

Ten

~ The Ladies ~

Marshal stepped into the infirmary with an unreadable expression, a candidate uniform on a hanger, and a wheelchair.

I bolted upright, clapping as I laughed, “Oh goodie! Field trip, and in uniform!”

“I had to break into your dorm room to get this from your closet. None of them look like they’re going to fit you anymore. You were always small, but I swear you couldn’t fill a glove now.”

“Oh be quiet. It will be fine. Gimme!” I snatched the uniform from his outstretched hand. “Quick. Draw the curtain and let me change into this. Oh my goodness, this is going to be awesome! Where are we going again?”

“Don’t play Miss Innocence with me, Candidate Regal. I didn’t tell you where we were going, only that we were going.”

“I don’t care where we’re going,” I assured, my fingers having difficulty fastening the snaps, hooks and buttons. “Blast! I’m so excited I can’t even work these things anymore.”

“Decent?”

“Yes.”

“Coming in.” He pulled back the curtain and stepped up, gently pushing my hands out of the way. “Candidate Regal, you are in a sad shape of disrepair.”

I couldn’t stop smiling as I watched him fasten each hook and button. “I don’t care, Mars. I’m just looking—What’s the matter?” His fingers had stopped their work, drawing my curious glance to his blank expression.

He held my gaze for a brief moment before focusing again on the duty of hook and button. “Mars. You called me that the day of...that day.”

“Oh...”

He straightened the collar of my uniform, his touch lingering. “It’s nice to hear again.” His gaze darted from mine and then he wheeled the chair close. “All aboard.”

I stared down at the chair with a darkening frown. “Couldn’t we forgo the chair?”

“Not acceptable. Dr. Kadowaki won’t allow you to leave the infirmary unless your butt is seated in this device.”

“Do you think I’m an invalid too?” I complained as I slumped into the chair.

“You’re about as invalid as I am.”

“Thank you! Now tell that to Dr. Kadowaki and Dr. Levinne!”

“I would if I thought it would change any action on their already long list of ‘to do’s, but alas, Candidate Regal, I am but a lowly Security Officer.”

“Lowly? Puh-lease. You’re second to Fujin.” I turned, fixing him with an accusatory stare. “And don’t deny that either. I asked.”

He didn’t meet my gaze. “Well, once the all mighty Almasy is discovered, I’ll be third. Unless he transfers my ass to Trabia.”

“Why would he do that?”

This time Marshal fixed me with that charming smirk and silver wink. “Because that’s what Almasy does, Candidate. He pushes buttons.”

“But he can’t!”

“Transfer me? Hyne’s ass, he can’t. The Network depends on his placement. If my going keeps his placement, then I go.”

I frowned, my heart pounding in my chest as I faced forward. The thought of Marshal leaving... it gave me chills! He was the one person the same from dream to reality, so how could I... how could I lose that?

“Before you spiral into despair with the tale of my flight, when did you want to go out on said dinner?”

Dinner? Date! I spun to face him. “Would I be able to leave? Please tell me I would be able to leave the campus!”

Marshal’s eyebrow twitched. “Of course you wouldn’t be able to leave the campus, Candidate Regal. You’re still on medical watch.”

“Drat.” I slumped back, arms crossed. “What I wouldn’t give to get outside for ten minutes!”

“I will see what strings I can pull, but it will cost you.”

I laughed, clapping as he wheeled me into the lift and inserted his key into the slot for the basement level. “Oh goodie! Security Center field trip!”

“Not just Security Center. Firing room.”

“Woo hoo!”

Marshal chuckled. “You sound like Selphie.”

“I’m sorry, Mars,” and I almost cringed when I heard the tightening of his hands on the handlebars. “It’s just that I’m so excited to get away from all the tests,” I hurried on.

“Yeah,” he grumbled. “You feel like a test tube inhabitant, I’m sure.”

I also don’t know what to do about you and Zell. The attention was nice, kept me distracted, but it

wasn't helping me decide anything. I didn't even know if I needed to decide anything. What had Zee said? Just act 19? All I had to do was think back about six years....

"Sally?"

"Hm?"

"Did you want to walk on your own limbs? Or should I wheel you in?"

"Oh! I'll walk!" And I almost tripped over my own foot in enthusiasm to be out of the chair.

"Ease up there, Candidate Regal. If I wheel you back with bruises or welts, I'm grounded." He parked the chair to the side and unlocked the firing room door, a hand at my elbow as I entered. "Welcome to my happy place."

It was drab, with an insulated quiet that one would expect of a firing room. There were three firing stations, and I noticed that the first had Marshal's nameplate. "You have your own station?"

"Huh? Oh. Heh. Yeah, that's a joke. I'm in here so often that they decided to give me station one."

I smiled at him, watching his eyes spark and the color rise in his cheeks. "That was really nice of them."

"Eh. I guess, for a bunch of punks. But here. This is where the fun begins." He guided me to station one with a hand at my back. "And here are the Ladies."

Marshal checked both .45s as I watched with wide-eyed curiosity. They looked powerful in their innocence, these guns, and his intent to teach me how to shoot overwhelmed me a little. Overwhelmed me and made me a bit giddy, to be truthful. Janine would have been laughing up a storm.

Finally, Marshal handed me one, butt first. "Here. Let's try Janine first."

I blanched, my hand frozen on the grip. My gaze drifted up to meet Marshal's curious expression. "What did you say?" I whispered.

"Janine. Lady number one." He hefted the other one, revealing the engraved nameplate. "Jennifer is Lady number two. I told you that, didn't I? Two friends I lost in the skirmish with Galbadia?" Marshal tucked the Ladies away when I took a step back. "Hey...." He encircled my shoulders with an arm and drew me close. "What's the matter? You look like you've seen a ghost."

At first, I could only stare at the guns in their leather holster and wonder what to think about every person that had found their way into my dreams. Marshal was like Zell. Saerin was like Eryn and, actually, so was Janine. Janine was a gun? The name of her friend killed in the line of battle, Jennifer, was a gun? How did something like that happen? How do dreams get so wrapped up in wishes and imagination to become so real that a person had difficulty separating one from the other?

“Sally?” Marshal caressed my face with the back of his finger, drawing my focus back from its dangerous spiral inside. “Sally, what is it? The dreams again?”

I could only offer a slight nod in response, my throat collapsing around the words.

“OK. Is it the guns themselves,” I shook my head, “or the names?” I nodded. “OK.” Marshal retrieved Janine once again and offered it forward. “Here,” he said in a quiet tone, “take it slowly. I won’t let go. You just lift it when you’re ready. Just seems the thing to do. All right?”

Again, all I could do was nod as I followed his direction, at first just resting my hand on the grip. I felt the cold material warm to my touch as I stared at the engraved nameplate of sterling silver: Janine. She would have loved the idea of being a gun, the dual act of protection and violence would have thrilled her. And the thought of being involved with vengeance was apropos, really. Janine had been the epitome of vengeance to me.

“I’m going to turn her over, so you can feel the other side. See that it’s no different. OK?”

“...ok.” I sniffed and wiped my eyes with the back of my hand.

“We don’t have to do this now, Sally. You know that, right?”

“I-I know, but I don’t care. It needs to be over. I’m tired of seeing shadows, tired of being scared to tears at the slightest thing. I’m done with it, Mars. Done, done, done.”

“I know you are, Girl. I know. You’re taking it a helluva lot better than I would.”

That elicited a reluctant smile as I met his gaze. He has really pretty eyes.... “Thank you. You’re lying, but I appreciate the thought.”

“Would I lie to you, sweet thing?”

“In a heart beat.” My heart took a leap at the ‘sweet thing’, but I quickly calmed it. No need going aflutter on a firing range! That’s just not appropriate! Appropriate for what, I had no idea, but it seemed the safer route.

“Psh. I never would.”

“You mean I never would find out.”

He smirked. “OK. So that was what I meant.”

That smirk of his was a bomb to my calm. Why is he so cute?! He was a charmer, to be certain. “OK. I think I’m ready to pick her up.”

“Just do it at your speed, Sally. No rush.”

My speed happened to be slower than slow. In a succession of tiny steps, I guess. First I tightened my grip, careful to rest my finger away from the trigger. Then I lifted her up so that she was upright and no longer on her side – is it odd to refer to a gun as a ‘her’? – with the butt resting still in Marshal’s hand. His eyes never ceased their examination of my face, which had my cheeks

alternating between pallor and crimson.

“You’re doing good.”

I brought up my other hand, now gripping the gun with both, and very carefully lifted the butt from Marshal’s palm. He didn’t lower his hand until I whispered, “...ok....”

He immediately stepped behind me, holding my forearms in his hands as support. His hair gel smelled so good.... “We can just – bend your elbows a bit. Good. – we can just stay like this if you want. Getting comfortable with the feel is as important as actually shooting the gun.”

To be honest, I didn’t mind staying like that. He was very warm, and the firing room was on the cold side. “It’s not that heavy.”

“Janine is the lighter of the two, for some reason. She shoots easier, too. Trigger. I think the material she’s crafted with has something to do with the weight. She’s my favorite of the two, don’t tell Jennifer.”

I laughed, “Silly boy,” and to my mild horror and surprise I used the endearing tone previously reserved for Zell.

Marshal cleared his throat and gave my forearms a momentary squeeze. “If you want to try a shot, just scoot up to the shelf there. See the mag?”

I nodded. His breath smelled like cinnamon.

“That is your ammo.”

I twisted my head around to meet his gaze. “She’s going to be heavier?”

“A little. Not so bad. You’ll see.” He smiled, and my heart fluttered away somewhere. “You better turn around, sweet thing, or I won’t be held responsible for my actions. Your hair smells like vanilla and I’m getting the munchies.”

My cheeks colored and I turned as requested while mumbling something that I don’t think either one of us understood.

“OK. Let’s take a shot. Step up. There you go. I’ll put the headphones on you. There. Comfortable? Good. Let me turn on the mic so I don’t need to shout. Can you hear me OK? Good. Did you want to insert the mag, or do you want me to do it?”

I regarded the simple looking magazine and then tipped Janine over to spot the receptacle. “I want to try it. Is it a hard slam?”

“Not too hard. Just kind of pop it in. You’ll hear a firm, metallic click. Guide it in. Just like that. Good girl. And then pop with the palm of your hand. Like you’re slapping my face.”

I laughed. “Marshal. Honestly.”

“Honestly. You think I kid.” He retrieved Janine from my grasp and popped the mag into

place. “See?” He released the catch and slid the magazine free, presenting both back to me. “You do it, just like that.”

“This is so exciting,” I confessed. “I feel like... like a real soldier when I handle a gun. Like I’m dangerous. Like I could do anything.”

He smirked. “You are dangerous, and you can do anything. Not only because of the guns, either, Sally.”

Blushing, I chose not to comment as I guided the mag into place and then popped it as instructed. “It worked!” I quickly offered the gun to Marshal so he could check, clapping my hands when he sent me a wink of approval. “Oh goodie!”

“Are you ready to shoot? We can do that another time, if you like.”

“No, I want to try it now. Is that OK?”

“Sure it’s OK! I have the room reserved for another 30 minutes.” He closed the blinds and then brought the paper target to approximately 10 meters. “This should be easy enough for you. Here. Let me help you with the first shot or two.”

Like before, he stood close behind me, supporting my forearms with a gentle grip as he gave me simple instructions on what to do and what to expect. Do I remember any of it? No way.

“Now. Take a deep breath, exhale slowly, and squeeze the trigger. Don’t pull it, squeeze.”

I nodded and did as directed, feeling the kick of the gun in my palm when I did so. If it hadn’t been for Marshal’s steadying hold, I probably would have hit myself in the forehead. The guns were too big for me!

“Good shot, Sally! Look at that. Left shoulder. The perp would have hit the ground with that shot.”

I smiled up at him, completely comfortable.

“Did you want to shoot on your own a couple times?”

“No, that’s all right. It’s too much gun for me to handle by myself.”

“I noticed that.” He gently squeezed my nose, still smiling. “Did you want to shoot again?”

“One more time would be fun, if you don’t mind.”

“I told you I don’t mind.” He gave my shoulders a squeeze as I once more steadied my stance and aimed at the target. He supported my forearms, his breath tickling my cheek as he leaned in near my ear. “Squeeze off two shots in quick succession. OK? Pop, pop. Just like that. Remember to squeeze the trigger and not pull.”

Again, I followed his direction. This time, I got two shots to the paper target’s chest.

“Hot damn, look at that!”

“You make it easy.”

“It is easy.”

Smiling, I handed Janine back, watching as he tucked her securely away. “Thank you. I appreciate your patience.”

“Patience has nothing to do with it, Sally. You know I like having you to myself.”

I lowered my gaze, clasping my hands behind my back. “It feels nice to be with you, too.” Which, of course, made me feel as if I committed adultery.... His silence drew a peek, but his eyes focused ahead.

“Do you remember anything yet?”

“Sometimes I think I will...and then it just fades to black.” I came to stand beside him, looking up at his handsome profile when he didn’t turn to face me. “Are you sure you won’t tell me about that week? Maybe it will help?”

To my surprise, he shrugged. “It doesn’t matter, Sally. Not really. We’ll make our own week.”

“But I want to remember yours.”

He smiled this time, looking over at me with those striking silver-blue eyes that stopped my breath. “This room is too dark for safety,” he said gruffly. “Come with me, Candidate Regal.” He grasped my hand and led me from the room, smiling down at me with those beautiful eyes that made me flush and look away. “When you look at me like that, it makes me think you remember.”

“I really want to remember.”

“It isn’t so bad that you don’t, Sally,” he assured. “Back then I felt as if I forced you into something you didn’t really want. Well, at least, you weren’t certain you wanted all of it at that moment.” He focused ahead as his hand gripped mine. “A part of me thinks that is why you were in the T.C. when you should have been at class. Trying to work things out. When I heard....” He shook his head as he cleared his throat.

I tugged him to a stop and rested a hand on his arm. He continued to stare forward. “Mars, it’s not your fault.”

“Not so certain I can whole-heartedly believe that quite yet, but I’m getting there.” He sent me a glance. “You want to go to the T.C.? For a walk? I’m not on duty for another couple of hours.”

“That would be nice.”

“I’ll have someone wheel the chair out by the lift. We can pick it up on the way back to the infirmary. Sound good?”

I nodded, clapping my hands with a whispered, “Oh goodie!” that had Marshal chuckling and me laughing immediately after. I really enjoyed being with Marshal. It was so... so... easy.

“Come on. Let’s get out of here before Fujin sees me with you and decides I’m not busy enough. She receives a sadistic pleasure in giving me duties when I’m off duty—Uh oh.”

“What—oh...”

Fujin strode toward us with her usual stern expression. “BEITA. MEETING. THIRTEEN HUNDRED HOURS.”

He glanced to his watch. “It was on my calendar, Fuj. I have two hours before I’m on duty, and two more before the meeting. Everything is all set. The hall is ready to go. When I come on duty, I planned to triple check everything beforehand. Acceptable?”

Fujin’s one visible eye narrowed on Marshal before she focused on me. I smiled and saluted. If there was one positive from the dreams/memories, it was my... comfortableness with who Fujin was.

“NAME.”

“Fu—”

Fujin sent Marshal a silencing glare before once again honing in on me. “NAME.”

“Candidate Sally Regal.” Again, I smiled.

Her eye narrowed a bit more, but then she nodded and stalked away. I was so excited I could have jumped for joy.

“My, my. Will wonders never cease. The sweet thing has a firm candy coating.”

Laughing, I gave Marshal’s arm a squeeze before following him out of the Security Center. Yay me!

“You think I kid. I have never seen you at ease with Fujin in the surrounding field of vision, Sally. Are you expecting me to believe that one day you pop up from a coma and you can face-down The Fuj?”

I only smiled at him.

“Not to say that I don’t relish the thought, I told you that this fire-cracker business is quite the hotness, but what happened to the shy librarian I asked to be my one and only?”

My cheeks colored. “Aww. That’s sweet. Is that really what you asked?”

“I’m only that suave after the fact,” he complained, “which is not the point. Changes of subject are against regulation, Candidate Regal. The answer to my question?”

“You’re so funny!”

While he did smile, and his silver-blue eyes did twinkle, his serious persona slipped into place immediately. “Candidate, will I need to put you into a headlock? If so, I won’t hesitate.”

I accepted his offer of first entry into the lift. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry. Don’t hurt me, SO Beita. I’m defenseless.”

“The temptation to check is overpowering.” He swiped his key and the lift doors closed. It rushed upward.

“Marshal! Honestly.”

“Again, you think I kid.” He took a menacing step forward.

“Hey now, soldier. You just behave yourself. I’m on medical watch, remember?” And the scenario was so reminiscent of something with Zell that I couldn’t decide if my heart pounded from horror... or euphoria.

“I will remember,” he promised, another step my direction. “It will serve as an excellent test of my subduance training.”

I laughed, even though I had backed myself up against the wall of the lift. “That’s not even a word.”

“Does it matter?” He had stepped so close that his cinnamon breath caressed my face... then the lift halted and the doors slid open. “You, Candidate Regal, are lucky.”

My only response was a single nod as I stared up at him with wide eyes, not certain what I felt about anything. Then he smiled that playful smirk and gently pinched my chin, inviting me to smile and melting the fear. Sally, I told myself, don’t push those buttons anymore.

“Chipped that candy coating, I see. Go, Dawg.” He stepped back as he gathered my hand in his. “At least I know the Sally I remember is right around the corner. Hotness aside, it plays with a guy’s head when the sweet thing has a tart side.”

It was the most ridiculous thing I had heard, eliciting a giggle as we exited the lift and headed down the main corridor toward the T.C. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be.” He winked and gave my hand a squeeze. “You were fun before, but now you’re...”

“Trouble?”

“That’s for damn sure. As in, I’m in big trouble if I don’t play my cards right. The sad thing is: I suck at Triple Triad.”