

Seven

~ Dramatic Pause ~

Zack parked the car and gathered his briefcase and visitor badge, all the while muttering about needing an escort every time. He had been in plenty of top-secret situations without as much care to security. He appreciated the fact they had a job to do, and military matters always required more security than a sane person would allow, but he felt like a kid.

“Mr. Regal.”

“SO Beita,” Zack greeted after a cursory glance over his shoulder. “You look like hell.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“I hope they aren’t waiting for me. I had to go back for additional information from a source that was late in getting back to me.” That and Desi had quit that morning.

“They made due, sir.” SO Beita offered forward another badge. “Updated badge permissions per Cmdr. Squall. This will allow you to log on to select computers within the Garden Network.”

“Is that online, then?” Zack accepted the badge and returned his other. “And you really do look like hell. Take a day off.”

SO Beita smirked. “Thank you, sir. I will tell Fujin you gave permission.”

“You do that.”

SO Beita offered to take Zack’s case and then motioned forward. “After you, sir.”

“Naturally.”

As usual, SO Beita stopped at the 2nd floor and sent Zack up alone. This time, however, there were two others waiting in addition to Cmdr. Squall.

First-Lt. Fujin Rokhart – which always struck him as a dramatic and odd name – stood at ease in front of the commander’s desk, not looking as he approached. To her left stood a tall, red-headed SeeD. He had never met her before but, unlike Fujin, she looked him straight in the eyes.

“Mr. Regal, this is Lieutenant Eryn Dwyre. She is head of instruction here and will be leading the mission, should it come to fruition.” Squall offered.

“Lieutenant Dwyre.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Regal. I must admit I’ve been anxious to do so.” She offered her hand and he accepted it. Eryn seemed friendly, but he could tell she silently sized him up. She too was cautious and probably completely untrusting. Not bad looking, though, with a porcelain complexion and striking green eyes.

“Lieutenant Rokhart.”

Fujin gave a brisk nod and once more focused ahead, the beauty of her profile once more striking Zack as a stunning contrast to her somewhat hostile personality. He supposed that both were used as a protection, they were most of the time, and it had his journalist sense wondering at the history that made it necessary. I’ll have to ask Sally. She had an ear for things like that and loved telling a story to the positive reflection of the people involved.

Zack smirked and focused on Cmdr. Squall. Nice kid. Focused on the business of running Garden to a fault, in most people’s opinion. Only problem was that the kid reminded Zack of himself. A plus, of course.

Squall motioned to the third chair. “Have a seat.” He sent a glance to Fujin as Zack and Eryn lowered themselves into their seats. “Fujin. Sit down.”

Fujin did as requested. She likely didn’t trust him either. He wasn’t Garden, therefore he wasn’t trustworthy. Of course, it didn’t help matters that he had a history of exposé pieces. Exposing things so that people made a stink and got things changed was what he loved.

“How’s Sally?” Squall inquired. “Dr. Kadowaki mentioned something about a refusal to take more tests the other day?”

“Yes, well, Sally seems to have acquired spunk in these two years she’s been asleep, and it looks as if she’s not afraid to use it. She’ll be back on track once I have a chat with her.” Maybe this time she’ll actually let me into the room? He’d attempted to visit her the day before and she had flat-out refused any visitors. Dr. Kadowaki hadn’t been free to tell him the reason.

“Adjusting takes time.” Eryn added, offering a sincere smile.

Squall absently nodded before motioning to Zack. “You mentioned information about the failed mission in Centra?”

“Yes. Someone called me yesterday offering me a lot of free information. When asked what would be expected in return, they said they would approach that at a later time. When asked if it was within my ability to provide, they said they wouldn’t be expecting me to provide it.”

Squall frowned and leaned back in his chair. “That means they’re going to expect us to do something.”

“NAME?”

Zack shook his head. “It was a woman. No name. Yet.”

“What did she offer?”

“Oh, she didn’t offer information to me that easily. It may be free, but I must work at finding it myself. She did offer me the starting point. Specifically, she wanted me to first look at different

companies that support smaller businesses, groups, or individuals. She didn't specify whether they should be above-board supports, rumor-mill supports, or conspiracy-theory-buff reports. So I looked into all of them, which I'm sure she knew I would do in the first place."

"What did you find out?"

"Over the past 24 hours I found that there are quite a few questionable supporters of even more questionable people/groups. The one that lifted the highest eyebrow was one from the Trabia area."

"Trabia..." Squall's expression grew dark.

"If anyone had a reason to screw with Seifer it was Trabia," Eryn said. "If I recall, he blasted their Garden, killing who knows how many SeeD and candidates."

"WHY?"

"Because, Lt. Rokhart, the questionable group being supported didn't come into existence until a few months after Seifer Almsy was re-enrolled. At least, they didn't become active, and funds didn't begin exchanging hands until then. There is alleged proof the group has been in existence since the Galbadian War with Esthar."

"Galbadia and Trabia?" Eryn grabbed Zack's arm with a firm grip. "Do you realize what this implies, Mr. Regal? With the other Gardens delaying fully networking, that infers conspiracy. That could start a military episode."

"Exactly." Zack opened his briefcase to retrieve a sheaf of papers bound neatly by a black metal clip. "This is the information I gathered about Galbadia and Trabia, as well as the reporting proving the conspiracy false. As for the information about the failed Centra mission, the woman promised a summary in my inbox this evening—late."

Eryn accepted the papers. "Will you send the email to Fujin immediately after receiving it?"

"As immediately as I can, yes."

"Good enough."

"At least now I won't have to make a report."

Eryn smirked. "You'll have to make a report, Mr. Regal. Paperwork is the binding tie here."

"Damn. I hate your style of reports. They're so boring." He latched his briefcase. "At least we've ruled out the Administration of your other Gardens. Someone worked damn hard to plant the right information, which causes me to wonder if it is in fact an anti-Garden or anti-military group. I have a couple feelers out to the different hard-ass groups around, but I don't know how quick they'll be able to get back to me. All these questions have made the informants a little nervous, most likely because of your own investigations." Zack smirked. "I'll just up the pluses. That usually steadies

nerves.”

“Garden is offering a reward for any information leading to Seifer’s recovery,” Eryn stated. “Maybe that will help.”

“Amount?”

“Depending on the information received, 10 to 25 thousand gil,” Squall answered.

“That will definitely get you some extra attention.” Zack stood. “I’ll pass the word. For right now, I must pick up my daughter from day-care. They bite me when I’m late.” He nodded to all. “Commander. Lieutenants. I’ll be sure to have my report to you before this evening. Well, after Joy is fed at least.”

Still smirking, Squall raised a hand. “Tomorrow?”

“Maybe. I might come in day after. I’m expecting information from one of my more reliable sources tomorrow. I’m waiting for his call. That and Joy doesn’t have day-care. I get to play tea-party.”

Fujin didn’t react. Squall and Eryn chuckled.

Zack’s smirk twitched. Okay. So Fujin doesn’t find me funny. Neither did his ex wife. At least, not anymore. “I’ll be at the infirmary for a few minutes before leaving, so intercom me if something comes up.” Both Fujin and Eryn bristled at that. Ah. Territorial and I’m not SeeD. Note to self.. “It might be better to buzz my cell phone. It’s always on.”

Then he nodded once more and turned toward the elevator. All SeeD met so far intrigued him, and that was hard to do considering his previous irritation with anything Garden. They were defined by a different code of honor than what he had expected, and a complete opposite to that of the Galbadian military. More than likely, it was due to the majority of enrollees being teenagers: troubled, abandoned, orphaned.... That commonality contributed to an impression of family. It also added to the previously mentioned code that bordered on self-sacrifice for the team.

There was only a handful of SeeD who didn’t fit with the ‘family’ and seemed to work outside the code, but even they were dealt with, involved, accepted, and considered one of the team. One being SO Marshal Beita. Definitely didn’t think to meet him in a position of responsibility.

The kid – though Zack supposed he shouldn’t call a 20-year-old a kid – had a questionable history. Enrolling at Balamb Garden at the age of 17, usually considered too late, Beita had a history of military schools in Dollet that had made him an exception. He had enrolled after his younger sister became the victim of a gang-rape, killed by Galbadian military.

Word on the street was that Beita had enrolled and then transferred to Galbadia Garden for revenge. Nothing had come of it, and now Beita was said to be one of the best security officers at

Balamb, deadly with his pair of .45s called Marshal's 'Ladies', and trusted by First-Lt. Fujin Rokhart herself.

The story hiding behind the switch intrigued Zack.

Zack stepped aboard the elevator and pressed the first-floor call button. He frowned at the seam of the elevator doors. He had supposed the Seifer-team ambush to be a Garden-inside job, but the more he researched, even with the knowledge of Beita's history, the more he believed it an outside job. The hunt for the truth, while frustrating at times, was a thrill.

Which was the whole reason he'd become a journalist in the first place.

§

There sounded a rustle and the nineteen-year-old beside the infirmary bed looked up from grading papers. She had only turned to her side as she slept. One side of Zell's lips twitched as he returned his focus to his papers.

"Wouldn't you be more comfortable at my desk?" Dr. Kadowaki asked, pausing on her way by.

"Nah. S'okay." Zell adjusted his ankle against his knee, shifting the papers slightly.

Dr. Kadowaki shrugged and continued on.

Zell glanced at Sally, watching her sleep for a long moment before once more grading the same paper he'd worked on for the last hour. Rubbing his scalp, he grumbled, "Focus, Dincht. Geez," and began tapping his red pen against the papers.

Everyone knew the library girl had a crush on him. Everyone knew she was too shy to do anything about it. That was one of the reasons he let her hang out with him at the party. He kinda... He kinda liked having her have the crush. No one else had one on him, unless they were just 'hero-groupies,' as Quis called them. It made him feel important.

Zell scrubbed at his scalp. It was weird how he liked hanging out with her. Working out with her had been fun, too, and stuff like that was usually a drag when doing it with someone else. They usually whined, or couldn't keep up with him. She hadn't once complained.

Sally rolled back to her side, but the action made a lock of hair fall against her nose, causing her to wrinkle it and squirm her face a little. Zell set the papers aside and stood, making his way to the side of her bed and brushing the hair away—the soft warmth of her face against his finger made Zell jump a bit as he pulled his hand back. Dude.

Yeah, but 'dude' what? Bad 'dude'? Or good 'dude'?

A throat cleared behind him, causing his face to redden as he turned. He felt as if he'd been caught peeking into the girls' locker-room.

A tall man stood in the entry of the small, curtained-off room. Dressed in jeans and a gray Timber Wolves t-shirt, he looked pissed.

“Zackary Regal,” he introduced. “Sally’s older brother.” And he put emphasis on ‘older.’

Shit. Zell forced a harmless smile as he stepped forward to grip the man’s hand. The grasp threatened hellfire. Dinct, you’re in deep shit. “Zell Dinct. How are ya?” I’m not trying to jump your sister.

“I’m well.” But his expression said ‘I’m going to hurt you.’

Clearing his throat, Zell released his hold of the older man’s hand and gestured behind to Sally’s sleeping form. “Just making sure she’s okay. Last time she woke up, she freaked. So, Doc said I could hang here in case she woke up again. She was up a little while ago, barely, but she fell back to sleep.” Dinct, shut up! He forced back the jovial smile.

“Walk with me.”

Zell didn’t take it as a request. Oh shit. “Sure thing.”

The two headed out of the infirmary and began what seemed a nonchalant jaunt around the Garden’s main corridor. Zell couldn’t stop smiling his best ‘I’m not scared shitless’ expression.

“Just what are you to my sister?”

“What d’ya mean?” was what Zell asked aloud while wondering how he was supposed to answer when he didn’t even know what she was to him.

“It’s a fairly straightforward question. Explains itself, hence the reason I asked.” Zack halted and faced him, his arms crossed. “I’m waiting.”

Zell had to wrestle with the easy smile as he gave a shrug. “I’m kind of a coach for her, I guess. Working her muscle-groups to get her endurance, tone, and strength up.” Geez. That sounds... “You know, so she’ll be good enough to walk around,” he somewhat smoothly added, and he nearly grimaced.

“And,” Zack pressed.

“And what?”

Zack leaned forward so suddenly that Zell took a step back, eyes wide. “Don’t screw with me, spike-boy.”

“I’m not!”

“Then what the hell are you to my sister?”

“I don’t know!” Zell confessed before he realized it.

“You don’t know?”

When Zack's short cut brown hair nearly bristled, Zell took another step back.

"You had better re-think that answer, spike-boy."

"Now, dude, chill. There's nothing going on. Swear."

"You do realize that I'll beat your ass if you hurt her?"

"I'm not!" Zell insisted. "I really like her." He blinked. I... I do...?

"Glad to hear it," Zack said, "because that's my baby sister you 'really like', barely nineteen, and if I hear you mess with her head at all, you won't be able to run far enough to get away from what I'll do to you."

Zell pulled his thoughts from the 'I really like her' and nodded. "You've got my word on it."

"Your word, at the current moment, doesn't mean anything but letters in a certain order. So, just so long as we understand each other, spi—"

"It's Zell, or Dincht." Zell produced his hand, still holding Zack's gaze. "And we do."

Zack regarded Zell for an intense moment before accepting the hand and giving it a firm grip. "Good, because I will hurt you."

With that, Zack casually walked toward the Garden exit as Zell stared after him. At least he still had all his extremities.

§

The phone rang.

Zack reached over and smacked the speaker button without looking away from the computer. "Regal. Talk to me."

"Good evening, Mr. Regal," greeted a low, feminine voice.

Zack snatched up the phone and pushed away from the computer. "You said you were going to email, but I'm not complaining."

"Did you meet with Balamb Garden?"

As before, she was all business. "I did. Did you access the information I uploaded?"

"Yes. You do very good work, Mr. Regal. I can see why you do what you do."

"So, I take it I'm on the right track with dismissing the intra-Garden conspiracy?"

"Yes, Mr. Regal. You gathered even more information than I had, so the certainty is definite—even for me."

"At least all the sleepless nights were worth it."

The woman actually chuckled.

"Any possibility I can have a name to report to Cmdr. Squall Leonhart. They're a little antsy

to get started and want to know who to contact.”

“I think I will leave things the way they are for the moment, Mr. Regal, if you don’t mind.”

“A reporter never minds having a private source. Trust me.”

“I didn’t believe it would be a problem,” she said, her tone amused. “Is it safe to assume that you are ready to receive some additional information about the mission?”

“Damn straight.”

“Could you humor me with the information you were provided by Garden?”

“Naturally. Did you want it verbatim, or colored with my own suppositions?”

“Verbatim first, if you please.”

“Good girl. Let’s see....” Zack hit the speaker button again and replaced the receiver. “If you don’t mind, I’ve put you on speaker. I’m at home, alone, so there’s no risk of info leaking out anywhere. I just need quicker access to my notes. I hunt and peck.”

“Are you always this way when chasing the story of your life, Mr. Regal?”

“Naturally.”

She chuckled again.

“Alright. Verbatim: ‘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 [Cmdr. Squall] approved. Lt. Cmdr. Quistis Trepe and Lt. Cmdr. Xu accompanied him as SeeD observation staff. 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.’ “

“Did they allow a recorder on base?”

Zack smirked. “No, I’m just good like that.”

“And your own suppositions would be what?”

“Besides what you read online?”

“Once again, humor me. I’m blonde.”

“Ah ha! I had pictured you brunette. Damn.”

She chuckled. “Mr. Regal. Let us stay on task, if you please.”

“Right. Supposition....” Zack received an email at just that moment. His brain stalled.

“Mr. Regal?”

“I just received some information. Need to process.”

“I will call you back in 30 minutes, Mr. Regal.”

“Call me back in the morning.” He clicked off the speaker and brought up the email, shifting it

to his second monitor to make room for the research windows he would need.

§

They had come again.

And again he had slipped through their fingers.

The constant cat-and-mouse game was a thrill for the man, a joke to himself of being a “thrill junkie” looking for the next hit. It reminded him that he was alive and free, gaining power and motivation with each day. Plotting vengeance. Plotting annihilation, really. No one took Seifer Almsy prisoner and lived to tell the tale.

These ass holes wouldn't be the first.

If he had anything to say about it, they would be the last.