suspicious glance. “Is that from spike-boy?”

“No, it—” I frowned in confusion. “Who’s spike-boy?”

“Dincht. You know. Tattoo. Horrid fashion taste. Spike up to here.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Zee, he’s not that bad.”

“He’s a walking hormonal urge. They’re all bad, especially that one. I read your fantasy reality, munch. Remember?”

“Psh,” I scoffed. “I don’t care if you are my older brother. I’m a big girl and can take care of myself.”

“You’re nineteen, sister-mine. You’re not a ‘big girl’ until you’re twenty.”

I shifted my glare to Bonny’s placid expression. I hadn’t minded being nineteen the first time around, but the second was getting a little old.

“Don’t pout, munch. It’s not attractive.”

“It’s your fault,” I mumbled.

“I know, and a big part of me is sorry that I threw you into the gloomies. But, like I said, I’ve

read your fantasy reality and would like you to remember that you aren't living that daily adventure anymore. It sounded like a great life. Hard, but good. But where does it belong? You only have so much 'you' to go around. Now you have to choose where to live it. Here. Or there. So, what are you going to do with it?"

I morosely shook my head with a small shrug thrown in for good measure, all the while picking at my ringless finger.

Zack covered the action with his own hand. "Stay here a while, munch. You've got a lot to offer a lot of different people. You never know. You might be the hero you dreamed you were. You'll never know unless you try it out."

My expression soured. What I would have given to be at least twenty-one.

Zack stood and kissed my forehead. "I need to get along, munch. Try to be a good girl for the doctors. Capiche?"

Then he left, leaving me broiling in the juices of my helplessness. I wanted to punch something now, or throw something.... I glared into Bonny's peaceful expression—and threw her hard across the room. She ricocheted off the wall with a clatter of eyes and nose to bounce from desk to floor. No, it didn't make me feel better, and now I had nothing to squeeze.

Rubbing at my eyes and face with harsh motions, I let out a choked sigh. No one would let me forget things were different now, and I didn't want to admit it was a good idea. "Bleh, bleh, bleh," I grumbled. With a shake of my head, I lowered my hands from my face—and focused on Marshal standing at the foot of my bed holding Bonny.

My heart thumped so hard I thought it would break out of my chest. "Hi, M-Marshal."

"You, uh, you dropped this." He set Bonny next to my leg and then fisted his hands at his side, not looking up from the rabbit.

"Um... y-yeah. Zee... he, uh, made me—I needed something to throw and..." I tucked my knees up to my chest and wrapped my arms around them, staring at Bonny as she tipped over onto her side. She looked back at me with her same peacefully blank expression.

"I—" He scrubbed at the back of his neck. "Squall said I should give you a tour of the downstairs."

I didn't know what to say at that. A part of me was so excited... and then there was another part terrified of seeing more differences that would never be the same. Janine would have scolded me for being such a fraidy cat. She would have told me to take this new life by the horns. 'You've got another chance, Sal, so take it and run, damn it! How many of us get a second chance at doing everything all over again? I can tell you: none.'

“I would like that.”

Marshal nodded, his expression distracted as he sought out a wheelchair and brought it over to the left side of the bed.

“Shouldn’t I get dressed?”

“Huh? Oh. Psh.” He sent me a lop-sided smile. “Candidate Regal, you’re out of uniform. What the hell?”

Smiling, I saluted. “Sorry, SO Beita. My uniform was stolen.”

“Good thing I’m taking you to security. You can file a report.” He chucked me my workout leggings and a Balamb-blue t-shirt.

“It’s an old case, sir. Two years. Leads have run cold, I’m sure.”

He drew the curtain. “Garden property is Garden property. Didn’t you know there’s a shortage?”

“I’m not short.”

Marshal laughed, and the sound of it made me feel so much better. He was usually so laid-back that it bothered me to have him on the morose side. Especially when I knew I had done it to him.

I slipped off the bed and sat in the wheelchair. “Ready.”

He pulled back the curtain, still smiling, and crouched in front of me, resting a hand on each arm of the chair. I held his silver-blue gaze, my cheeks flushing molten. He didn’t say anything. He just smiled up at me for the longest time. Then he reached up and caressed my cheek with the back of a finger and stood, going around behind me to push the wheelchair out from the infirmary toward the main corridor.

“You’re different from before the accident,” he mused in a quiet voice. “Trying to put my finger on it, but can’t get it cornered.”

My palms were a little clammy, so I rubbed them on the thighs of my leggings.

“Would you mind if I try to figure it out over dinner some time?”

I blinked and my heart skipped a beat. Did I mind? Zell didn’t see me as anything but ‘the library girl’ still. Marshal had been my friend since enrollment; we may have been more than friends before my accident.... I liked Marshal, a lot, and liked how we got along. Even though it was creepy how he was like my dream Zell.

Did I mind him trying to figure me out? Did I mind going out?

Marshal wheeled me into the lift and pressed the call button after inserting his security key. The lift zoomed downward. He didn’t look at me. He didn’t say anything more. He simply stepped back behind my chair. I knew that if the lift opened and I hadn’t answered, he would never ask again.

Don't ask me how I knew.

The lift opened and his grip on the handlebars momentarily tightened before he pushed the chair forward.

"I wouldn't mind," I whispered.

The chair jerked a little but continued forward into the construction mess that I hoped would someday be the Network Security offices I remembered so well.

I experienced a pang of wistfulness at the bustle and activity, even though there were only a handful of cubicles and desks set up. There were no separated offices for Fujin or Seifer, either, reminding me that Zell had said... "Marshal, where's Seifer?"

"Classified."

It didn't make any sense. Had he gone rogue? If there was a current operation in process to track him down, that also could lead to a security black-out, but... I couldn't see that happening. Especially since Fujin was here, in security. She wouldn't be here if Seifer had gone rogue. She would be with him. Everyone knew that.

"I miss my security clearance," I mumbled.

"You haven't ever had clearance, Candidate Regal."

"Oh yes I did." I faced him as he continued to push the chair forward through the construction. "I was Special Security Officer, Rank 10, here at Balamb. At Winhill, I was Assistant Security Station Administrator under Zell. In fact, I think I out-ranked you."

The chair stopped and Marshal held my gaze, his expression showing some expression I didn't recognize. It seemed a combination of pride and disbelief. "You were in security? When?"

That made my gaze fall and my eyes burn as I faced forward. "Oh... never mind."

"Sally, seriously. I want to know." He came to crouch down in front of me. "You were... You were security... in your coma?"

Again, I would have liked to chuck something across the room. Instead, I made due with gripping the arms of the chair and trying not to glare at him. I don't think I succeeded. "Yes, and I kicked ass. Seifer even said so. I was the best hacker-cracker in the Network. In fact, because of me we were able to find a hole in our Network Security firewall and track them to the source. That led us to find a whole bunch of other things in Deling Garden, making Zone and Quistis having to go undercover. Zack helped with that, I think. It was a new Garden, and that was where we put all the delinquents."

Marshal's eyes widened and he slipped off his feet onto his butt, silent.

My frown deepened and I crossed my arms. "For my Field Exam I had to go in and disarm a

warhead with just my hand-held. Fanatics had hold of a Garden weapon somehow. That was so many years ago, though, that I can't remember the specs of it. Then, even though I was going to be Library Admin, Seifer made them transfer me to security. He put me outside his office. Of course, he was always yelling at me, and I think I got his coffee more often than I should have for a Security Officer rank, but I didn't care. I made a difference and did excellent at my job. Fujin even respected me."

I knew that I talked too fast to be as calm as I had wanted to be, and I could feel a tear escape, but I didn't care. I felt as if I spiraled out of control because I didn't have any place to fit here. I wanted Marshal to realize just how much I lost when I woke up. I wanted him to know where I wanted to be, that I didn't care how hard it would be—I wanted it so much it hurt.

"I was so good that Seifer threatened all sorts of things when he found out Zell and I were accepted as Admin for the Winhill Security Station. It didn't matter that I would train Saerin, my replacement, to be just as good or better. It didn't matter that I would continue some of my responsibilities remotely. He wanted me because he knew exactly what to expect and when. He knew I would get the job done. He knew—" I bit down hard on my lower lip to keep from crying. Crying was getting old.

I looked down, shaking my head as I grabbed the wheel rims of the chair and propelled myself around and back toward the lift. I nearly ran over someone, but I didn't care.

"Sally!"

I heard Marshal scramble to his feet, mutter something to the person that was nearly the first victim of a wheelchair hit-and-run, and then his quick steps after me. Unfortunately, he grabbed the handlebars of the chair just as I was wheeling into the lift.

"Let me go...." I could have taken him, in my dream.

"If you want to go back to that room," he let go, "I'll let you. If you want to have a tour of the security office, I can take you around. It's your choice."

"That's not fair," I whimpered. "I don't want to go back to that stupid little room." But I didn't want to be down there.... I sighed. I did want to be there. I wanted to see if it was the same. More than that, I wanted to see if it was the place to be when I completed my Field Exam. I wanted that job back, and I knew this would be my one chance to see if it was worth the effort.

Marshal leaned down, whispering, "Are you OK?" in my ear in a quiet voice that sent tingles down my spine.

"Yes," I mumbled, "I just need to hit something."

He chuckled. "I can understand that. Believe me. Maybe I will take you to the firing range down here and let you fire off a few rounds. The Ladies wouldn't mind, I'm sure."

I smiled a pathetic bit of smile at him. “Thanks, Marshal. But aren’t they a little big for me?”

“You can hold one in both hands. It will help.”

“I’d rather hit you.”

Marshal laughed. “I get that a lot.”

This time my smile was more genuine.

“Now buck up, Candidate Regal. I’m showing you classified material here. Be proud.”

“Only if you tell me where Seifer is.”

“Holy Hyne, Sally. You’re like a dog with a bone.”

I nodded, not looking away from his silver eyes. It seemed that they laughed at me, and I wasn’t certain how to take that. “If I make puppy dog eyes will you tell me?”

“If you make puppy dog eyes I will send you to the pound.”

My mouth dropped open and then I frowned and slugged his arm. “You meanie.”

“Heyouch! That hurt!”

While I hadn’t meant to hit him that hard, it made me feel good that it hurt. It meant that I wasn’t a wuss like I had been before. Of course, I had been doing my strengthening exercises like a good girl.

Marshal leaned forward, scowling. “Don’t you usually say ‘sorry’ when someone says ‘ouch’.”

I pressed my lips together to restrain a laugh as I held his gaze.

“Since when did you get attitude?”

I stuck out my tongue, feeling very ‘Janine’.

“You had better watch out, Candidate Regal. I’m liable to take your punishment a bit too personal.”

I flushed molten but didn’t look away.

Marshal leaned closer, his breath fanning my face and making me a little dizzy. “I think I’m beginning to put my finger on what is different about you, Candidate. You’re more of a fire-cracker, and that’s very nice to look at.”

That sounded so ridiculous that I laughed and pushed him back, wondering why it felt so right to play around with Marshal when it had been Zell in my dreams. Something was backwards, and I wasn’t certain yet how to figure out what it was. I just liked being here right now, comfortable in my own skin.

§

Marshal reloaded the magazine of Lady number one, Janine, when he saw Zell in the outer

hallway. He frowned, his hold tightening on the magazine as he snapped the last bullet into place. He deliberately set the magazine and the gun down, opposite one another, before taking up Lady number two, Jennifer, and repeating the routine.

Zell opened the door of the firing room. “Hey, Beita-Dawg. You got a sec?”

“Maybe.” He set Jennifer aside, unloaded, and turned, arms tightly crossed. “What?”

“You sound like Fujin.” Zell grimaced and then shrugged it off. “So, you’re friends with the library girl, right?”

Marshal’s spiked black hair bristled. “Sally.”

“I know what her name is. You’re her friend, right? So, can you help me out? I like her, but her brother is totally cramping my style. I can’t go near her without looking over my shoulder! ...the hell? So how do I ask her out? Where should I take her?”

“Don’t ask me, Dincht.” He turned and took up the magazines, slipping them into their pouch on his belt before tucking the Ladies, unloaded still, into his black leather shoulder holster.

“Wha? How come?”

“I’m not going to help you. That’s ‘how come.’” He stepped out of the firing room, fisting his hands when Zell followed.

“Just give me a little something? Help a buddy out, will ya?”

Marshal sent the other SOs in the office a sidelong glance before doing an about-face. “I’m not going to help you, Dincht,” he hissed. His silver eyes sparked like lightning. “Don’t you get anything outside your two-foot bubble?”

“...the hell, Dawg? What’s got you—”

“You.”

“Wha?”

“If you noticed anything outside your two-foot world, you would have asked her out three years ago. You didn’t, so why the hell should I help you?”

Zell’s face screwed up in confusion. “So I didn’t ask her then. I want to ask her now. Is that all right with you?”

“NO.” Marshal grabbed Zell’s shirt. “If you ask her out, I’ll hurt you.”

Zell stared up at Marshal with wide eyes. “...the hell?”

“BEITA.”

Marshal’s hold on Zell’s uniform shirt tightened for the briefest instant before he pushed him away and stood at attention.

Fujin glared at both of them before focusing on Marshal. “ESCORT. NOW.”

After one last threatening glance toward Zell, Marshal about-faced and strode toward the lift. Fujin focused on Zell. “GO.”

“Hey, I have as much right—”

“NOW.”

“Tch.” Zell made a rude gesture and then strode toward the lift a few moments later to await its return.

§

Eryn Dwyre and Marshal Beita sat together in the busy cafeteria. There was a break between classes and the place was buzzing with students and teachers each trying to grab a quick snack before their studies resumed. Marshal stared into his black cup of coffee. Eryn watched him as she dropped another cube of sugar into her own bitter cup. Zell Dincht came up and smacked Marshal hard between his shoulders before she could make comment.

Marshal lurched before jerking around. “The hell, Dincht?”

“Just making sure you’re still breathing, Dawg.”

Eryn said nothing as she watched the exchange. The tension between the two men was palpable, easily cut with a gunblade. In fact, Eryn repositioned herself in her chair in preparation to jump between them should a fight break out. Luckily, Zell smiled, though it was far from genuine. He actually sneered at him!

“See ya around,” he said, turning to walk away.

Marshal muttered something under his breath before taking a large, forceful gulp of his coffee.

Eryn stared at him in disbelief, “What in Hyne’s name was that all about? I thought you and Zell were friends.”

Marshal cringed, “Friends? Zell Dincht is dead to me.”

“Really? He seemed pretty alive to me just now...”

Marshal met her gaze for a moment before glaring into his cup again.

“Look, I’ve known you a long time. You’re a private guy and I respect that. But whatever you did to him...”

Marshal glared at her. “What I did? You have no idea what’s going on between us.”

Eryn shrugged. “You’re absolutely right, and what I was going to say was whatever you did to him, or whatever he did to you, are you sure it’s worth throwing away your friendship entirely?”

“He can go to hell.”

“Exactly the response I was looking for.” Eryn rolled her eyes, “Look, I didn’t want to pull the

'rank card' but you're sort of leaving me no choice. I'm running the retrieval operation and I won't let anyone jeopardize it. We've only got one chance at this, and if I have to cut one of you, I will, and I guarantee you it won't be Zell. He out-ranks you and there isn't a damn thing I can do about that."

Marshal shifted but made no response. Eryn nodded once and stood from the table. "Just think about what I said, alright? You lose a friend; you lose a great opportunity for advancement." She placed her hand on his shoulder and gave it a squeeze before heading toward the exit.

§

She sat alone brushing her hair, not truly seeing her reflection.

Stroke – stroke – stroke

She set the brush aside and coiled her locks of blonde, pinning them against her head with a metal barrette—Her eyes focused on the face staring back at her as she lowered her hands. Turning her head, she scrutinized the profile with a sharp green gaze. She wondered, again, if they were as similar as she imagined. She attempted, again, to envision the reaction and the response.

To prepare for the path chosen.