

## Thirteen

~ Mission: Brief ~

“We haven’t been using GFs since the war!”

Zack nodded. “The fact remains, however, that you used them. Because of that, the faction has taken it upon themselves to eradicate Garden one person at a time. Candidate Almas was their first step in making that happen. This faction wants Garden to implode and the collateral damage matters little.”

A steady murmur began to escalate as Cmdr. Squall Leonhart stood and made his way to the podium. “Thank you, Mr. Regal.”

“My pleasure. Always wanted to perform a military briefing. Appreciate the opportunity.” Zack handed over the controller and returned to his seat.

The Commander quieted the group with a simple look. “Team setups are as follows: Eryn, Quistis, Serra, Fujin, and myself are on the lead team with Jaxon as tracker. Zell, Xu, Raijin, Selphie are back-up.”

Quistis stood. “Sir, request to be on the back-up team.”

“Reason?”

“I enjoy being the last line of defense. In my experience with your operations, you exit the premises on a run.”

The group chuckled, and even Squall’s expression lightened to that of amusement. Zack could tell there were scores of inside jokes within these few team members.

“Request granted.” He looked to the others named on the back-up team. “Who requests a transfer to the lead team?” When Zell raised his hand, he was pointedly ignored. “Selphie? Granted.” Squall focused on Jaxon. “Jaxon, you and Fujin will be the initial scouting group. You will be required to report in once every ten minutes. You are absolutely forbidden to engage the enemy alone.” He focused a hard stare on Fujin’s averted gaze. “Is that clear?”

Jaxon and Fujin both nodded.

“The rest of the group will abide by Eryn’s directive, which she is handing out now. You have one hour to prepare before deployment. Good luck.”

Zack gathered his things while imagining the roar of the crowd at a future journalistic award ceremony.

After the meeting, most attendees went their separate ways to prepare themselves for the upcoming mission. Eryn snatched up her papers from the table; she had plans to meet up with Jaxon so the two could catch up. She filed away the last page and turned to leave, almost colliding with someone in the hallway.

“Oh— Zell, what are you still doing down here? Squall gave you an hour to prep. I suggest you use it.” She moved past him and continued on her way to the lift.

“Wait a sec!” Zell called after her.

Eryn stopped and turned to face him, “What is it?”

“So, like, I’m sorry, for...you know...What happened,” he started, “I was thinking, maybe you could talk to Squall. I feel like I should be with Jaxon, you know, on the lead team, since like, Seifer, you know...”

Eryn stared at him in disbelief, “Were you always this way? I mean, I remember you from the war. We met a few times.”

Zell’s face contorted with confusion. “What are you talking about?”

“You know, we all played our parts back then. Any one of us could be walking around today acting as if the world owes us something. But no one does. Squall, Jaxon, Fujin. None of them act that way, so why do you?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“This... ‘entitled’ attitude you carry around, especially lately. I just don’t get it.”

“You know what? Screw you, Eryn. You’re not my ma, or my girl, or even a friend. So you can just step off!”

Eryn shrugged. “I’m sorry you feel that way, Zell, I really am, but the teams remain as they are.” She turned and continued toward the lift, mumbling, “What the hell does Sally see in that guy?” She punched the lobby-floor call button. It wouldn’t be so bad if he were anything like he used to be, but like she had told him, the attitude had to go. “He needs to grow up, is what he needs to do, dickhead busting up my team and making my work harder than it has to be.” She scoffed and strode toward the dorms. I need a cigarette. No, damn it. I need a drink. A big, stiff one.

Outside Jaxon’s assigned hostelling space, Eryn nervously glanced around before knocking. She crossed her arms tightly against her chest. When the door opened and she saw Jaxon, the tears sprung to her eyes.

He smiled, but it vanished when he saw her. “E? Are you ok?”

She threw her arms around him and pulled him into a tight hug, tears rolling down her cheeks. Eryn hated the fact that she blubbered like an idiot, crying was against her personal policy,

but seeing a friendly face had sent her control out the window.

Jaxon stood still for a long moment before wrapping his arms around her. “OK. Let’s go inside,” he finally said, ushering her inside.

Sniffing, Eryn wiped her eyes with the sleeves of her uniform jacket before taking a seat on the small couch. She watched him as he grabbed two glasses from the sparsely stocked kitchen.

“I’m sorry about that, Jax.”

He set the glasses down on the table in front of them. “It’s ok, E.”

He dug into the duffel on the floor next to the couch, retrieving a bottle of brown liquid—whiskey. He unscrewed the cap and poured some into each glass. Eryn gulped down a large sip.

“Better?”

She nodded. “I’m really glad that you’re here.”

“Me, too. Now tell me what’s got you so upset. I’ve never seen you this way before,” he admitted, sipping his drink.

Eryn rolled her eyes. “It’s been terrible here; this last week especially. Ever since we found the informant I’ve been working until all hours of the night. Two days ago I was up for almost 24 hours straight, and then that same day, I catch Zell and Marshal beating the shit out of each other in the middle of the lobby. That’s why he couldn’t meet you yesterday, and why Marshal isn’t going tomorrow...They’re both in the damn brig.”

“Wow. Marshal and Zell? What the hell is going on around here?”

“Would you believe that spiky-headed idiot had the nerve to actually ask me if I would talk to Squall about getting him back on the lead team?” Eryn shook her head. “The worst part of all? Just now Zell basically said I was nothing to him and that I needed to back off when I told him he had a serious attitude problem.” She sighed. “He’s probably right. Just me sticking my nose where it doesn’t belong again. I always do that.”

“You don’t mince words, E,” Jaxon started. Eryn shot him a glare. He held up his hands in defense. “It isn’t a bad thing. Zell’s been riding the ‘I saved the world’ wave for what? Almost three years now?” He fingered his glass before taking a thoughtful sip. “There comes a time when you have to move on, grow up.” He put his hand on her shoulder. “You have way more tact than you think. You’re hurting right now because Zell doesn’t.”

“Tell that to him, the punk,” she grumbled. She downed the last of her drink and offered him the glass. “Thanks, Jax. I needed that. Unfortunately I can’t get shit-faced with you today. Saving a comrade and all.”

Jaxon smirked. “Yeah. Damn those comrades in arms, eh?”

Eryn's expression softened into a smile, which Jaxon returned. "I'm really glad you're here."  
"Me, too."

§

They had been surprisingly accepting.

The commander hadn't asked for proof of her claim. He had accepted the offered blood-work, allowing her to report to the doctor with her findings for corroboration with current medical records. When said tests had been returned positive, he had simply smiled and shook her hand.

Serra lowered her gaze to the soft white glow held in her palm. With a frown, she released the light to vanish into a puff of smoke and fisted her hand. They had been surprisingly accepting, hinting at the chaos that would meet her at the end of this particular tunnel.

§

"So, my sister is worth suspension and 24 hours in the brig." SO Beita sent Zack a sidelong look. The kid looked like hell, reminding him of a certain other kid with a similar bruised and bloody appearance.

"Sir," he greeted. He didn't stand to his feet. Nor did he bother extending his glance of the TV reporter. Instead, he lowered his blank gaze to the cement underfoot.

Zack performed a cursory examination of the glass of the door to the confinement cell, shifting his scrutiny toward the high ceilings of the security basement to see about the possibility of helping the kid out. "Bullet-proof. Ironic," he mumbled. He resigned himself to a muffled conversation as he focused on SO Beita's somber profile. "When were you going to tell me? After all we've meant to each other." And why is it that I don't want to feed this particular SeeD to the nearest elevator chute?

"There was nothing to tell, sir. She doesn't remember."

That had to be hell. "That didn't prevent you from being the truck that ran into Dincht's face, which makes me think—"

"Think what you want, sir." SO Beita fixed Zack with a hard stare. "I don't answer to you."

Zack regarded the SeeD for a moment before he inclined his head. "In all honesty, I wouldn't expect that of you. You're too similar to the ass standing in front of you. In fact, that might be why I don't mind the idea of you being involved with my sister. Dincht on the other hand...."

The security officer allowed a smirk.

"How much does she not remember?"

The smirk vanished. "That's none of your business, sir."

"Humor me."

“I don’t think so, sir.” SO Beita once again lowered his focus to the cement floor. “If it’s all the same to you, I’d rather serve my time alone.”

“Without even an explanation as to why Dincht received the business end of your fist? Sally’s naïve and so I doubt her taste in men, but Zell Dincht didn’t strike me as the kind to—”

“Dincht can go to hell,” was all he said.

Zack considered the young man in thoughtful silence. The attitude was surprising, considering Garden’s tendency toward extreme loyalty. Of course he could understand coming to the rescue of his sister, which is what those around Garden had reported, but between friends? Zack set the mystery aside with some difficulty, his brain scrolling through the known facts of the kid with slow deliberateness. Something in SO Marshal Beita’s past ingrained him with an almost compulsive need to protect those emotionally connected with him. Of late he hadn’t had the free time to spare to extra mysteries, but now that the troops had been deployed....

“Before I go, soldier, answer me one question.”

“No promises, sir.”

“Have you ever considered life outside of Garden?”

That grabbed the security officer’s attention like a bolt from a crossbow. “Sir?”

“A job. A career. Something that doesn’t involve uniforms and carrying a military issued weapon.”

“The Ladies are mine, sir.”

“Point taken: You have a frightening attachment to guns. That aside... have you considered life outside these gates?” How old was he when he joined? Seventeen?

SO Beita’s gaze narrowed. “No, sir.”

“Not once?” Zack pressed, incredulous.

“Every soldier wonders at least one time in his career, sir. When that time comes, he or she deals with it one way or the other.”

“Has your time come yet?”

SO Beita regarded Zack for a long moment, his expression thoughtful. “No,” he admitted slowly.

“Not even today?”

He clenched his jaw. “No.”

“Hm. Interesting.” Zack tapped a finger to his chin as he held the security officer’s gaze. Then he gave a one-shouldered shrug. “Think on it while you’re in here, soldier.”

“Think on what, sir?”

“Whether or not you would consider working for me.”

The man blinked. “Sir, why would I consider working for a TV reporter?”

“Station owner,” Zack corrected in an absent tone. “As an employee, preferably as a Garden Network press liaison, you would have access to informants and other such nonsense.”

“I don’t see the draw.”

Zack smirked. “Touché. Regardless, think about my offer as you stew in this little box. I’m interested to see what you come up with. I’ll check in on you later.”

Irritation sparked in the man’s eyes, but he remained silent. Zack gave a nod and turned toward the exit. The kid was good at his job, and if Zack was serious about delving deeper into researching conspiracy theories he would need someone to keep his hide intact. Who better qualified than a Garden Security Officer who had a history of military academy training?

“I believe you might just be onto something,” he congratulated himself. At the same time, he wondered if he could make the last train to Timber. It would give him just enough time to delve into researching the death of Katie Beita before the last news broadcast of the evening.

## §

“Every soldier wonders at least one time in his career, sir. When that time comes, he or she deals with it one way or the other.”

“Has your time come yet?”

Marshal stared down at his scuffed shoes and fisted his hands. “No,” he said again. He had put that question out of his mind before he signed the Garden contract. The minute he dedicated himself to finding Katie’s killer he flushed all thoughts of taking a different road. He dropped out of class, quit his job, and signed the contract with Garden for that one purpose.

Then he met Sally Regal.

The first time he shared a study group with her at Balamb he knew there was something different to her. Then he found out she had a family, unlike almost everyone else enrolled. Her biggest challenge had been shyness, not anger management or post-traumatic stress disorder or abuse. Sally had something to live for outside of the Garden collective. She had something to smile about.

Soon after his transfer to Galbadia he had called the Balamb library to have a book transferred. She had greeted him with enthusiasm and laughter, and that sound had sent him over the top. He fought off the attraction for months after that, using his sister’s picture and the broken pendant they had found on her body as his primary motivator. Of course there was also the fact that

everyone knew she crushed on Zell, and Marshal wasn't one to be second.

But once a person met Sally Regal there was no easy way to forget her.

She never forgot him, either. Holidays, birthdays, promotions... each time he succeeded in wresting her from his mind and re-gaining focus, she sent a card or gift for some supposed monumental event. She would even transfer books with a note explaining that she remembered he was doing some type of research, or writing this paper, or preparing for this mission....

He still remembered the day she hand-delivered a top secret folder requested from Cid, although he couldn't now remember what it was all about. Somehow she convinced him to give her a tour of Galbadia Garden with only a simple request. Even more surprising was when he heard himself invite her to lunch afterward.

When he offered to fly her back to Balamb in an aerial, she declined. "I'm off to Timber to spend time with my parents. Even Zack!" she said, laughing. The next words out of his mouth: "I'll drive you." It was the first time he had mentally paid attention to anything around him, outside the end goal of retaliation.

After that drive to Timber he knew there would be no going back to the loner SeeD bent on avenging his murdered sister above all else. His focus continued to be drawn from Katie to Sally. At one point he told Sally that she reminded him of his sister. Her brown eyes lit up like stars. "I don't have a sister," she told him in that cheery tone so unlike anything he had heard before or since. But then her eyes had darkened and she nibbled at her lower lip before timidly asking, "Would you... would you mind telling me about her?"

They sat up all night in the cafeteria talking about Katie over hot cups of coffee and cocoa.

Where had Zell Dincht been? Off with his Sorceress slaying buddies.

Marshal scoffed and bolted to his feet. He stalked to the glass door of the cell and leaned against it to stare out into the darkened corridor with a blank gaze, arms crossed. "As an employee, preferably as a Garden Network press liaison, you would have access to informants and other such nonsense." It was an opportunity of a lifetime, but the timing of it couldn't be worse. Sally finally began to see beyond Zell Dincht. In fact, Marshal knew that when she looked at him she saw 'Mars'. Maybe one day she would remember their last week together? Would she if he left?

But pass up Garden Network Press Liaison? Pass on the informants, the information network, the way to find the ones responsible for Katie's murder? Marshal pulled a pendant and chain from his left trouser pocket, opening the locket to reveal the smiling faces of the two women that meant the most in his life—

He snapped the locket closed and fisted his hand around it, pressing his knuckles against his forehead. When Katie died he vowed to find the ones responsible. Today was not the day to start breaking promises.

§

I made my way to the rehab room and the jet-stream tub in the corner, Mr. Huggles (the Tonberry) in one hand and Bonny in the other. My back ached and the doctor recommended soaking for at least 30 minutes to loosen the muscles. I stared at the bubbling surface of the water with a blank gaze as the temperature rose to the set degree. When the degree was reached, I set Mr. Huggles and Bonny a safe distance away and shed my terry robe. Stepping into the heated water, I settled myself into the corner and just stared at the playful bubbles, my hands clasped in my lap.

The timer dinged and I twitched, shifting my focus to the clock behind me—my gaze focused on my reflection and I gasped, my cheeks going ashen. I touched my shoulder with tentative motions, my fingertips tracing the scar spanning the top of my shoulder to my side in the shape of a giant maw. My vision blurred and I whimpered as I jerked my hand away. Then I covered my face and sobbed.