

Fourteen

~ *Mission: Go* ~

“We know you’re in there, soldier!”

Seifer rolled, his back slamming against the crumbled stone wall. Fragments stung his face as the machine gun fire ricocheted. “Shit,” he hissed. What he wouldn’t have given for at least a knife.

“Give up now and we won’t kill you.”

“Go to hell!” He scrambled two yards to the east and the next ruined wall. A barrage of gun-fire followed in his wake. “You better kill me, ass holes, because you’re dead!”

Seifer continued to progress from ruined wall, down crumbling stairs, and over felled columns trailed by a shower of bullets and the clamor of booted feet giving chase. Deeper into the ruins he ran, not caring that with each step the darkness thickened and his eyes strained to make out the next safest step. Something drew him deeper and he couldn’t help but obey.

§

Jaxon stowed his gear and plopped next to Eryn. “Is it just me, or is the air around here electric?”

Eryn shifted her glare from Zell at the far end of the transport. “Huh? Oh. Electric. Right. You know, I’d like to ‘electric’ him all the way to—”

“E.”

“What?”

Jaxon shook his head. “Never mind.” When Eryn once more focused an angry stare on the blond, Jaxon stood. “Let me talk to him.”

She scoffed and crossed her arms. “Whatev. He won’t listen, or hear for that matter. He’s so damned sure that he’s got the rights to a sweet life....” The rest was lost to a collection of grumbles.

Chuckling, Jaxon made his way to the space next to Zell with an acknowledging nod to Fujin on his other side. “Hey, Zell. I didn’t get the opportunity to talk to you after the meeting. How are you?”

Zell didn’t lift his gaze from his hands resting on his knees as he offered a grunt in response.

“Ah.” Jaxon continued to regard his friend, expression thoughtful. He finally lifted his arms in a shrug. “I’m at a loss, buddy. I heard what went on and, well, fighting in the halls? With Marshal?”

“He threw a punch. I threw back.”

“And? Come on. You and Marshal have been chums from the first, and I know you’re loyal to that. What—”

Zell’s head jerked up. “Just step off from me, Dude.”

“You say that to all the people trying to help you?”

His brows furrowed. “You don’t want to help me, Jax. You’re just all in my face because Eryn went off and blamed me for everything.”

“Eryn doesn’t lay blame where it isn’t warranted, Zell. You know that. She holds you to your attitude and your actions. Period.” Jaxon sent Eryn a quick glance, but she continued her study of the mission scope. “Zell.” He focused an intense gaze on the scrapper, “Zell, you’ve been my friend for many a year. I’m trying to be loyal to that here, and you’re making it difficult. If you want help from me, try opening a line of communication and I’ll see what I can do. Telling me to ‘step off’ won’t achieve anything.”

Zell grumbled as he lowered his focus back to his fisted hands. “It sounds dumb.”

“Everything sounds dumb to someone at some point in time. Try me.”

Another grumble, a reddening of ears, and then Zell mumbled, “He moved in on my girl.”

“I’m sorry, pardon?”

“Marshal. He was moving in on my girl.” Zell sent Jaxon a sidelong glance.

Jaxon’s face contorted into an expression of shocked disbelief. “Marshal? Did he *know* she was your girl? Did you tell him so he could correct himself?”

“Everyone knows she was my....” Zell clenched his jaw and looked away. “Everyone knows, Dude. Forever.”

“Enlighten me, then. Who is she?”

“The Library Girl. Sally.”

Jaxon sat back and reviewed his repository of information regarding Sally and Zell. “The only thing I heard was that she had a crush on you. You never reciprocated or showed an interest.”

“So?”

“So? Women are not required to pine away their days waiting for their ‘first choice’ to get their heads out of their butts.” Jaxon leaned away from the glare aimed his direction. “Look, you can’t expect a girl to telepathically know you’ve suddenly decided she’s an object of your attention.”

“I gave her a stuffed Tonberry doll. It had a basket of flowers and a little cactuar.”

Something tugged at Jaxon’s memory. “Oh, it must look a lot like the one Selphie bought some days ago. I was on the phone with her about her Trabia security clearance when she started squealing about this stuffed Tonberry and its little cactuar. I nearly lost my hearing.” He paused to retrieve the rest of the memory. “In fact, she said she thought it would be great for Sally.”

Zell scowled at the pointed look from his friend and, instead of saying anything, just crossed his arms and glowered at the floor.

“Sorry, man, fighting in the halls is not cool. Sally doesn’t strike me as the kind of girl who thinks it neat to have two knuckleheads fighting over her – and it doesn’t matter who started the brawl, either. She also doesn’t seem the type to think someone who felt ‘entitled’ to her affections is cool.” Jaxon sent Zell a pointed scrutiny. “Zell, if your attitude doesn’t change, I can almost guarantee you’ll have no chance with her – ever.” He stood to his feet, leaning down in order to keep his next commentary somewhat private. “Oh, and if any of the women I’ve ever known had caught me giving them a gift I’d borrowed from a friend... well, let’s just say I probably wouldn’t be alive today.”

Hoping something had gotten through, Jaxon came to his full 6’4” height and promptly forgot the 5’ 10” clearance of the ceiling. He hit the hull of the transport with a resounding thud and took a couple of staggering steps backwards before having to quickly sit.

“Are you all right, Lieutenant?”

The voice of the Lieutenant Commander set something afire in his chest. “I will be in a minute.” He looked up and gave the officer from the Centra Agency a weak smile. Her eyes settled on his and she returned the smile warmly. Absently, he rubbed his head. “I would swear I’ve met you.”

“Not much of a pick-up line, Lieutenant.” if she’d been wearing glasses, she would have peered over them at him.

“I don’t do pick-up lines within 30 minutes of a mission.”

She continued to smile at him, her expression softening. “Does it still hurt?”

The question made him look up at his hand that continued to rub absently. “I do it all the time. You’d think I’d be used to it by now.”

“You’re very tall. This world wasn’t built for people like you,” she commented. She reached up to gently remove his hand from his head and instead placed her own hand there. It was warm and he wasn’t sure where the tingling came from, but the pain eased quickly.

“Thank you,” he said in a soft tone. It didn’t matter that the whole transport probably watched the exchange – he very badly wanted to kiss her.

“You’re welcome, Lieutenant.”

“Jaxon, or Jax, depending on what makes you comfortable.”

“OK, Jax.” She smiled again and blinked a few times before clearing her throat. “Would you like to get some coffee sometime?”

He grinned. “As soon as possible.”

A ripping sound from the back tore his attention from the captivating woman next to him. Eryn’s expression promised death and destruction to mere mortals and she violently tore her papers into small pieces.

“I’m sorry, but I have to go avert a disaster back there. “ He stood – ducking this time. “I’ll hold you to that coffee.”

“I won’t forget, Jaxon.”

The look in her eyes and the sound of her voice made his knees weak and he had to consciously order his feet to move away. When he finally arrived at his original seat next to Eryn, Jaxon scooped up the shreds of mission brief she had strewn about his chair.

“Is she the one you saw yesterday?” Eryn asked, lifting her chin toward the front of the transport. Her voice wasn’t quite as stormy as her expression.

Jaxon released a breath he hadn’t realized he held. “Yes, that’s her.”

Despite her otherwise sour mood, Eryn chuckled. “You really can pick ‘em.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Have you looked at her?”

“A few times, yes. I have.”

“You do realize who she is, don’t you, Mr. Detail-Oriented-to-an-Anal-Retentive-Fault?”

He shrugged, not having a clue where she tried to lead him. “An officer from an organization in Centra?”

Eryn shook her head in disbelief. “Take the blinders off, Jax. Squirt some eye drops in there and blink a few times.” She grabbed his jaw and turned him to face Serra’s direction. “Who does she look like?”

The object of his focus continued to work on her computer with studious attention and didn’t notice the intensified scrutiny. She chewed on a lip in contemplation. Then, suddenly, she scowled. Jaxon’s jaw dropped. “No way!” A simple coffee date just became very complicated.

Eryn nodded, almost apologetically. “Yes. Way.”

Jaxon’s heart sunk to his feet. “She’s his sister?”

“Twin sister.”

He slumped back into his seat and covered his face with a hand. “There is no particular four letter word that will be enough to express my surprise,” he muttered.

“I could provide a list for you to choose from....”

“I know you could.” He crossed his arms in his lap. “How could I have missed this?”

“I know you well enough to be able to say with all certainty – you saw her eyes and her legs and then turned off your brain.”

“Crap. I suck! How could I....”

Eryn put a hand on his shoulder. “Jax, despite your excellence at your job and your nit-picky attention to detail, you are vulnerable to your fundamental flaw.”

He raised an eyebrow, his expression urging her to continue.

“You. Are. A ma-a-a-a-n.”

He gave Eryn a gentle shove while looking ahead toward Serra. She caught his gaze and sent back a smile that seemed to make her eyes sparkle and made him damn grateful that he *was* a man.

§

Seifer ducked around the corner of crumbling mortar and stone, his shoulders hunched against the onslaught of gunfire. He could barely see the flagstone corridor ahead of him. “Shit.” A stone fragment stung his cheek, motivating a backwards run and a vicious return spray of gunfire. One of his pursuers sprawled forward, rolling several feet before sliding to a halt and tripping the son of a bitch that followed. “You like that, assholes? Come and get some!”

The pocket of his tattered trench clanked with the two remaining clips of ammunition. That flared a spark of anger; he knew he would run out before the punks were all dead. *Then I’ll*

just need to do it the old fashioned way. A gunblade would have been a nice addition to the fun. Hell. A nice fire spell would have been good. “Light the god damned way,” he grumbled between puffs.

Diving into a corridor of mostly rubble and skeletons, he pressed himself tight against the wall and waited. The heavy sound of booted feet followed not long after. He gripped the machine gun, counting in his head the number of men and how soon they would get to—Two men passed at a run. Seifer smashed the next man in the face, the blood from his broken nose spurting a good two feet. His howl of pain halted the others. Firing from the hip, Seifer didn’t give them the chance to see his face. They fell forward, blood covering the flagstones beneath them.

He snatched up the handgun and the extra ammunition, tucking them into the belt of his slacks or the pockets of his trench. The flashlight was useless. He swore and then headed blindly down the corridors again, following the pull in the base of his brain. It was like a voice spoke to him. He couldn’t understand what it said, or who they were, or why he did what it said. He just couldn’t keep himself from going deeper into the ruined castle – or whatever the hell it was – all the while hoping he would find a place to make a stand at the end.

Bounding over a fallen column, he only just kept himself from careening into a rotted wooden door. The bauble almost sent him head over heels down the stairs on the other side of the door. He caught himself and continued down in a more controlled fashion. What little light there was faded quickly, and there wasn’t much more his eyes could do to adjust. His hold on the machine gun tightened as he wished, again, that he could make fire. But junctions were forbidden now... at least for SeeD. *One hell of an irony,* he mused.

The footsteps of his pursuers stopped; the shouts and curses following hinted they had lost his trail. He ducked behind another wooden door, this one still clinging to its iron hinges, and pushed it closed. Leaning back against it, he steadied his breathing as his narrowed gaze took in his surroundings. He had found a smaller room than what he would have liked, and one wall looked as if it would tumble at the merest breath. *Might come in handy.* The thought of smashing one of the sons of bitches under a ton of rubble gave him a reason to smirk.

“First things first,” he grumbled. He slung the machine gun behind his back and hurried forward, searching the rubble for anything he could use as a light or torch. Unfortunately, he couldn’t even find a bit of dried wood in the small fireplace.

Seifer cursed as he swiped a shaky hand through his hair—A warm breath on his neck

spun him so that he almost lost his footing. But he was still alone in the room, the voice in his head continuing to urge him deeper into the castle.

“Leave me the hell alone,” he hissed. “Damn ghosts....”

But there remained a heavy presence. It was as if the owner of the voice had a grip of his trenchcoat lapels and pulled him toward the crumbling wall. In fact, his left foot scuffed forward, leaving him staring down at it in horror.

“What the hell?” He stepped back until he came up short against the door, the feeling of being pulled toward the wall returning with the voice in his head. Fisting his hands to control his smoldering temper, he told the voice to go to hell and turned to open the door, bringing his machine gun up as he continued his search for a way out. “If puberty boy or chicken-wuss don’t get here soon....”

The voice wouldn’t be ignored, and Seifer began to lose control of the temper that roared in the back of his mind. Pulling and pushing; ordering him this way and that; up these stairs and around that corner... the voice was relentless. He followed, just as he had when Sorceress Edea had pulled his strings like a marionette—Seifer hissed and ground to a halt, his body leaning forward with the effort to resist the voice and the pull.

The warm breath at his neck was followed by a firm push. He braced himself, the rage of his temper escalating to a din in his ear that had him seeing red. In fact, he felt as if his entire body was ablaze.

“Damn ghost,” he growled. He sent a quick glance over his shoulder to the dark corridor before he hurried forward. “Just get the hell off me.”

He was fed up with crazies and nut cases, ghosts and GFs and all the other damned ludicrous things people did to one up the other clown. Give him a gunblade and he was fine. What the hell did he need all the other shit for—Seifer grabbed the wall on his left to stop himself, pulling back to stare with wide eyes down the side corridor at the shimmering figure that stood there. Blonde-green hair cascaded down her back, almost to the floor, and her body was ablaze with white fire.

The voice became a frenzy of whispers, pressing and pulling as its tone escalated in intensity and insistence. The voice silenced, however, when the creature with the blonde-green hair beckoned to him, her eyes blazing. Then a surge of power overcame him from the inside out, exploding in his mind—and everything went white.

Serra considered herself studious.

There was little challenge for her to pay attention during mission briefings and overviews. However, as Eryn Dwyre made her way to the front of the three teams, Serra found it increasingly difficult to focus her attention on the detailed maps and mission plans. Even as she lowered her drifting attention to the handout binder held in her white-fingered grip, her surroundings almost seemed to phase in and out of... focus.

Instead, she was left with a two-toned whine in the back of her mind that balanced between being heard and being felt. To her already ragged nerves it was much like a jagged piece of metal scraping on a chalk board.

In an attempt to firm her focus, Serra raised her hand.

“Yes?” Lt. Commander Dwyre asked in a sharp tone.

“I assume that I will not be allowed to accompany Lieutenant Crest?” She noticed, barely, that he was not at the briefing.

“Correct. He has already ventured out on his assignment. You will be on the first team.” Eryn consulted her notes. “I believe team assignments were already discussed in the mission briefing this morning.”

Serra ground her teeth to keep herself from flinching, both from pain of the whine’s rising pitch and from embarrassment of not recalling that fact. She nodded and lowered her focus yet again to the handout binder.

The hard stare from Lt. Commander Dwyre continued for a few brief moments before Eryn called everyone’s attention to the next page of the handout and continued with her overview. Any and all questions asked fell to the wayside of the whine that escalated into a throbbing roar in the center of Serra’s brain.

With a cringe, Serra raised a hand to pinch the bridge of her nose, not noticing her simultaneous action of creating a white ball in the palm of her hand roughly the size of a large marble. She fisted her hand, enclosing the marble of light in a white-knuckled grasp as she wrestled with the pain and the sudden short bursts of noise and voices—

Serra bolted to her feet, voicing a murmured apology and stepping quickly away from the team. She didn't notice Eryn’s attentive focus as she continued her overview, or Commander Squall follow after her. All she heard was the noise of two voices deep in her mind and the explosive array of images of a young woman. Even with her eyes open the woman was there. Her blonde-green hair flowing in soft waves to her feet. Her stature erect and intense.

Her slim form engulfed with white fire—

The woman faced Serra, her eyes ablaze with white fire... and a look of surprise. Then the woman smiled and lifted an arm, beckoning Serra forward while uttering a single word: “Come.”

The word pounded in Serra’s mind, bringing with it a wave of power that Serra had to grapple with in order to keep it from exploding out of control. She panted with the effort, her hands pressed to each side of her head as she ran blindly forward. She didn’t hear the voices behind her calling for her to stop. All she heard and saw was the young woman with an eternity of age in the white fire of her eyes.

The woman seemed familiar at the same time she was strange and different. But she was safe and Serra knew she had to go to her. Knew that a life hung in the balance.

A hand gripped her arm, but a pound of outward power loosed it and propelled Serra forward. Serra couldn’t comprehend how long she ran. All she saw was the form of the woman, her hand outstretched, and her eyes smiling.

Power continued to flow from those eyes into Serra, pressing at her brain and burning through her body with the effort to keep it in check. All those years of training to control her abilities.... Her confidence soared. I can do this! I can do this! It was the first time in her life that she experienced clarity in her purpose, in the purpose of her abilities, and in the purpose behind her existence.

The woman. She was the key.

Serra reached out, desperate to grasp the outstretched hand and pull the answer to her. The woman vanished and Serra stumbled to a halt, blinking into the darkness. She summoned a ball of white with a simple thought and gazed around her in confusion at the dim and cobweb infested hallways of a ruined castle— booted footsteps and angry shouts and curses sounded behind her. Serra’s heart pounded in her chest, her new found power surging like a wave of water through her veins and in her ears.

Danger! Hurry!

Serra scurried forward, stumbling over the debris of fallen walls of brick and wood girders. Panic battled with her confidence and calm but she pressed forward, following the press to turn down this hallway and that one toward the end she didn’t see.

The angry voices continued behind her, gaining with each hesitant step and turn. Serra tried to shut them out, but failed. Halting at a crossroads, she ignored her trembling fingers,

focusing instead on her instincts and controlling the power that continued to surge and wane and surge again through her body—

Bullets sprayed the ground and wall behind her and she dove forward, releasing the white ball of light and tripping over something lying prone in the darkness. She rubbed at her forehead and the fresh bump before calling again the white ball of light and shining it into the darkness... to reveal the scarred face of Seifer Almasy.

Serra choked on a sob and clutched him with her free hand, her eyes frantic in searching his pale face for signs of life. He moaned and a splutter of flame shot out from his palm to shatter bits of brick from the ceiling above them. She threw herself over him, doing her best to protect him from the falling debris while her frantic mind grappled with any way of escape.

But when she felt the burning muzzle of a machine gun pressed against her back, panic jerked free her control of the waves of power and a ball of white roared outward, turning everything living to ash... and all went black.