

Three

~ The Lost ~

Eryn Dwyre, Head of Instruction at Balamb Garden, sat in the cafeteria looking over several folders of a wide variety of paperwork: tests, placements, scoring, etc. Frustration marred her beautiful face. To her right, Andromeda. To her left, Raquel. The two SeeD had bickered back and forth for over an hour, and Eryn now found it difficult to keep her temper in check. Her patience had gone within the first ten minutes of their conversation, and her face mirrored her hair: red.

“I mean, she was in a coma for what? Two years?” Andromeda was asking. “I was available that whole time, and where was he?” Andromeda scoffed.

“Oh, I know,” Raquel agreed. “It’s amazing that he was that oblivious that whole time.” She nudged Eryn with her elbow. “Don’t you think?”

Eryn just stared at her blankly.

Raquel sent Andromeda a glance, who shrugged, and then focused light blue eyes back on Eryn’s smoldering emerald gaze. “What?”

“Does anyone know what time it is?” Eryn finally asked in an alto tone of controlled calm.

Andromeda looked at her watch. “It’s 3:30. Why?”

Eryn took in a deep breath. “Oh, no reason. I just thought that I’d comment on the fact that you two have been bitching about the same thing for over an hour now.”

Andromeda and Raquel exchanged confused glances.

“What do you mean?” Raquel finally asked.

“You know what?” Eryn slapped closed the folder in her hands, slamming it on top of the other near-dozen folders that hadn’t been touched. “I am sick and tired of listening to you two whine and complain because this boy or that boy hasn’t paid you any interest. Are you both SeeD or are you a couple of 13-year-old girls fresh off the leash?”

Raquel and Andromeda stared at her, mouths open and eyes wide.

Eryn gathered the folders with a quick and rough swipe. “If I want drama, I’ll pay 10 gil and see it on the big screen, at least that way I have the option of which airhead movie star I get to watch.” She sharply pointed at one and then the other. “I never got the choice with you two.”

Picking up her tray in her free hand, she stalked towards the door of the cafeteria and slammed her trash into the receptacle. Once she got to the door, she turned to face the two stunned SeeD left in her wake.

“Eat it, smoke it, shove it up your asses! Do whatever you want with your drama, but keep it away from me!” Then she shoved her way from the cafeteria to the corridor, nearly colliding with Commander Squall on her way. She pointed up at him. “You need to work on your screening process, or I swear to Hyne’s Hell that I’m going to devise a way to cull this... this... AHH! Words escape me!” she seethed, throwing up her hands and sending folders flying.

Commander Squall watched her a moment before casting a glance over his shoulder to the SeeD that had slowed their progress down the main corridor to try and determine what the noise was all about. He cleared his throat and crouched to help her gather her folders, tucking his own – marked confidential – under his arm.

Once Eryn straightened, folders in hand, she closed her eyes and released several long and slow breaths before focusing on him with a more calm expression. She even had presence of mind enough to salute.

Squall smirked as he saluted in return. “So, would this be a bad time to ask for your opinion on something?”

“Oh, I’ve always got an opinion.”

“From a security stand-point,” he pressed.

She presented her hand to the folder still held close under his arm. “Hand it over.”

Squall did so. “Try to keep your reaction quiet,” he warned.

One auburn eyebrow arched upward as Eryn shifted her focus from the Commander’s expression to the folder marked ‘CONFIDENTIAL.’ She skimmed the information. “Holy shit,” she hissed. She focused sharply on Squall. “Is he serious?”

“Considering the trouble he’s made for Dr. Kadowaki on behalf of his sister, I think he’s very serious. Just like I think he knows just how badly we want this information.” Squall tapped the folder. “He knew exactly what to use as leverage.”

Eryn lowered her scrutiny back to the cited bits of knowledge. “What the....” She turned the page. “What did Fujin have to say?” she asked absently.

“She wants to bring him in for... questioning.”

Eryn chuckled. “I bet.” She shook her head and handed the folder back. “I say work with him. I mean, he’s right in what he says there: no one will work with us because we’re Garden – suspicious bastards.”

Squall absently nodded as he focused on the folder. “I agree.”

“If he can find.... Well, let’s face it. If he can find our lost team, than it’s worth any possible security risk. And with him being involved with television, I can damn-well guarantee that he

understands about privacy and keeping his sources more private than death.”

Again, Squall nodded. Then he met her gaze and offered a very slight smile. “Thanks, Eryn.”

“That’s what I’m here for.” Then she watched as he turned and made his way back for the elevator and his office. Once he stepped out of sight, she had to lean against the wall of the corridor for support. After a year of searching, they might bring one of their own back home.

§

Zack chucked his leather briefcase into his office chair and snatched up the phone on the third ring. He wasn’t in the mood, but he would risk a moment of irritation on the off-chance it was someone of use. “Regal.”

“Good evening, Mr. Regal,” greeted a female voice he hadn’t heard before. “Have I called at a time at which you’re available? I had attempted to reach you at home, considering the hour, but there was no answer. An emergency of some kind at the office?”

Zack’s eyebrow twitched upward. His home was an unlisted number. “There’s usually always an emergency at the office, but I have a moment.”

“Thank you so much for your time. I knew that you would want to hear any further information regarding your sister, and as I’m now able to give that to you, I called you directly.”

His hold tightening on the phone, Zack did his best to sound concerned yet controlled. “There’s been another positive change?”

“Quite a few these last several days, as a matter of fact. We’ve had her under close observation. Today, Dr. Levinne, Dr. Kadowaki, and I agree she’s stable enough to warrant a visit from her family. In fact, we believe it will help her.”

Zack slowly lowered himself into his chair, grabbing a fistful of hair to keep him calm. “And when you say ‘stable enough’, what does that mean, specifically.”

“Oh, I’m terribly sorry. Sally is awake, Mr. Regal, aware of her surroundings, and in control of all her faculties. She’s quite the wonder; startled an intern nearly to death when she sat up and asked for the doctor.”

But Zack didn’t hear. He had dropped the phone and covered his face with his hands, his eyes shedding those tears held back for the sake of his mother and father. Maybe even for his sanity. There had only been the research, the investigative reports, the specialists, the waiting information that he simply had to find in order to rescue his sister from the dark.

Sally had always been afraid of the dark.

“Mr. Regal?”

Quickly wiping the tears from his face and eyes, Zack cleared his throat and took up the phone. “Yeah. I’m here. Go ahead.”

“There isn’t much more to say, Mr. Regal. We’re so very happy for you and your family, as I know you’ve hoped and wished for this day to come for so long.”

“Can we see her? When can we see her? We’ve got to be able to see her, right?” Regal! Get a grip on yourself, man!

“Of course, Mr. Regal. I’ve left visitor badges for you at the security desk near the front gates. Simply retrieve them, I left one for each of you, register with the SeeD at the desk, and then you’re free to head straightaway to the infirmary. The pass allows only limited access, specifically to the infirmary. If you need access elsewhere, you will need to apply and wait for a thorough check. Security, you understand.”

“Understood. I won’t need other access. Infirmary is good.” He cleared his throat again, rubbing at his face and scalp alternately to convince himself he was awake. “Thank you for your call. I appreciate it.”

“You’re very welcome, Mr. Regal. If you need anything further, don’t hesitate to call me directly. My name is Edea Kramer. I’ll leave word with the switchboard to put your calls through. In fact, extend that invitation to your parents, as well. I know how horrible this long wait has been.”

Zack wordlessly nodded. Then he gave himself a mental shake. “Um... thank you very much, Edea. Thank you.”

“It was my pleasure, Mr. Regal. Very good. Then I will see you and your family tomorrow. Whatever time works best for you, the badges will be ready. Good evening.”

“Good evening,” he whispered, placing the phone onto the cradle and then simply staring at it as he fisted his hands into his hair. “Awake.... She’s awake....” Awake from whatever darkness and silence she’d been hiding in for more than two years—

The mobile phone on his hip rang loudly, causing him to jump out of his seat. “Regal.” At the joyful sobbing in the background, Zack smiled. “Yeah, Dad. I just heard. She’s awake.”

No, Sally had never liked the dark.

§

“Sally! Oh, thank Hyne! Sally....”

Then two sets of arms enveloped me, jolting me awake to the sounds of parents sobbing into my ear and hair. I blinked, trying to focus on the tall guy standing at the foot of my bed. At least he’s the same, was what I thought through the fog while giving my older brother Zack a very tired smile.

His thick brown hair, wrinkled dress-shirt tucked into wrinkled charcoal slacks brought back years of memories. Mostly, they were memories of me wanting to be like my cool older brother, the investigative reporter. For the first time in my life, I saw a tear in his hazel eyes as he smiled back at me.

“Hey, Sal-Gal,” he said gruffly.

“Hey.”

Then the barrage of questions ensued.

“Hold up there,” Zack said as he stepped forward. “Let’s get some chairs and give Sal-Gal room to breathe.”

The laughter was a relief as they organized their positions around my bed.

“Now,” Zack directed, “how about we have some semblance of order and take turns asking questions.”

I giggled, grateful for his usual control of every situation.

“How are you feeling, hon?” my dad asked.

“Good.” I tried not to think about the “considering” that should have been added at the end. I was alive when I could have been dead. I was awake when I could still be asleep. I had a life to live when I might not have had anything. “Good,” I said again, forcing myself to ignore the missing metal on my left hand. Clasp my hands together, I gave a two-shouldered shrug and asked, “So, what’s happened while I’ve been sleeping in?”

Zack was still manager of the television station and still looking for the exposé article that would win him an award. The information I was most excited about was the fact that things had warmed up between him and his ex-wife Sandra—I had apparently imagined him the second ex-wife. In fact, she had signed over partial custody of his three-year-old daughter, Joy. It had originally started as one weekend a month but, after six months, she asked if he wanted to do the “six-month split.” Zack jumped at the chance.

The pet shop was still doing well, a second veterinarian working for them in fact, and there was talk of building an expansion. It was wonderful to have the same stories retold as a “Remember?” so they could give me updates. It made the starting over prospect not so bad. It gave me a foundation, and a better idea of where I would start.

That left me free to look ahead at where I wanted to go.

Sometime later, Dr. Kadowaki came and ushered my parents away, wanting to talk to them of my condition, recovery, and long-term plans for rehabilitation, more than likely. I had been through it once already with the accident in the library — I never look at bookcases the same — so I already

had a good idea of what to expect. All of it would be hard work, but it was worth it if I finally lived a real life.

The doctor allowed Zack to stay behind, so he pulled the stool a little closer and gave my arm a nudge. “You look tired, munchkin. After all that sleep, I would think you’d look different.”

Tall and just as handsome as remembered, the sameness I saw in Zack chipped away at the terror of not knowing how to separate my other reality from this one. “Weird, huh? I guess my body needs to wean itself from so much relaxation.”

His smile slowly vanished to a more solemn expression; one that I’d never seen before. “We almost wrote you off, munch. Mom and Dad didn’t say it, but I could see it in their eyes. They really didn’t think you would wake up.” He gave a slight shake of his head as his hand searched out mine. “I did all the research I could find on comas, but no one seemed to really know much about it. Pissed me off to no end, you know how I hate not getting answers. I mean—Hyne! I couldn’t do anything!”

I tightened my grip of his hand.

“I guess I love you after all.”

“You’re such a goober!” I laughed.

Chuckling, Zack gave my hand a squeeze. “So, what was it like to lounge around 24/7 with that silly smile on your face all the time?”

I pulled my hand free and gripped the blankets. “I didn’t know I was sleeping.”

“How’s that?”

I sent him a glance from under my lashes, wondering if telling him about my alternate life was such a good idea. “Erm....”

“Sal-Gal, don’t even try to keep a secret from me. You know I can read you like a book.”

“Well, I know, but it’s just... it’s just that it sounds really... weird.”

“Weird? You’re kidding me, right? Sally, I’m a reporter. I eat weird for breakfast.”

I reluctantly giggled. “Oh, fine.” I reached to the bedside table at my left and retrieved a mini-disc. “This is what it was like.”

Slowly accepting the disc, Zack raised his usual eyebrow. “What exactly is this? Your coma is on this disc?” He met my gaze. “Is Garden able to record visuals of brain activity?”

“Um... not exactly.”

“What kind of answer is ‘not exactly’?” Zack protested.

“I...”

“Yes?”

“Zee, it’s hard enough without you being pushy!”

“OK. I’m sorry.” He pointed at the disc. “So this is...?”

“A journal of my memories.”

“You have memories of your coma? The activity around you?”

I glared at him. “Will you just read it!”

Zack laughed and tucked the disc in his pocket. “OK, Sal-Gal. OK.”

Smiling, I gave his arm a shove just as the doctor returned, parents following along behind.

“I’m afraid it’s time.”

Zack gave me a kiss on the head. “See you later, munchkin. We’ll do lunch some time.”

“Please.”

The removal of my parents was a lot more exhausting. Once they were escorted away, vocalizing promises to visit whenever they could, the doctor checked my vitals and myriads of other things before shooing me under the covers and standing over me until exhaustion settled in. Then I was ushered to sleep and the hope of a better dream....

§

“Zell?”

“Hmm?”

“Did you want kids?”

Zell bolted upright and looked at me with wide eyes. “ ‘Scuse me?”

The ridiculous expression of shock on his face brought a giggle. “Not right now, of course. You’ve got your position and I’ve got mine and then there’s Winhill and that, but... Do you? Sometime after our careers have settled down a little?”

“Sure. I don’t know how I’ll do with babies and diapers and crap like that, but I get a kick outta playin with the junior classmen.” He grinned. “How come?”

“Well, I...” I reached up to tease the bottom of his tank-tee. “I’m just trying to figure what might be next.” I sent him a quick peek. “And since we’re married now... and we’re going to Winhill soon, well, I thought that it might be nice to think about children,” another peek, “and so I thought I should ask you how you liked them,” another peek, and this time I noticed his expression had softened, giving me an internal swell and a flush of hot. “...what?”

Then Zell went down to an elbow and caressed my lips with a finger. “I’m still trying to figure how to handle being married to the sexiest and smartest lady in the Network.”

I shyly giggled an “Oh Zell,” and gave his shoulder a gentle push.

He chuckled, gave me several soft and short kisses, and then resumed his previous position, this time wrapping his arms around me to hold me tight. “Winhill will be awesome for kids. There’s a little school there, I think. One room, just like way-back-when. I guess there’s only, like, six or seven kids altogether.”

“It sounds wonderful,” I admitted softly, returning to a stroke and play of his hair.

“No doubt, with all the farms and ranches and stuff? It’ll be great. Won’t have to worry ‘bout nothing.

Practically.”

“And kids should always have a safe place to live,” I said, voice hushed in the euphoria of the possibility of a family with Zell.

He nodded against me, his arms tightening slightly. “So, yeah. If we stay in Winhill like I want... Yeah. We’ll have kids. Boys. Girls. I don’t care.”

My expression softened, and I released a silent breath as I closed my eyes and envisioned blonde and brunette alike, playing in the front yard. Swinging on a swing-set in the back. Making mud pies. Going over to friends’ houses... “As long as you’re their father...”

I startled awake, glancing around the room at the infirmary as one reality overpowered the other. Releasing a deep breath, I pushed myself upright while mumbling, “Leave me alone,” to the dreams that wouldn’t let me forget what I hadn’t ever really had.

My gaze dropped to the finger on my left hand, and I remembered the weight of a pair of rings. They had become a part of my hand, and yet the mark of their presence wasn’t there. I let out a choked breath, morosely lifting my gaze in time to see Zell step into view. So soon after the vivid dream, my reaction was two-fold: extreme happiness and extreme agony. I once more lowered my focus to my now-clenched hands as my lips drooped downward.

“Hey, what’s with the face? First day of physical therapy is good. Means you’re strong and healthy, in the Doc’s opinion.”

I slouched back into the pillows with a whispered, “I know.”

“Then what’s the deal?”

He gave my arm a shove, but I kept my gaze lowered. I just couldn’t look into his handsome face and laughing blue eyes without remembering our life together. One I could still feel glowing inside of me—in my dream I had just learned that I was pregnant. A tear dripped down my cheek the same moment I hiccupped a sob, looking further away so Zell wouldn’t see.

There was a squinch as Zell sat down beside me on the bed, making me remember a day I had stayed home with a bad cold and. He had been all worried and attentive, making me breakfast in bed and hot soup for dinner....

“Say, what’s the prob? Doc thought you’d be itching to get out of here. It’s been, like, eight days or something.”

Quickly wiping the tears from my cheeks, I forced a tremulous smile and nodded, trying not to sob at the concerned expression I saw in his blue eyes. I picked at the blankets. “Sorry for being a wuss.”

He gave my arm another shove. “Well, sure, OK, but... Gee, you’ve got to cheer up. It’s your first day out of here in two years. Who cares if you’ve got to work at it. You’ll be moving!”

My smile relaxed into one a bit more natural, and I couldn't keep the memories from flooding back. "OK."

"OK." He glanced around the room. "Now where're your pants? We've got two hours of muscle work to do. First thing is to get you to stand and see where exactly we need to work most."

My eyes widened. "Y-you?"

"Ah-HA! There they are!" He stepped to Dr. Kadowaki's desk to grab up the sweats and t-shirt, and that's when I finally noticed he wore his usual work-out outfit: Balamb blue sweats and a gray t-shirt. "Of course me. No one else is worth a damn." Zell tossed the clothes onto my bed and then sent me his remembered boyish smile. "Sides, I get out of class to do it." Then he drew the curtain.

"Oh, I see. I'm an 'out'."

I stared down at the sweats and t-shirt, remembering how our other friendship had begun – with a promise of hotdogs – and how our workout sessions had blossomed into something more. I cleared my throat and dressed, setting the memories aside. It was time to make new ones, and if I was going to put my whole heart into it, I couldn't keep remembering the old.

After slipping my legs over the side of the bed, I softly worried my lower lip. "Um... Zell?"

"Yeah."

"Last time I... last time I tried to get out of bed, I nearly fell down. Should I...?"

The curtain was tugged aside and Zell stepped in, hand extended. "Here. You do it, slowly, but I'll be extra support. You need to focus on getting up, not doing all the other crap."

My hand slipped into his with a remembered belonging that had me swallowing hard and unable to think what to do next. I had missed him terribly.

"Take your time."

Flushing, I sent him a glance, noticed he was intent on watching my legs, and breathed in deep before sliding forward.

"Don't put all your weight on your legs at once. Ease up to it."

I nodded, tightening my hand on his, and slowly eased as much weight onto my legs as they would hold before they began to threaten to buckle, still leaning my butt against the bed.

"Ah ah. Ease back a little," he ordered, giving my hand a push the same moment his other went to my hip for added support. "There ya go. Two years is a long time. You've got to work up to standing. After we do this for a bit, I'll grab the ankle weights and we'll do some lifts. We've got to build up your stamina again. Maybe later in the week we'll take a break and I'll wheel ya to the training center."

Nodding, I absently said, “Alright,” even as my mind focused on his hands. I swallowed hard and closed my eyes.

“Wup. Muscles starting to quiver. Get back up there.” Zell helped me scoot back onto the mattress and then released my hand to gather up the weights. “Let’s do your arms next. Need to give your legs a rest. Need a break?”

I shook my head, forcing my eyes open as well as a smile. “No. I’m OK.” At least, I would be. Once I had my life back. But what if he doesn’t want that life? I understood that life couldn’t be structured. It had to be lived, and Zell had the right to live his life, not mine.

§

The man could never trust if the dreams of the dark were his or theirs.

Sometimes they told a story. Sometimes they waited for a story. Sometimes they were dark, filled with the visions of vengeance that pulled him back from the darkness and the pain. Sometimes they held the faces of the dead. Other times they mocked him with the faces of the living. Still other times he only made out the sounds of running.

In his dreams he had run many times, or what he thought were his dreams. He had run toward something that had rang of freedom; had smelled of it... but then he woke to the agony of the reality they had given him and hadn’t been able to tell if the dream was his or theirs; if it had been life or wishing.

No, the man could never trust the dreams of the dark.

Even if it were the last living place for hope.