

Twelve

~ Rules of Engagement ~

Marshal shed his uniform coat and tossed it aside as he strode down the infirmary hallway toward the main corridor. His eyes narrowed, scanning the candidates and SeeD in the hallways as he unfastened the cuffs of his shirt and rolled up the sleeves. Candidates and SeeD alike moved to the wayside as he passed, staring after him with wide eyes.

They had never seen Marshal Beita wearing an expression of unbridled rage.

Shrugging out of his dual leather holster, he shoved it into the hands of a passing SeeD without glance or pause. One SeeD had attracted his focus, and one SeeD was about to be physically engaged.

“Dincht.”

The fountain itself seemed to go silent as every SeeD and candidate turned as one. A single SeeD didn't turn.

Without looking from the solitary SeeD with the blond spike, Marshal addressed the crowd. “Everyone clear the halls. Now.”

The reverb of marching feet lasted but a few moments and then silence.

“When I left Candidate Regal to acquire her wheelchair, she was fine.”

Zell fisted his hands but didn't turn.

“I returned to find her wandering inside the T.C. without escort. As if that wasn't enough, I was this close to being asked to take on a T with just The Ladies.” Marshal yanked Zell to face him and pointed at his split lip and black eye. “These were meant for you, dickhead, and I'm giving you thirty seconds to tell me what the hell set her off before I pass this message along.”

“Get off me!” Zell shoved free. “I don't know what happened!”

“Wrong answer, Dincht. Twenty seconds.”

“She was talking about her coma dreams, OK, and she said we'd been married!”

“...what?”

“In her coma we were married, Dawg, so I ran my ass out of there. What the hell does a spaz like me know about being married?”

“I see. So, because she told you that, you left her there by herself thinking a million different things that sent her into the T.C. by herself. Got it.” Marshal adjusted his rolled sleeves. “I'm going to kick your ass now.”

Zell dodged the left jab but caught the right hook on the jaw. He staggered back, his expression wide-eyed amazement as blood flowed from his now split lip.

“I told you to leave her alone,” Marshal reminded in a dangerously calm voice. He swung, caring little that Zell blocked. “But no! Not the great Zell Dincht!” Two jabs deflected, and then a right, but the roundhouse caught him in the mouth. “So you can go to hell.”

“You go to hell!” Zell raged. He caught Marshal with a quick double-strike to ribs and face that sent him reeling backwards. “Step off, Dawg.”

Marshal straightened and wiped the blood from his mouth, his face stretching in an evil grin. “Bring it, Booya-boy. Your ass is mine.”

§

Eryn stepped onto the lift down the hall from her second floor office. She had just enough time to stop at the cafe for a quick bite before her next appointment. She absently faced out the clear glass of the elevator, glancing down at the folder in her hands— Her attention snapped to what appeared to be a fight in front of the directory. Eryn strained to identify the offending SeeDs. It looked like, No...It couldn't be...Marshal and Zell?

The lift chimed its ground level arrival, and she couldn't get off fast enough. She tossed the folder aside, sending papers everywhere, and bolted down the stairs toward the scene. She cringed as Marshal landed a blow to Zell's mouth, spattering the floor with blood. She reached them as Zell readied another punch.

Grabbing his right wrist, she pushed it to the side as she moved to stand between them. “Easy,” she said, pushing Zell back with a hand on his chest. Her voice was calm, though it overflowed with warning. “Break it up—”

“Marshal! No!” The squeak of sneakers on linoleum reverberated through Garden moments before Sally threw herself at the security officer, grabbing his arm. “Please, stop!”

“Sally, stay back,” he said gruffly.

“I won't! I won't watch you kill each other like this.” She buried her face in his chest, “Please...”

Zell's eyes narrowed and he shoved Eryn clear, clocking Marshal with a right hook and nearly hitting Sally. Blood spattered and Sally screamed as Eryn regained her footing. She took two hard steps toward Zell and threw her shoulder into his side, using all her body weight to knock him down.

Zell glared up at her from the cold tiled floor, blood trickling down his chin. “...the hell?!”

“That was the cheapest shot I've ever seen,” she said, pointing at him. “Don't you dare get up.” She pulled her cell phone from her belt and dialed. “Fujin. I need a security detail in the lobby. Now.”

With that, she slammed the phone closed and turned on Marshal. “What the fuck? Are you insane?”

Marshal didn't reply. He only stared ahead as he held Sally's sobbing form close. His right eye had swelled shut and the fresh gash on his cheek oozed blood.

“Hyne's ass,” she muttered. She turned on Zell who had followed her orders to the letter. He had only moved enough to pull free a loose tooth. “Are you both losing your mind? We're, what?, 24 hours from the most important Garden action in two years and you choose this time to have a pissing contest?” Eryn swore. Then she pointed harshly at Zell. “Get off the floor, soldier. You two are in the brig.”

When she focused on Sally, she fought the urge to box the men's heads together. Instead, she pulled the distraught candidate away from Marshal with some difficulty. “Candidate Regal, come with me back to the infirmary please.”

Zell straightened, wiping the blood from his mouth before gingerly rotating his jaw. Marshal didn't shift his focus from the lift, even when the doors opened and Fujin stepped out followed by a team of six security officers.

“You two better hope to all that's holy that Squall doesn't keep you in the brig for a month. If it was up to me, I would leave you to Fujin's brand of discipline.” She motioned to Fujin. “Lieutenant, put these two in the brig to cool off. Candidate Regal, after you.”

Sally limped along beside her, but her focus was still on SO Beita. “What's going to happen to them?”

“That's up to Squall. Me, personally? I hope they get pistol-whipped at the very least.”

“It's my fault, Lt. Dwyre.”

Eryn scoffed. “Strictly off the record, boys are completely stupid. They have no one to blame but themselves. But.” She sent the candidate a sidelong glance. The girl looked pathetic. “But, out of curiosity, why is it quote-unquote your fault?”

“It's a long story that I would rather not talk about right now,” she said.

If the story was half what Eryn suspected, she didn't blame the girl one bit. “Regardless, you won't be in my report to Squall as an offender. From where I stood, you tried to stop the knuckleheads.”

“Will you please tell me what punishment they get?”

Eryn hesitated.

“Please? I want to know so that I can talk to Cmdr. Squall.”

“Sally, do you really want to get yourself messed up in this? Like I said, boys are stupid. If you dive in, there's no telling what kind of stupidity will drop on you.”

“You don’t understand, Lt. Dwyre.”

“Damn straight I don’t understand. Marshal is Garden on a stick, Zell is as easy going as an old dog, and they try to kill each other?” Eryn scoffed. “The little shits are in a deep hole of their own making. Don’t you dare throw them a rope.” She held open the infirmary door, lifting a single finger when Sally vocalized a protest. “That’s an order, Candidate. You keep your butt in this room for the next 48 hours. Clear?”

Sally lowered her gaze and offered a slight nod.

“Good. I will see about checking in with you later.” Eryn strode from the infirmary wing, stopping at the end of the long hallway. The area surrounding the scene of the fight buzzed with students. They watched in wide-eyed amazement as the clean-up crew quickly mopped up the bloody floor.

“Aren’t classes still in session?” she said firmly, stepping closer.

Curious or not, the students scattered. Eryn hesitantly made her way to the lift and pushed the third floor button, collecting the contents of her thrown folder while she waited. Sighing, she pinched the bridge of her nose. “What the hell am I going to tell Squall?” she muttered as she stepped onto the lift. Anything could get both Zell and Marshal suspended, and she needed them on the mission.

“Bad news,” she reported as she entered Squall’s office.

He frowned. “I already heard. I was just about to call you.”

Eryn slumped into one of the visitor chairs in front of Squall’s desk. “Unbelievable! I was on the elevator on my way to the cafeteria. I turn my head and the two of them are beating the hell out of each other in the middle of the lobby....” She sat up a bit. “The worst part of all? I think if I hadn’t shown up they wouldn’t have stopped. They would have kept at it until one of them was.... Well, let’s just say I was in the right place at the right time.”

Squall shook his head. “Why? Why would they do such a thing?” He noticed Eryn’s squirm. “You have a theory then?”

“As juvenile as this is about to sound...I think It may have been over a girl.”

It was Squall’s turn to squirm. “Who? What girl?”

“Sally Regal, the poor thing. As if she doesn’t have enough on her plate already. She helped me try to break them up, by the way.”

Squall nodded. “Anything else?”

“That’s all,” she said, shaking her head. “Believe me, that’s enough.”

He nodded again as she stood from her chair, “I’ll keep you posted.”

On the lift, she frowned with arms crossed. “If it were anyone else, this whole incident would probably seem romantic.”

§

Fujin escorted SO Marshal Beita and Lt. Cmdr. Zell Dinct into Squall’s office in stern silence. Squall didn’t lift his gaze from the papers on his desk.

“SIR.”

Squall’s brows furrowed and silence descended yet again. SO Beita and Lt. Cmdr. Dinct adjusted their stance. Both had bruised and bloody faces, a swollen eye, and torn uniforms stained with blood.

The commander motioned to Fujin without looking up.

She saluted and about-faced to focus her furious, one-eyed gaze on the men. “RAGE.” She motioned toward SO Beita with a harsh motion. “DUTY: PROTECTION. IDIOT.” Lt. Cmdr. Dinct smirked, drawing Fujin’s glare. “BETRAYAL.” His smirk disappeared. “FOOL.”

Squall shoved the papers aside. “Zell, what the hell?” he asked, focusing on his friend. When he looked about to answer, Squall shook his head. “I don’t want to know. Of all the stupid things you’ve done, this is the worst.” When he focused on Marshal, the glare didn’t lessen. “SO Beita, you’re grounded, meaning you won’t be going on the OP to extract the informant. And you.” His attention snapped to Zell. “You won’t be on the lead team. You will be back-up, by the extraction unit.”

The men stiffened.

“When we get back, you’re restricted to your dorms, the cafeteria, or your desk for a month, and your pay will be docked. For the next 48 hours, or until the mission begins, you’re both in the brig. Now get out of my sight.” He motioned to Fujin, who saluted and escorted them out of his office.

§

Sunglasses hid the bright blue eyes of Trabia Garden’s LFC Jaxon Crest as he stepped out of the air transport at Balamb. The light breeze ruffled his wavy dark brown hair as he waited for the cargo area to be unloaded so he could retrieve his duffle and weapon.

As he waited, Jaxon took a moment to appreciate the fresh air – and the warmth of the sunlight that happened, for once, to be coming down as sunlight should, instead of being reflected straight back up from the blanket of snow in Trabia. His mobile unit buzzed quietly in his pocket and the ID brought a smile.

“E, milady! Where are you?”

“Hey, Jax, did you get in all right? Any issues?” Her voice betrayed her frustration.

“I’m fine but you sound like someone hid your cigarettes...”

“Yeah, well, remember when I said I couldn’t meet you? I still can’t. And Dincht can’t, so you’re on your own, Bubbles.”

The name caught him totally off guard. “Bubbles?”

“ ‘Bub’ just seemed too rude. Anyway, gotta go. I’ll see you in the AM. Go down to security to get your keys.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

After collecting his weapon case and travel duffle, Jaxon headed into the building after one last hesitation to relish the sunlight. Through his years with SeeD, Jaxon had only been to Balamb two times previous; once for his field exam when he was 17, and again for a special seminar regarding sword-smithing when he was 19. He’d always appreciated the wide open spaces, and this time was no different.

As he didn’t know where the new security section was located, he made his way toward the directory. What could be bothering E? She never sounds like that unless she’s wishing death down from the heavens. I wonder if she’s got herself a man. Jaxon smirked. Now that would be something. Might be the plug to her temper, too, especially if there’s a discourse about careers and the military. Jaxon almost laughed, his thoughts derailed when he collided with two candidates. Their eyes widened to the size of saucers at the sight of the security officer.

“Good morning, ladies,” Jaxon remarked with one of his more charming smiles. He bent to help them retrieve their papers. There had been a veritable flurry of paper and two frightened squeaks at their meeting.

“S-s-sorry, sir.”

“Not your fault, I wasn’t watching where I was going.” He handed the blond girl a stack of paper. “Could you direct me to the security office? I’m from Trabia.”

Two arms instantly pointed to the central lift. “Down one floor, sir.” They said in unison, causing Jaxon to chuckle.

“Okay, thanks. And sorry about that, I’ll watch where I’m going from now on.”

The girls nodded in unison before stepping to the side and disappearing down a side corridor.

“Strange kids,” Jaxon muttered with an amused smile.

He sent another look toward the central lift, his breath catching in his throat as he glimpsed a woman climbing the steps. The attraction was so instant and strong he felt momentarily stunned. Her wavy blond hair cascaded over her shoulders and down to mid back, and her knee length skirt revealed finely toned, shapely legs. She paused mid-stair to look at a paper in her hand. When she

looked up, her bright green eyes met Jaxon's stare.

The moment passed too fast. Jaxon couldn't move, breathe, or even think. Upon regaining control, he rushed toward the lift as the corridor flooded with chatty, excited candidates. The tide almost pushed him backwards, and making headway was difficult with his duffle and weapon case in hand. By the time he arrived at the top of the stairs, she had gone.

Jaxon released a frustrated breath and actually stamped his foot while he pushed the down call button. This trip wasn't for leisure, but that didn't mean he couldn't have a cup of coffee with an attractive woman. He could tell from her tailored burgundy and gold uniform she wasn't SeeD, the fact she couldn't blend in gave him a little hope of finding her again, but for the moment it had to be just that, hope.

§

Zackary Regal adjusted the shoulder strap of his briefcase as he frowned at the empty reception area just outside Balamb Garden. He glanced at his watch. "What the hell," he grumbled. It would be the first time SO Beita hadn't arrived at least five minutes prior to the agreed upon meeting time. "Damn it. I'm going to be late."

But with no escort onto Garden grounds, he could do nothing but watch the minutes click by. That is, unless he allowed himself to follow his notion of disobeying a direct order from the high command. Zack smirked and stepped forward, bringing his temporary security badge to the fore in preparation for those itching to land his butt in the brig.

He had only set one foot onto Garden grounds before First-Lt. Fujin Rokhart was seen striding his general direction. The stern expression seen at their numerous meetings beforehand had nothing on the expression she wore now. If he had to hazard a guess, he would have thought a favored comrade was involved.

"Something to your extreme displeasure, Lt. Rokhart?" he ventured at her approach.

Fujin didn't respond, although he tried never to expect a response from her.

He followed her lead into Garden, doing his best to examine her mood from glances to her profile. "Lieutenant, if we were at a bar I would offer to buy you a drink in order to elicit the telling of the tale that has you breathing acid and fire. You would decline, likely with a slap to my face, but I would still risk the asking."

Fujin sent him a dark look.

Zack raised his hands. "I submit, Lieutenant. Tell SO Beita he owes me a drink."

Fujin scoffed, and that sound in conjunction with the rage in her expression had Zack

wondering, again, what had set her off. In fact, it piqued his curiosity to the point of blocking out all other information as he entertained possible treks of point A to point D. His attention didn't refocus until Fujin escorted him into a meeting hall that easily out-sized his entire newsroom.

If someone had reported the meeting hall as being the location of all Garden press releases, not that they had many, he would not have been surprised. In fact, jealousy motivated him into the duty of plotting how to gain the use of the hall himself. Does Garden need a press liaison? That would be a career-maker.

Cmdr. Squall Leonhart motioned to a seat nearest Lt. Eryn Dwyre. "Mr. Regal?"

"Commander. Thank you." Zack stowed his case in the seat next to him as he nodded to Eryn. As with Fujin, irritation tightened her features. "Lt. Dwyre."

She gave a curt nod, her eyebrows furrowed. "Regal."

He made himself comfortable and leaned toward her. "What seems to be the problem? Death would be frightened of you."

She lifted a hand, eyes closed as she pinched the bridge of her nose. "Don't even talk to me about it right now."

One of Zack's eyebrows rose as he sat back, his gaze raking the attendees. Quistis Treppe received a wink. She adjusted her spectacles but made no response. Seated three seats down from Eryn he noted one unfamiliar SeeD. The emblems on his uniform classified him as a high level tracker in addition to a security officer of a higher rank than SO Beita. The SeeD intercepted Zack's scrutiny and offered an easy-going smile and single nod. While surprised, Zack acknowledged the welcome with a nod of his own while making an internal note of a later investigation. Zell, seated on the other side of Fujin, looked to have been run over by a truck.

"Mr. Regal. Lt. Cmdr. Serra? Your report," Cmdr. Leonhart requested.

"Ah." Zack sent the CA operative a quick glance as he stood. "Might I have the honors, Lt. Cmdr.?" She motioned an acknowledgement as Zack steadied his briefcase on the central podium. "Excellent."

He retrieved a card from the pocket of his jeans and slipped it into the computer console in the podium. That activated the drop-down screen and the projector as the lights automatically dimmed. Zack chafed with jealousy at the high-tech options as he gathered up the wireless controller for the presentation software.

"Good day, Ladies and Gentlemen. For those of you who might not know my role here, my name is Zackary Regal. I am an investigative reporter with the Timber newsroom. Yes, I am the older brother to the charmer known as The Library Girl recovering in the infirmary," he

acknowledged with a nod toward a raised hand.

The same unknown SeeD stood. “Nice to meet you. SFC Jaxon Crest. Trabia.”

Jaxon Crest.... The name didn’t ring any warning bells. “SFC Crest. Welcome aboard. Now.” He activated the graphic display of the gathered information. “Here is the confirmed location of the informant who led one Candidate Seifer Almasy into an ambush. The location is accurate to the best of my source’s information since this morning at about three hundred hours.”

“Centra desert?”

Zack forwarded the display to a zoomed satellite image. “The one and only. From the images, here, you can see the bits and pieces of a ruin of some kind. Lt. Cmdr. Serra informs me it is a ruined castle in an historic district of Centra that is due for renewed archeological expeditions in the upcoming months. At the current time, it is abandoned. Or so the present residents would like us to believe, I’m sure.”

“Who’s behind the ambush?”

“That is the fun part,” Zack said as he brought up a collection of documents to the overhead display. “Based on these financial records one could easily assume Galbadia and Trabia Gardens were forming a type of consortium in order to keep Mr. Almasy from joining the fold in a security sense of the word. However, when I dug deeper, I found a fun bit of information leading me to the conclusion the whole bit of excitement was orchestrated by – wait for it – a Purist faction.”

“A Purist faction of what?”

Zack forwarded to an organizational chart breaking down the members of said faction. “A Purist faction against GF use.”