

## Fifteen

### ~*Mission: Extraction*~

There came a flash of white and then the ground rumbled beneath Jaxon's feet, nearly sending him on his rear-end before he could steady himself. "Whoa. That can't be good." He took stock of his surroundings, judging the direction of the blast – or whatever it was – by the change in the air and the smell of something burning on the breeze. He set off at a quick trot. "Did they start the fun without me?"

The sounds of Eryn barking orders on the run told otherwise.

Jaxon came to a halt near a crumbled bit of wall. Leaning casually against it, he bided his time until Eryn, Squall, Fujin, and Selphie converged on his position. They even brought Xu and Raijin as backup. *Good little soldier, Mr. Commander, Sir*, Jaxon thought to himself. "I'll take the obvious 'what the hell' expressions as proof that you had nothing to do with what happened."

"What *did* happen?" Eryn asked, the grip on her weapons adjusted in readiness.

"As near as I can figure someone made a boom."

Eryn and Fujin both cast him a glance of impending doom and destruction.

He cleared his throat and straightened. "Only thing is, I do believe the explosion was caused by magic."

Squall stepped forward, looking beyond Jaxon to the ruins. "GF?"

"I don't believe so. The air felt different."

"How can you do magic without a GF?" Selphie asked.

"That is a good question." Jaxon sent Squall a glance as he continued his scrutiny of the ruins. "If you want the answer, we'll need to venture forth." He sent Eryn an inquisitive look. "Where's our guest from the Centra Intelligence Agency? Isn't she on our lead team?"

Eryn pressed her lips into a tight, white line. "She came this way a few minutes before the white light."

Jaxon balled his hands into fists until his hands hurt. "Pardon? Clarify 'came this way.'"

"She bolted. Like Ifrit himself was on her heels." Eryn didn't hold Jaxon's pained gaze.

"Is this on the map?" Squall's intense expression grabbed Jaxon back from the sudden mad desire to charge into the ruins. "This doesn't look familiar to me."

"It isn't on any map that I have, no. E, can you get a screenshot from the closest

satellite?”

“No uplink.” Eryn waved her handheld in an irritated arcing motion. “Some high-level interference in this place, that’s for damn sure.”

“Interesting.” Jaxon grappled with his calm to focus on his task at hand. Then he stepped toward the collection of ruined walls. Shell casings littered the ground and the amount of booted footprints told of a skirmish leading into the gaping maw of a castle-like building that seemed to be stuck midway above and below ground. “Everyone ready for an adventure? Whoever was victim, or instigator, of the white magic went thisaway. And believe me when I say there are a lot of them. At least two squads.”

“And us without a blessed GF between us,” Eryn grumbled. She swore.

Jaxon’s unease prevented amusement. The aroma of powerful magic nearly singed his nose hairs. But, as he had told the others, it didn’t smell nor feel the same as the intensity of a GF. GFs gave the impression of a blanket, somewhat smothering or stifling. This was more like... an approaching forest fire or lightning storm as there was an electricity-type feeling to the air. As if even that could... implode and explode at the same time at any given moment.

But even that didn’t really explain things.

Eryn and the others switched on the lamps strapped to their wrists and aimed them into the growing darkness. Squall had Griever drawn and ready.

“Where are all the bodies, you know?” Raijin whispered.

Jaxon crouched and gingerly touched a pile of fine dirt... though it felt more like soot or ash. “Hm. Incinerated, apparently.”

Selphie muffled a complaintive squeal while Eryn and Raijin both cursed. Jaxon dusted his finger off on his trousers and led them forward again. “Let’s all hope and pray that the boom doesn’t decide to come around again, shall we?”

“If the occupants are ‘incinerated’, Jaxon, does that mean...?”

Jaxon shrugged without looking at the Garden Commander. He couldn’t say “That’s exactly what it could mean.” It didn’t matter if it was the truth or not. That Seifer Almasy and his beautiful twin sister were possibly two piles of ash were facts he didn’t want to face at the moment. “We don’t know that all occupants suffered the same end. In fact, I don’t know for a fact that the dust back there is the remnants of a person.”

“You’re the best,” Squall reminded. “I’ll take what you have to say at face value.”

Jaxon cringed. “This is the one time I don’t care for being the best, Sir.”

“Agreed. They could be fine. Stranger things have happened.”

“I’ll take that, Sir. Thank you.” Jaxon halted and gestured to the others. “Now, if you could take a few paces back, I have a job to do and something just changed.”

Squall did as ordered – the fact he was able to order the Garden Commander around still weirded Jaxon out. He crouched and pressed his fingertips on the brick flooring. “Boots at a run. More than one pair.” He closed his eyes to focus on the sounds. “Two pair don’t have the smoothest gait. May be injured. Don’t believe they are ours, though.”

“Are they headed our direction?”

“I don’t believe so, no. It’s hard to tell in a ruin like this. Bricks tend to reverberate and throw me off.” Jaxon stood and continued forward in cautious attention. “Try and be as silent as possible. Tread as soft as you can. I’ll see about getting us around them.”

Eryn’s grumble about not being a rabbit caused a smirk.

§

The world didn’t exist outside the darkness and pain.

There was heat and fire. There were conflicting voices. There was weight pressing down on his chest. He couldn’t lift his arms. Couldn’t even open his eyes for the incessant pounding. Even a curse required too much effort through the sludge in his mind.

*Rest.*

A voice he seemed to remember. As if from a dream. A very long dream filled with running and ghosts and gunfire and flaming bodies that vanished into nothing— the weight was suddenly lifted and he groaned as the agony exploded in his head and throughout his body...

...and all went black.

§

Jaxon lifted Serra’s limp body from the rubble, dusting the fragments of dirt and stone from her face.

“Is she alive?” Eryn asked, her voice hushed. The pallor of the woman’s cheeks made her uneasy.

The only response was a grunt as he stood, lifting her into his arms and then bolting down the hallway toward the exit. Eryn gaped after him a moment before growling orders for Xu and Raijin to offer escort.

The handheld at her hip beeped and buzzed a demand for attention. “Dwyre. Go.”

“I took it upon myself to order a medical transport,” Quistis reported in her usual businesslike fashion. “It should be here in five.”

“Good because Jaxon just beat Hyne’s hell out of here with Serra. Not sure if she’s alive or dead, but she’s headed your way.”

“Roger that. Aggressors?”

“Not yet, but Jaxon—” Eryn’s gaze fell upon the heap of gray and brown revealed by Serra’s removal. “Gotta go. Over and out.” She slammed the handheld to her belt clip. A closer scrutiny revealed the heap as another body. He was thin and his clothes looked like they hadn’t fit him for some time. His face, however, was still recognizable despite everything he had endured: Seifer Almasy. Eryn’s throat constricted at the intensity of her relief. *At last.*

“Commander!” she called.

Squall’s attention shifted to his red-headed lieutenant and the tattered grey lump beside her. He strode over and knelt beside them, his eyes widening at the sight of his lost advisory. “I’ll be damned,” he said, his face breaking out into a smirk, “I knew the jackass was alive.”

Their reunion was short-lived.

Gunfire danced around them. Squall jumped to his feet, Griever already drawn as he barked at Eryn. “Get Seifer out of here!” he shouted between bursts of gunfire.

She jumped to her feet, grabbing Seifer forcibly by the arms and standing him upright long enough to toss his weight across her shoulders. Beaten and starved for months, Seifer still out-weighed her enough to make her doubt her instinctual reaction to her training. The extra mass slowed her progress, but she was still able to hot-foot it down the corridors while doing her best to not jar the man. There was no way for her to know how many injuries he had incurred while in the torturous care of the Purists.

“You’re not gonna die on me today, Seifer Almasy,” she grunted.

Eryn cursed under her breath as she burst forth from the castle ruins to the brightness of mid-day. The aerial medical transport had arrived and Jaxon busily loaded Serra’s stretcher inside. He turned as she approached. In fact, the boy gawked at the sight of his best friend carrying Seifer Almasy across her shoulders.

“Are you serious?” he asked in disbelief, pulling a stretcher with him.

Eryn leaned forward and dropped Seifer onto the stretcher as gently as she could, her hand shooting out to probe his neck with two fingers.. Panic slapped her in the face at his face’s

disturbingly peaceful expression. “There’s no pulse,” she hissed. “Fuck! No pulse and no breath!”

“*What?* Mr. Stubborn-Pain-In-Everyone’s-Ass can’t hang on for five more minutes—?”

Eryn and Jaxon were both shoved roughly aside. Serra fell across Seifer’s inert body, sobbing “No!” just before an eye-searing globe of white enfolded the two. It vanished as quickly as it appeared, a wave of hot and sweet-smelling air pulsing outward with its disappearance that sent both Jaxon and Eryn onto their backside.

Scrambling upright, Eryn searched for a pulse— she let out a fast breath; his heartbeat was strong and constant.

“This isn’t right...”

Eryn shifted her focus to Jaxon’s frown. “What’s the matter?”

“Her heartbeat is constant but... there’s something not right. Her breathing and her heart rate... it’s too low.” Jaxon shook his head. “I don’t like it. We’ve gotta go—Now!”

As Jaxon once again scooped Serra into his arms and made his way to the transport, Eryn assigned stretcher duty to Xu and Raijin while contacting the Balamb Garden Infirmary. “Incoming!”



“Put him in there.”

The tone of emergency jarred me awake. I bolted upright and scurried out of the small hospital bed to peek around the corner of the privacy curtain. When I saw Seifer lying motionless on a gurney, my heart broke and I only just prevented a cry. He was so thin and haggard. His trenchcoat torn and bloody, and his boots tattered....

Dr. Kadowaki gave a brusque nod and stepped away once he was safely moved to the bed in the small treatment room. Once she entered the other treatment room, closing the door behind her, I slipped from behind the curtain and into Seifer’s room. As the door purred shut behind me, I tip-toed to the bed and stared wide-eyed at the patient there. He was nothing at all the Sub-Lt Cmdr. Seifer Almas, Head of Network Security, from my memories. And Seifer should have been the one constant. Why? I don’t know. That’s just the way it should have been. Seifer was... he was *Seifer*.

My knees gave way, sending me into the nearest chair with a ‘splut’ as I continued to stare. How could I keep doing this day after day? Each moment haunted by the possibility of

something else being other than how I remembered. When would I be free to live my life as I wanted to live it? Without the punch in the face each time my memory didn't match.

I covered my face with my hands and cried.

Zell was different. Janine... Janine just *wasn't*. Saerin was Eryn. Marshal was... something I didn't even really know. Even I was different. Two worlds colliding; me stuck in the middle. I didn't want to do it anymore. I just wanted it over. I wanted a new 'day one'. I didn't want to keep looking over my shoulder and wondering....

"Where the hell am I?"

Gasping, I swiped the tears from my face and lifted my head to meet Seifer's dazed expression. He sat up in bed, a hand holding his head as he gazed at me.

"And who the hell are you?"

Out of habit, I bolted to my feet and saluted. "SSO—I mean...." Non-plussed, I stared at him as I realized I had no idea how to introduce myself. A candidate? I hadn't been a candidate for eight years!

"SSO? What the hell is that?" Seifer barked. This time he tossed back the covers and made as if he were about to get out of bed.

"Oh no you don't, sir." I was at his side in one step, pushing him back with a firm hold. "You're not cleared to get out of bed."

He tried to shove me aside, but I resisted, dodging his next attempt in such a fashion that he stared at me in bald-faced shock. Then he smirked. "What are you supposed to be? My mamma? My own personal bodyguard? You're a goddamn patient yourself."

My cheeks flushed as I fought the urge to look at my sweats and t-shirt, common patient attire. "That doesn't matter, sir. You're wounded and I'm not." *Mostly*. "So I get to make certain you stay in bed. Especially since Dr. Kadowaki wouldn't be as nice as I am, sir."

"I'm not your fuckin' 'sir'."

"There's no need to use that tone on me. I can call you 'sir' if I want to." I blinked. *Did you just tell off Seifer Almasy? No, you couldn't have....* "Sir."

Seifer laughed, and my visions of a court-martial waned, especially when it dawned on me that he was as much a candidate as I was. After all, it was his Final Exam which had started this mess in the first place!

"Fine. Get off me and find Chicken-Wuss or Puberty-Boy."

My brows furrowed. *Does he have any idea how stupid he sounds talking like that?* Probably

not. “I will, but if you don’t keep your voice down, Dr. Kadowaki is going to come in here and get us both in trouble. Do you want to be drugged? No? Then shhh.”

I glanced over to the door when I heard a sound, and Seifer followed my gaze. When I looked back over at him, he sized me up with his ever-familiar hard gaze. “Just who the hell are you?” he asked, his volume considerably lower.

“Sally. Regal.”

“Regal... Regal...” He shrugged. “Never heard of you.” He pushed free of my hold to take up a scrutiny of the treatment room. “So, where am I?”

*“Never heard of you.”*

Just like that everything changed... again.

*“Never heard of you.”*

I had been Seifer’s assistant for what seemed ages, and yet now I was just a name. A name he didn’t even know. It was like having my entire purpose flushed down the toilet. I had meant something, and now I didn’t. It was like having amnesia, but worse: I remembered things that no one else did.

*“Never heard of you.”*

Zell never heard of me.

Eryn never heard of me.

Who else had never heard of me? Me.

I turned on my heel, mumbling “Balamb Garden Infirmary,” as I walked out of his treatment room and out of the infirmary. Where was I going? I barely knew. I only had one thought in my head: I was done. The only way I could finish was to *be done*. All the way. Forever. No going back. No Zell. No Marshal. No ‘That was then, this is now.’

No Garden.

I - was - done—

Rounding the corner into the main corridor, I stepped into a tall form. Looking up, I inwardly cringe at the most appropriate and yet painful of trios to run into at that particular moment: Squall, Eryn, and Quistis. Of all the people in Garden, these were the ones that had the power to do what I thought I wanted.

Their voicing of concern barely registered as I said, “I’m terminating enrollment.”