

One

~ Waking ~

I stretched my arms over my head as I looked around me, my mind groggy. Being in the infirmary didn't ring right. Aren't I supposed to be in Winhill? And where's Hugo? Zell quite often slipped out of bed first to get a head start on the office work, but our Bull Mastiff, Hugo, always slept on the floor on my side of the bed and wouldn't move until I got up. Sometimes he even sat there for an hour, his chin resting on the bed and a patient expression in his doe brown eyes.

Rubbing my eyes with the backs of my hands, I smacked my lips and did another slight stretch. Then I again took stock of my surroundings. Infirmary?

Frowning, I sat up—and gave a blink of surprise when that action caused a headache and an extreme feeling of exhaustion. I lowered my gaze, my focus drawn by the medical identification bracelet on my wrist. Twirling it until I could read the typed information, I brought it closer. My eyes widened. “What?” And my voice rasped as if I had laryngitis.

I grimaced and glanced to a glass of water on the bed-stand to my left. Bringing it to my lips, my hands shook and the glass felt much heavier than it should. What is going on? I once more gauged my environment, trying to remember returning to Balamb Garden from Winhill.

“This has got to be a prank,” I mumbled as I tossed back the covers. However, when I attempted to swing my legs over the side of the bed, the effort it took waved a red flag. Did I fall down the house stairs? A concussion could cause limited amnesia, after all.

Giving my head a slight shake, I slid off the bed— and nearly fell over. If I hadn't held onto the mattress I would have gone straight to the floor. Staring down at my legs peeking out from my hospital gown, my expression was slack-jawed amazement as weakness forced me to lean my entire weight on the mattress. What is going on?

I heard a step followed by a gasp and clatter and looked up to see a medical intern staring at me with wide eyes and now-empty hands. I smiled. “Oops. I didn't mean to scare you.” Pushing myself back onto the bed, I asked, “Is Dr. Kadowaki around? I don't feel myself.”

He scurried back the way he came while shouting, “Doctor! Doctor!” and a few other names that I couldn't decipher with how fast he ran down the hall.

“I'm not feeling that bad.” I giggled. “Zell Dincht, I'm going to get you for this. You and Zack both. Because I know he put you up to it.” I giggled again, shaking my head as I waited for everyone to file in and say “surprise,” or whatever.

Dr. Kadowaki entered a few minutes later, cheeks flushed and breathing fast. “Well, well. Look who decided to wake up.” She stood beside me and began feeling my face, my glands, my pulse, and a variety of other things.

“It’s not that late, doctor, is it? It only seems about eight. I only don’t understand why I’m here. Did I fall down the stairs in Winhill? Although why they would bring me all the way here if I just had a concussion is beyond me. Dr. Grayson in Winhill is wonderful.”

I had to stop speaking as she used the tongue depressor and checked my throat and tongue, etc., noticing her occasional glances and quizzical expression. When she turned away and retrieved her other medical equipment, I continued.

“I’m sorry for all the trouble, doctor. I’ll be sure to tell Zell and whoever else was involved to stop playing pranks like this. Maybe he was able to get Ryan involved? It seems intricate enough for those two. It’s very disconcerting to wake up in a different place and feel all wobbly from the sedatives or whatever they used. I’m sure Sub-Lt. Cmdr. Seifer is livid. I wouldn’t want everyone to get in trouble. Although, he probably had a hand in it, too. We all know how much he likes his pranks. I will never forget the one he pulled on me in the elevator before the wedding. I still can’t believe he said that to me. I was mortified.”

“Breathe in,” the doctor requested calmly, placing the stethoscope on my back.

I did so, smiling.

“Again.” Then she nodded and began to examine my head with her fingers, shined that awful light in my eyes, and then stepped back with hands on hips and a single eyebrow arched almost completely to her hairline.

I giggled. “Doctor, I’m fine. I told you, it was just Zell and his silly pranks.” I lifted my right hand with the medical ID tag. “Ryan or Zack probably thought of this, silly boys.” But it made me love Zell all the more.

Dr. Kadowaki pulled up a tall stool from the corner of the room. “Sally, I need you to tell me the last thing you remember.”

Face now crimson, I said, “Going to bed in Winhill at 22:00 hours sharp. Zell stayed up to watch a movie; I think it was a docudrama on the first Sorceress War—Oh. Wait. I remember getting up at 2:00 to let Hugo, our Mastiff, out for a pottie-break. Zell was in bed by then and I tripped over one of his shoes.” My laugh was a nervous twitter.

The doctor lowered her gaze and adjusted her crossed arms. “And why would you be in Winhill?” she asked. Her voice sounded calm and serious.

“Why—?” My smile vanished. “Because we’ve opened a security station there. Zell and I are

the administrators. We've been working there for almost three months now. Sub-Lt. Cmdr. Seifer is very... happy about how it's going."

Dr. Kadowaki lifted her head this time, her eyes dark. "And where does... where does he work?"

I blinked and my skin began to crawl. "What?"

"Seifer. Where does he work?"

Licking my lips, I gave myself time to calm a frightening flutter. "He's Head of Network Security. He works here in the basement office, as it's been converted into a security hub..." At the twitch of her eyebrow, my lower lip began to tremble. "Doctor, you're scaring me."

"I'm sorry, Sally." She stood. "You've some very nice memories, my girl, but—" She suddenly shook her head and turned away, mumbling, "I better get Dr. Levinne and Matron." She paused at the doorway to my section of the infirmary and pointed toward me. "Stay in bed and don't talk to anyone, Sally. Understood?"

I mutely nodded, my eyes as wide as ever. With how my stomach gurgled, my face must have been as green as the grass outside. She pulled the curtain closed and I scooted under the covers, settling back into the pillows and clutching the top of the blankets. I stared at the ceiling with a frightened expression as I felt a collection of terrors gather in the corners of my mind. Zell... Zell, I'm scared. My throat tightened, and I squeezed my eyes shut tight.

A tear welled and escaped.

§

"Damn it!" The man slammed down the phone and stood, running his hands through his tousled dark-brown hair as he stalked around his office. Enclosed, it afforded him a reasonable amount of privacy; however, the glass walls allowed all to read and interpret the man's body language at any given point in time. Today, it wasn't so difficult for the others within the bustling television studio to hazard a guess as to the man's current mood.

He was pissed.

He dropped into his office chair so roughly his nameplate – reading Zackary Regal – clattered from his desk. He swiped up his phone and buzzed his secretary. "Ronda, get me—"

"Mr. Regal, Dr. Kadowaki from Balamb Garden is on the phone for you. Line three."

Zack paled, his hand tightening on the phone as his eyes focused on the pulsing light of line three. He cleared his throat and brusquely said, "Thanks, Ronda," before clattering the phone into its cradle. He continued to stare at the pulsing red light. Unnoticed to him, his hands began a steady

rhythm of fisting and then relaxing, only occasionally interrupted by a quick swipe through his hair.

Ronda, sitting just outside his door, sent him a glance when the phone chirped a 30-second hold warning. Everyone knew the TV manager's sister, younger by about ten years, had been in a coma for the past 27 months. Each day Zack had sent at least half a dozen of their researchers on searches for specialists, psychologists, neurologists, and behavioral specialists to try to explain what no one could reason out: Why.

Unknown to Zack, there were two pools since two months into his sister's coma: 1) how long until she woke; 2) how long before her mind and body finally shut down. Ronda had invested in both.

Zack touched a button on the front right section of his desk and the glass of his office darkened. Then he released a slow and shaky breath, rubbed his palms on his wrinkled charcoal slacks, and retrieved the phone. He pressed the flashing line with a trembling finger. "Regal."

"Good morning, Mr. Regal. Have I caught you at a bad time? I can call again."

"No. You're fine," he said, his tone crisp. "Did you receive those work-ups yet?"

"Ah. Yes. Just this morning. I will be having them sent to your office directly."

"Did they reveal anything positive?" After two years of no answers and only more questions, an answer to anything would be "positive."

"Not that I recall, although that wasn't my reason for calling."

He closed his eyes. "All right. What can I do for you?"

"There has been a change in her status."

Zack's right hand fisted in his hair. "Positive or negative?"

"Positive."

Zack bolted out of his chair, but the doctor continued before he could think of what to say.

"That is all I'm able to tell you at the moment, Mr. Regal. I will keep you updated as always, but information, at this point, will be slower to come until I've had the opportunity to consult with a few of the people involved with her case."

"She's awake, isn't she?" It was the only thought his mind could hold.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Regal. I can only say that she's had a positive turn." He heard voices in the background before the doctor returned. "I must go, Mr. Regal, but I will keep you informed. Good day."

"Doctor, wait—" But the click of the terminating call was unmistakable. Zack slowly lowered himself back into his chair, staring at the telephone receiver with a blank expression.

"Positive turn" phone calls always came when there were upward spikes in brain activity. The past several months those spikes had even begun affecting her central nervous system, causing

muscle twitches and movement in her extremities. One time she had even sat upright.

She had to be awake.

Zack twitched when his intercom rang its complaint at not having the phone in the cradle. He dropped it with a clatter and sat back in his chair, still staring at the phone even when Ronda buzzed a second time, this time the phone allowed to access its hands free feature.

“Mr. Regal, I received a report from Dr. Kadowaki at Balamb Garden. Did you want it—”

“Give it to me now,” he ordered, standing to his feet and striding to the door at practically the same moment as the order. In fact, he jerked open the door and presented a hand for the report as Ronda answered, “Yes, Mr. Regal,” to the intercom. She twitched, disconnected the intercom and handed him the sheaf of papers.

He slammed the door closed, drawing everyone’s attention to the still-darkened glass of the soundproof office.

A tall man in his late fifties crossed his arms as he leaned against a supporting pole of the news room. “I bet his sister just took a turn for the worse.”

A woman in a desk behind him hung up the phone. “You’d lose, Fitch. My source just told me she woke up.”

Fitch focused on the woman with a look of disbelief. “You’re kidding.” She shook her head. He regarded the closed office door. “Why do ya suppose he’s in such a piss-fit?”

“I doubt they informed him. You know how doctors seldom want the family intruding into touch-and-go situations like hers.”

“You think we should tell him?” he asked, smirking.

“I’ll tell him when I have the report ready for breaking news. Sure way to get a big bonus.”

“Or get your ass fired,” Ronda volunteered.

The woman shrugged. “I’m not going to report her awake until I can confirm my source, and if I can get a report prepared in the meantime, it’s my wallet.”

Chuckling, Fitch moved away. “Good luck with that, Desiree. You’ll need it.”

Desiree regarded Fitch and then Ronda for a long moment before focusing on her phone and dialing her next source the same moment she prepared her report.

§

There were running steps and then a high-pitched screech-screech as a person hurried up to my bed and skidded to a stop. When I opened my eyes, I smiled and sat up just as Zell exclaimed, “Dude! You’re awake!” Then he plopped down into the seat beside my bed, grinning at me as he leaned his

arms onto the mattress. I continued to smile at him, speechless with relief.

“How ya feeling?” he asked.

“Alright,” I croaked, and then motioned to the glass of water and straw. He passed it to me and watched me as I took a long drink. I flushed and handed it back. “Alright,” I said again.

“Booya!” He briefly lifted his chin toward me. “Every time I came in here you had a smile on your face. Even when they were doin’ that creepy muscle therapy/electrical stim crap you’d be smiling. Doc said no one’s been in a coma as long as you and looked happy about it.”

My face went ashen and my stomach lurched. “ ‘C-Coma’?”

“Yeah, ever since you pushed that junior classman out of the way of those T-Rexaurs.” His face twisted up as he rubbed at his scalp, and I lowered my stricken gaze to my ringless hand. “What was it? Two years ago? Yeah... it was, like, four months after Ultimecia, so...” Then Zell once more lifted those beautiful blue eyes toward me and grinned. “Dude! I still can’t believe you did that!”

He didn’t seem to notice anything out of the ordinary. Not like he used to. Not like I remembered him to do. I stared at the hospital blankets with a blank expression. It can’t be.... But if I’d been in a coma for two years, that meant.... All of it...?

“I bet you’ll be as good as new once you do some weight training to build your muscles. You can get back to classes, too. I bet Selphie can rig up a CPU in here. I’ll ask her.”

I could only nod, fighting back the vomit as my mind struggled with two very different realities. Coma since.... But all the laughter, and tears, and... how could it be... nothing?

Zell stood, giving my arm a gentle chuck. “See ya round, library girl.”

The final thrust.

As the infirmary door closed, I looked down to the medical bracelet and choked back a sob.

Patient: Priscilla Elizabeth Regal, candidate
Status: Coma; 2 years, 3 months
Location: Balamb Garden

§

No words could describe the agony that coursed through the man’s body when awareness faded in from the blackness. Groaning, he could do nothing more. Rage flared, but even that white-hot burst of energy wouldn’t force the leaden weight of arms, legs, and head to shift. He couldn’t even move enough to cause his bonds to make a fraction of a noise.

The groan became a growl as he fought off the heaviness, ignoring the wave of misery that ensued as a direct result. He only continued to focus on lifting his head at least – enough to look the enemy in the eye; to let them see the hatred that kept him going: day to night to day to night.... But

the agony won and the blackness wrapped itself around him, pulling him under into nothingness that was too much like death while being only a whisper of life....