

## Four

~ Two Sides of a Same Dream ~

Zack regarded the impressive multi-tiered Garden with crossed arms and a scowl.

Cmdr. Squall Leonhart had summoned him, basically, to discuss the promised exchange of information. While Zack didn't like the idea of being ordered around as a brainless soldier, he appreciated the quick action of being allowed to see his sister. That deserved his cooperation, and he was a man of his word.

"Don't appreciate being ordered to stand outside and wait for a security detail," he grumbled. But he would let them push back this time, if only to have dibs at the story of the century.

Prompt as expected, a male SeeD approached sporting a dual holster of .45s. Zack hadn't expected to see weapons worn on the campus of a military school/base. A soldier's work is never done?

"Zackary Regal? Security Officer Beita," he said, producing a visitor badge.

Zack accepted the badge and clipped it on his belt. "Lead on."

"Weapons search, sir."

"You're kidding."

"Arms out to your sides, please, sir." He unsnapped the holster strap for good measure.

"Oh for the love of— At ease, soldier. Search away."

SO Beita performed a cursory frisk before motioning onto the Garden campus. "After you, sir."

"Of course. Wouldn't want to risk an ambush."

"That's not my concern, sir."

"Ah. Of course not."

It still rubbed him the wrong way that military goons like this one surrounded his sister. Yet, if they were anything at all how she presented them, then he had misunderstood the whole concept of Garden for years. He frowned, reaching into his back pocket to withdraw the mini-disc Sally had given him. He had read her journal so many times that he had the first line memorized. "Eight years is a long time to put into words, but this is my life. The identity I don't want to forget."

Eight years wrapped up in a two-year coma. A 25-year-old mind trapped in a 19-year-old's body. An accomplished SeeD in her dreams, now, essentially, demoted to a simple candidate. And what accomplishments she had made! What friends! She had discovered herself and her strengths. She had found her place in this 'Garden Network' and excelled... and she had kicked ass.

Zack chuckled as he tucked the mini-disc back into his pocket.

“This way, sir.”

Following SO Beita to the lift, Zack performed a cursory examination of the mall area and the candidates and SeeD that were present.

“Looking for someone, sir?”

The lift doors closed, interrupting his scrutiny of a short blond with spiked hair before he could get a complete look. “Not particularly.” Only a SeeD by the name of Zell Dincht. Zack shifted his attention to SO Beita, who continued to focus ahead. SeeD always wore an attitude, and SO Beita was no different. If soldier Dincht had that same attitude, the two of them would need to have words regarding his sister.

The lift doors opened on the second floor and SO Beita stepped out. “Continue to the third, sir,” SO Beita informed, reaching around to hit the appropriate button before Zack could exit.

“By all means,” Zack grumbled as the lift continued its upward journey.

When the lift opened on the third floor, Zack stepped out into a small office that seemed more a miniature war room. Displays, tables, maps... it was all for a specific purpose, that being the plotting of an attack or defense.

The young man leaning against the desk, arms crossed, looked up at Zack’s entrance. The scar across the bridge of his nose gave him a somewhat formidable appearance. What is he? 19? The commander of a military station not old enough to drink was an interesting paradigm.

“Commander Leonhart? Zackary Regal.” The Commander stepped forward. Like SO Beita, he wore a weapon—a gunblade. Does everyone on this floating warship carry at all times? They shook hands.

“Mr. Regal, thank you for coming.”

“Considering the care you’ve taken of my sister....”

Cmdr. Leonhart motioned to a chair as he made his way around the massive desk to his computer. “She’s one of us, sir. We take care of our own.”

The double-edged sword of the ‘brothers in arms’ mentality.

The Cmdr. pushed forward a manila folder stamped CONFIDENTIAL. Zack retrieved it while gauging the commander’s expression, which didn’t reveal a thing.

“Eight months ago Seifer Almsy and his team disappeared while on a mission.”

“Details?”

Cmdr. Leonhart motioned to the folder. “All we have is there.”

“It’s pretty slim for eight months.” Cmdr. Leonhart didn’t reply. “Can you provide a summary?”

“A terrorist faction attempted to take certain prominent scientific minds captive. We had

pinpointed their location, with Almasy's help, and planned a strike at their core. Almasy wanted to head the mission and I approved. Lt. Cmdr. Quistis Trepe and Lt. Cmdr. Xu accompanied him as SeeD observation staff."

"Observation staff," Zack repeated, thoughtful. "It was a Final Exam?"

Cmdr. Leonhart gave a single nod.

"There was an ambush, and Lt. Cmdrs. Quistis and Xu were able to escape. The faction took Almasy and his team captive. Investigations haven't revealed any sign of the faction or where they might have gone."

"Isn't Almasy too old to be accepted as a SeeD?" Cmdr. Leonhart didn't respond, hinting at a possible history between the kid and the captive. "Question withdrawn, Commander." Zack gave the information a cursory examination, trying to compare it with the reading he had done the night before from Sally's disc. "I will need to study this to make any sense of it. May I take this?"

"Your copy."

"Excellent." He met and held the Commander's gaze. "I need to know where you want me to go from here. If I find people tied directly with Garden, I don't want to suddenly find myself in the brig awaiting execution for treason."

"You find out what you can," Squall told him, "and we'll deal with the facts later."

"No, we'll deal with them now. I've got a little girl to take care of, and there's no way in hell I'm leaving her without a father because the Network Head had to do a cover-up/clean-up move. Either I get it in writing that I don't get screwed, or I walk and you can clean up your own damn mess."

The expression on Squall's face was his usual slight scowl. "Fine. I'll have a contract drafted right now." He dialed the legal department to have it put into the works.

"That's all I wanted to hear. I'll expect it on my desk no later than tomorrow morning. If it isn't there by ten, I walk." Squall curtly nodded, and it impressed Zack to no end. He's got cool, this one. "With that pesky business out of the way..." Zack stood. "I thank you for this information, Commander. As soon as I have more, I will contact you to set up a meeting. Sufficient?"

"Yes."

Zack lifted the folder. "You can trust me with this, Commander. Garden may itch me raw, but a source is a source and I take the information to my grave if need be."

The Commander smirked. "It may come to that, Mr. Regal."

"I don't doubt it." Zack extended his hand. "I can see myself out, Commander."

"SO Beita will escort you to the entrance."

He grimaced. “No secrets for this reporter, eh?”

“Not yet, Mr. Regal.”

“I’ll hold you to that ‘yet’, Commander.” The military was always a good source of top stories.

§

Dr. Kadowaki wouldn’t let me have visitors the first days of physical therapy.

Instead, my mornings before therapy consisted of all forms of tests. Even Dr. Levinne, our resident psychologist, came to perform tests. Physical. Mental. Emotional. They even tried to get me to agree to hypnosis.

Uh... no.

It made me feel freakish. I mean, I couldn’t be the only one who had ever woken from a coma. But when I asked for any kind of information, they only told me I was doing well and I would probably be under surveillance for no more than another week.

I really missed my own room.

One time I woke from a nap after a healthy barrage of tests and found a small, stuffed pink bunny beside me on the bed. I mean, the cute little thing was only a smidgen bigger than my hand, sitting on its back haunches, and looking at me with an adorable expression of... cuteness. With no card, I couldn’t say who it was from, and I didn’t want to torture myself by thinking it was from Zell.

It was from Zell... right?

On day six, I couldn’t take it anymore!

Whether sitting at the table, desk, or on my bed, I refused all tests with crossed arms and a frown. I had explained my stir-crazy feelings the day before, but they explained it away. Of course I knew the tests were important, but the stress of all the tests was making me crazy!

“This isn’t like you,” Dr. Kadowaki said as she lowered her clipboard and pen.

I adjusted my crossed arms, expression as sour as before – well, sour for me. My face began to hurt. “I refuse any more tests,” I told her. “I am not a lab rat.”

“Sally, the measures we’ve taken are for your well-being,” she reminded.

But I refused to live my life in fear. I had spent too much time under that shadow before, and that was one lesson that had been pounded into me again and again in my dreams.

Dr. Kadowaki released a deep breath. “Very well. I will arrange for a short outing.”

“Thank you, doctor.”

Though she didn’t look very pleased as she entered her office.

I smiled, lowering my focus to Bonny, the pink rabbit, who sat in silent congratulations on my

lap. “Did you see that? I staged a sit-in and won.” I gave her head a pat. “Janine would be proud of me.” Which had me hoping there was a Janine Larabie somewhere.

Janine. Jaxon. Sierra. Saerin. Harry. Ryan. Marshal... They were all names and faces so vivid in my memory— Wait. Marshal. I... I knew him before graduation. Before the Ultimecia fight, didn't I? He requested books from me in the library. He hadn't transferred to Galbadia until after the Ultimecia fight. Wouldn't we chat through our panels during tests on the message board? My expression fell. I couldn't remember and it felt like I had lost my best friend.

I waited a healthy 15 minutes for the promised 'outing.' Then I took matters into my own hands. When the on-duty SeeD interns were processing other tests, I made my way to the wheelchair a few steps from my bed and stealthily wheeled myself from the infirmary. Once out in the corridor, I gave a nervous giggle at the rush of freedom.

Watching the SeeD and candidates pass on either side, I desperately tried to remember the first reality I had there. But I still had problems drawing the line of when reality had ceased. Maybe it would never be clear? Did it matter? Both realities made me who I am.

I halted my progress in the middle of the main corridor and adjusted the chair's position to face the outside. I still tried to get a feel for this Garden. While it seemed a lot like the other one, I felt like an outsider. I gathered the bunny close and snuggled my face into her softness—

A flash of red caught my attention. Three SeeD all dressed in black passed on their way to the Garden exit. One SeeD had the reddest hair I had ever seen and made me blink. No, it couldn't be...Could it?

“Saerin!” I called out. “Saerin Kael!”

The crimson-haired SeeD halted and turned to face me, her beautiful porcelain features registering confusion. The resemblance to my dream was uncanny, and I couldn't stop my hand from covering my mouth as the leader made her way over to me. Did she...could she be...? But I was so overwhelmed with hope and terror that I couldn't say a single word.

“My name is Eryn Dwyre,” she corrected, sending my hope into oblivion. “Have we met before? Forgive me, but I'm drawing a blank.”

“Oh...” I guess it was too much to hope for... “No. I'm sorry.... You just remind me of someone I once knew.”

“Oh.” Eryn sent a glance to the SeeD that had come to stand on each side of her. Then she produced a hand. “You are...?”

“Sally. Sally Regal.” We shook hands.

“Regal...” Eryn blinked and sent another glance to her fellow SeeD, who began muttering and whispering amongst themselves. When Eryn again focused on me, she asked, “Are you the candidate that was in a coma? What was it, a year or so?” Eryn’s emerald eyes practically swirled with curiosity and incredulity.

“Two years, actually,” I corrected. Don’t remind me....

“Has it been that long already?”

I suppressed a grimace.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Sally.”

The other two SeeD, Raquel and Andromeda, repeated much the same sentiment as they also introduced themselves, shaking my hand each in turn and offering me smiles that didn’t make me feel better. Though I really tried.

“Knowing you lived through such an ordeal... It... it gives me a great deal of hope.”

“Hope? What do you mean?” I couldn’t see how my lost life could give anyone hope. It certainly didn’t give me anything but miserable moments of... oh who knows...

Eryn sent me a small smile as she shook her head. “Never mind.” She again offered forward her hand, which I accepted. “I’m the Head of Instruction here, so if you need help with anything at all, don’t hesitate to ask. I’ll do my best to work with doctors Levinne and Kadowaki.”

“Alright. Thank you.”

“Welcome back, Sally.” Then Eryn gave my hand one last grip before leading her group out of Garden.

“It was nice to meet you Eryn,” I whispered. I lowered my gaze to Bonny’s blank expression. “Again and again and again....”

My chair suddenly rolled forward, causing a squeak as I looked behind me—I blinked at the somewhat familiar SeeD. In his uniform, he cut a very professional picture, especially with his ‘don’t mess with me’ attitude. The man had short-cut dark hair – spiked on top – silver-blue eyes, and a natural tan. He stood taller than Zell by about six inches.

Of course, a lot of people were taller than Zell.

He seemed so familiar, especially with the twin .45s peeking from under his jacket. “Marshal?” When he sent me a wink and a flash of white smile, I felt as if I could have floated away. He’s real! He wasn’t just part of my dream! Before I could stop myself, I hugged his arm. “I’m so glad to see you!”

“Thank you, but you aren’t supposed to be out of the infirmary, Candidate Regal.”

I grimaced. “I know, but after so many days of tests, I got stir-crazy!” I lifted Bonny. “And she

wanted a walk... er... hop.” Marshal’s lips twitched upward, but he didn’t look down. I lowered the bunny. “Why did they send you to find me?”

“I work in security specifically to find wandering souls. SO Beita at your service.” He glanced down. “Besides, I saw you just sitting there and thought you might be lost. You were out for a long time.”

“I know.” Sometimes I wish I were still sleeping. “So what’s new with you? Last time I remember, you were studying at Galbadia.” I felt as if I updated a decrepit database.

“Graduated. Transferred back – the politics at Galbadia really suck – and now trying to help get the Network up.” He shrugged. “That’s about it.”

“What seems to be the problem with the Network?” I shifted around in my chair enough to watch his expression. “Is it software or hardware?”

“Hardware’s been checked,” he informed. “Software’s great.”

“And?”

“And you don’t have high enough security clearance to ask that question, Candidate Regal.”

His smart-aleck attitude and good looks were just as I remembered, and I was so happy about that. It took away a lot of the ‘limbo’ feeling to this reality. “How come I can’t ask about the Network?”

Marshal sent me a glance before turning down the corridor leading to the infirmary. “That subject is off-limits.”

“But—”

“I’m sorry, Sally,” he said in a quiet tone. “I can’t.”

I slumped into the wheelchair with a sigh. “I guess I know that.”

“Don’t you know the saying about curiosity killing?” Marshal reminded. “They try and say it was a cat, but I think someone more important needed to die to get parable ranking.”

I snickered, relief at his sameness making me giddy.

“I think Galbadia Garden was behind the whole thing.”

I tried to laugh, but the closer we came to the infirmary hallway the more miserable I felt. Finally, I turned and met his gaze, trying to give him the most pleading expression in my repertoire—it wasn’t a very big repertoire, and I doubted how successful it would be.

“Please don’t take me back to the infirmary yet.”

Marshal didn’t answer. In fact, he looked away while he continued to push my wheelchair toward the hallway.

I sighed. “Well, Bonny, I don’t think SO Beita is going to let us escape. He’s caught us, and

now we're off to more tests." I released a deep breath and sat back in the wheelchair. "I'm tired of answering questions and being poked and prodded. I need to get on with things, Marshal. How can I do that when every time they ask me a question it reminds me I was in a coma, and that the life I remember in my dreams didn't happen?"

"They want to make sure you're OK."

"I know, and I appreciate it, but... I want to get back to work." I blinked back a tear as I remembered just how much I came to love my job. "I need to get back to something, only... It isn't there waiting for me anymore. Not unless I make it happen. I can't do that if I'm always in the infirmary." Shaking my head, I sniffed. "Candidates study, don't they? Why am I the only one that gets to be studied?"

Marshal turned down the corridor leading to the infirmary, but then he halted. After another second, he pulled back and continued around the main corridor.

I turned in the chair, looking up at him and trying to figure out what he was thinking by the serious expression on his face. "Where are we going?"

"We're going to class."

Smiling, I turned and gave Bonny an excited squeeze. "Oh goodie!"

Marshal chuckled. "It's my ass if we get caught, Candidate Regal, so you better pay good."

Giddiness couldn't describe what I felt as we took the elevator up to the second floor. After being in a little room surrounded by beeps and lights and moving needles while being asked questions that affected how the two doctors treated me? I was definitely ready for the large classroom and the familiarity of my console. As he wheeled me down the hallway and took a right, I began to remember both reality and dream, which led to a giggle and a soft clap of hands.

"You always were excited about schoolwork," Marshal said. "You remember doing those text-based adventures when Teach thought we were doing assignments?"

"Oh yeah! I still think you should make them into a book."

"Psh. I can't write to save my life. You do it."

Considering how easy it had been to write the memoirs of my eight-year dream life, it didn't sound like such a bad idea. "Maybe I will. Do you still have the transcripts? You always were a packrat when it came to things like that. A hoarder."

"Look who's talking! I was in charge of archiving your station and found assignments and papers from every term."

"You never know when you need something!"

"Assignments?" Marshal asked, his expression screwed up in a frown of disbelief.

I laughed. “OK. Maybe not assignments....Did you erase them?”

He smirked. “No, I didn’t erase them. They’re on a collection of discs in your room, organized and labeled just as you had them on your station.”

“Whoo-hoo!”

“Being in a coma couldn’t have been so bad as to run head first back into school, Sally. The doctors said your brain was pretty active. Like a dreamer.”

My smile wavered. “That’s why.”

“What does that mean?”

I shook my head and mumbled, “Nothing.”

Marshal didn’t push it, which surprised me a little. He used to nag me to death in our online chats when I didn’t want to talk about something. Instead, he wheeled me into the classroom and to my old position in the front right portion of class.

“We’ll just do an overview,” he said. “There was a group of intermediates in here last class period, so the tests are already cued. Just refreshers, understood?”

I nodded, the smile returning with the giddiness. I was happy to do anything that didn’t involve medical references. The eagerness in my expression made us both laugh. So, once situated behind my control panel, Marshal pulled a chair beside me and navigated to the intermediate placement tests used that morning.

Heart racing with expectation, I took in a deep breath—I looked over at Marshal with wide eyes. “Is that cologne you’re wearing?”

“Huh?” Marshal lifted the lapel of his uniform and sniffed. “What are you talking about, cologne? I don’t have time to buy fancy face water.”

I pointed at his gel-spiked hair. “What is that?”

“Hair?”

“No!” I protested, laughing. “The gel you use. What is it?”

“Psh. I don’t know. The first thing I grab at the PX? No. No, wait. My mom got me this for my birthday.”

“Well, it smells really good. You should look at the bottle and tell me what it is so I can get it for you for your enrollment anniversary. I like it.”

Marshal scratched at his scalp somewhat self-consciously, and his ears even looked a little pink. Then he gave me a slight shove. “Just look at the screen, Candidate, and take the test.”

“Oooo. Marshal’s embarrassed,” I teased, giggling.

He stood and began wheeling the chair away.

“Don’t!” I squealed, grabbing his hands. “Marshal!”

He met my wide-eyed gaze with a mischievous expression. “I’ve got all the power, Candidate Regal. Your choice: tests, or teasing?”

Laughing so hard I couldn’t even speak, I pointed back to the console.

“OK then. Quit being a screw off.”

I nearly fell out of my chair.

Marshal set me up in front of the console yet again, making certain I was comfortable before locking the wheels in place.

I leaned forward, resting my elbows on each side of the screen as I cupped my face in my hands and read, remembering my candidate days with a slight smile. They had been fun days of studying, hanging out with friends, and knowing that something different waited down the road. Now I had a chance to have that again, and this time I wasn’t going to be wrestling with fear. This time I could be the ‘self’ that I had been too afraid to show before. That made me excited to see how different and yet the same my future could be. I only had to take a step at a time.

Even I could do that.

Marshal let me take a couple practice quizzes first to get me ready for the idea. Then he opened the first intermediate test and let me at it. Each time I got a perfect score, he went to the next one. “Hell. Why not?”

It didn’t seem any time had gone by at all when I hit the first tests that actually gave me pause. Each time I hesitated over a question, Marshal prompted me to re-read it aloud. Then he gave a hint of which portion of the scenario or question to focus on to access the answer. Each time he did, he leaned closer and touched the screen, looking up into my face with an expression of attractive seriousness I remembered from my dream—when he had helped me study for my Security Officer exam. Each time he did, I felt a little hiccup that scared me. It was like—

I shook it off and focused on the question, frowning as I tried to shoo my focus back into order. Reluctantly the focus returned, and I coaxed my studious habits back from their duty of studying my friend! I reminded myself.

“Last question.”

“But—”

Marshal pinned me with that serious, silver-blue expression. “Sally, you gave me your word.”

“I know, but...” But I was confused and I didn’t want to go back to the room with the poking and prodding and the questions that I didn’t know how to answer. I wanted to stay here where I had some control, where I was comfortable... mostly.

He chose the question and tapped the screen. “No. Last one. No argument.”

“Oh all right,” I grumbled as I focused on the screen and the question ‘Was my sister dead in your dream?’ My smile vanished and I blinked back the tears.

I felt more than saw his quick glance as my brain tried to think past the shock of the question. A part of me had hoped that the death of his sister had been something I concocted. But.... I folded my hands in my lap and sat back in the wheelchair. There was no way I wanted to answer that question, not even with a shake of my head, though I knew that was an answer of itself.

Marshal swore under his breath, giving the console a firm pound that caused a sharp beep.

“I’m sorry, Marshal,” I whispered, afraid to look at him because I knew how he felt. Neither one of us would be the same because of the loss of a single person.

“I thought—Hell. I don’t know what I thought.” He stood, his chair clattering over as he took a firm hold of the wheelchair handles and pushed me somewhat quickly to the door. “I guess having her in a dreamlife was an ‘out’ for me. Closure? Who the hell knows?” he grumbled.

Staring down into Bonny’s placid eyes made me think of Katie, his sister, and the stare of death that tortured him night after night— “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t. Not your fault. I’ll deal.”

But how could he deal when there was nothing good to take from that particular bad history? As far as I could recall, he hadn’t even been able to find the people responsible. It was no wonder he didn’t have closure! I could give him closure. All I had to do was talk about it—the other life I tried to forget.

Marshal wheeled me into the elevator and punched the lobby call button. When his hand returned to the handlebars, I could hear the grip of flesh against plastic. You have to do something, Sally! I turned and tried to meet his gaze. He didn’t cooperate and continued to glare ahead. “Marshal, I could... I could tell you something that might help you. At least a little.”

He clenched his jaw, his grip again squeaking the handlebars. “I’ll deal.”

My throat tightened and I blinked back the stinging of tears. “I know you will. You always were a tough guy, but—”

This time his silver-blue gaze met and held mine. “Sally. Don’t.” If I hadn’t known him so well over the years of my candidacy, I would have thought he was angry at me. “Leave this one to the demons in the dark.”

“Even though I have a candle?”

“Yes.”

I turned back, worrying my lower lip as I fiddled with Bonny’s ears. Then I reached forward

and pulled the emergency stop switch. The lift jolted to an immediate stop and a bell sounded an alarm. I muted the intercom before facing Marshal again. Even under his tan I could see he was a bit on the pale side, and his knuckles were whiter than white as he gripped the wheelchair.

“Sally—”

“You’re my friend, Marshal.” He twitched, which I didn’t understand, and shifted his gaze to the far wall. “I can’t do nothing.”

“And just what can you have to say that would put Katie back where she should have been?” he asked, deceptively calm. “Dreamlife isn’t enough. You know that.”

“How about vengeance?”

Marshal’s grip shifted from the chair to my arms so fast I barely had time to gasp. I had never seen eyes that dark before. “Who?”

“In my dream, you and Fujin went into Winhill to investigate—”

“Who was it?” he pressed again, giving me a slight shake. “Holy Hyne, Sally, tell me who the hell mutilated my sister!”

“A radical faction that wanted to annihilate Garden. You killed them. You killed them all.”

Marshal’s head fell forward and he choked out a sob, his hands tightening on my arms. Then he drew me close, wrapping me up in his arms so tight that I struggled to breathe. My heart pounding in my chest, I lifted my arms and held him, not knowing what to think—

He lifted his head and cupped my face in his hands, tears marring his face. “Thank you,” he said gruffly. Marshal brushed my forehead with a tender kiss that scattered my brain and sent my heart elsewhere in panic and... what? When his intense gaze met my more dazed one, I couldn’t get my brain to function. Then he lowered his head and kissed me with a gentle firmness that was so far from innocent.... Sally Dincht scrambled backward, desperately trying to find the wherewithal to slap his face. But Sally Regal stood rooted to the spot, shocked still by the Firaga firecracker that went off in my brain.

...M-Marshal?

Sally Dincht screamed at me to back away but... I couldn’t. Something... something clicked in my head and I found myself returning his kiss with a cautious one of my own. My limbs trembled, and I must have kicked over a firebomb that set off a cascade of firas and firagas in my brain when he answered my kiss in kind. Intense but... not and... and it felt... right? Did I want Marshal to be kissing me like that?

He pulled back, his hands still cupping my face, and I could feel his breath on my flushed cheeks. “I’ve been wanting to do that since I saw you hugging that damn bunny I got you,” he

confessed roughly.

Bonny—Marshal?! I swallowed hard, but I couldn't make my eyes open. I couldn't let go of his arms either. I just stood there, my knees wobbling as I wondered, What did I just do?

"You didn't seem to remember," Marshal said, pressing his lips on my forehead with such softness that I thought I would cry. "But then... then I thought, maybe...?" He caressed my cheeks with his thumbs. "You remember, right?"

"...remember?" I swallowed hard, still unable to do much more than grip his arms.

His lips brushed mine. "Us."

### §

The man in the dark remembered having power. He remembered a sword and strength. He remembered blazing fire.

The fire seemed to burn in the back of his brain as he focused on it, trying to remember at the same time he tried to call it back. In a place where there was nothing but dark, a little fire would have been a blessed change. Something more than the nothing he slipped to each minute that seemed an hour. He wanted to bring back the fire so that he could have a bit of warmth in place of the cold.

Something different from the chaos. Something to burn, brightly. Something to control.

He called it again. And again—The blaze flared in the back of his brain and held, sputtering and struggling against an exhaustion that always welcomed the darkness too soon. The fire kept it back this time. He wrapped the warmth around himself and held it tightly, even when his body shuddered with the effort. He didn't want to go back to the darkness without the flame. The sword. The control.

The fight against the chaos.