

Five

~ Day Seven ~

Day seven of my workout sessions with Zell brought a knot in the pit of my stomach. Not only were memories of a previous “day seven” clubbing me over the head, but I still reeled from the elevator incident with Marshal. I don’t remember what I said to his question about “Us.” I didn’t even remember being wheeled to the infirmary. All I did remember was how it had felt to be kissed by a guy I thought of as a friend. My lips still throbbed, and I felt as if I had just committed adultery—all at the same time!

I hadn’t yet dealt with that by the time Zell showed up.

“Vacation time for you today,” he told me as he wheeled up a chair. “You’ve been working like a fiend, so we’re going to hang in the T.C. and do light stuff. Maybe walk around a little, if you’re up to that.”

Day seven... training center.... I cleared my throat and lowered my gaze to my clasped hands. “Um... can we just wheel around Garden instead?” I hated the fact that I was stuck between two incredibly wonderful guys and didn’t know which one to say ‘no’ to! It should have been a clear-cut answer, right?

“Sure thing,” Zell said absently. He offered a hand to help me up, supporting me at the hips as I very carefully walked those few steps to the chair. I regretted the request of wheeling around Garden once we had started. True to my impression of him, he began making vroom noises and screeching through the halls at incredible speeds, reminding me of the day I got myself a concussion from falling face-first into the road on the way to Balamb.

Gripping the arms of the chair, I tried not to throw up.

When we turned into the side-hall leading to the cafeteria, a feeling of dread bore down on me. Zell had slowed the chair by this time, yes, but the closer we drew to the cafeteria, the brighter the memory of how my entire non-existent life with him had begun: the fateful sharing of hotdogs and the title “hotdog fairy”....

“Francine requested a side-quest,” Zell said. “I told her I would, so I’m toast if I forget.”

I forced my death-grip of the chair arms to loosen as I mumbled that it was OK and that I would like to visit with her. Too bad it was as far from the truth as possible. There was a fear, and a sick little hope, that I would see Marshal.

If we were an ‘us’, what would that mean for me to still be fawning over Zell? Was I fawning?

And why couldn't I remember Marshal as anything more than a friend? I remembered that we had great times together online, both when we were studying or just chatting. I remembered when he would come over and visit me here at Balamb when Selphie scheduled events, but couldn't recall if that was dream or reality. I rubbed at my throbbing head. Why don't I remember Marshal as a boyfriend? Why?!

"Here," Zell said, releasing his hold on the chair and going around. "Let me hold the door while you wheel yourself in. Doc would be pissed if I wheeled you back with a huge bruise."

I offered him a small smile and continued my forward progress, Zell holding open the swinging door. The boyish grin he sent me was cuteness itself, making my heart go pitter-patter, but it also racked me with guilt because of kissing Marshal. I looked away—

"Surprise!"

A crowd of at least a hundred candidates, SeeD, and instructors shouted as one roar. My mouth dropped open and I looked to Zell with wide eyes. He wiggled his eyebrows at me, every inch the mischievous boy I remembered. "What did you do?"

"I said you'd been working like a fiend," he informed, "and fiends get dibs on parties." Zell pushed my chair toward the approaching group. "Come on, party girl. I want some hotdogs and cake."

It was over hotdogs and cake that I found out Cmdr. Squall awarded me a medal after the accident, now displayed in the library beside the Certificate of Excellence after my first injury—at least that actually happened. I didn't have the heart to tell them I didn't want the medal. They were all so excited that Cmdr. Squall would have given something like that to a candidate.

So I just said "thank you" and focused on my partially nibbled piece of white cake, hoping they wouldn't make me give a speech at the same time I hoped that Marshal would and would not be there.

He wasn't, and they didn't.

Zell nudged me with his elbow some time during the party, giving a wink and a cute expression of 'Isn't this cool?' as he served himself what must have been his fourth slice of cake.

Why couldn't you kiss me? I had a crush on you for years, so why didn't you ever notice? It must have been too much, and Marshal must have finally asked. Why couldn't I remember? I would want to remember something like that, right? But, then, why did I dream such a happy life with Zell? Why did I dream Marshal in love with Fujin? Had I not been over Zell? Was I still not over Zell? But, then, why did it feel so wonderful to be kissed by Marshal?

I nearly grabbed a fistful of hair to get the questions to stop. None of it made sense. At all!

"Hey, Zell!" Selphie Tilmitt sat in the chair next to him and gave him a soft shove. "I told you

she'd love it, didn't I?"

Zell grinned, not bothering to choke a response from around his mouthful of cake. Selphie focused on me, leaning forward and in front of Zell with hand extended. "I'm glad you're feeling better, Sally. We missed having you around. In case you don't remember, I'm Selphie. I helped Zelly put this all together."

Zell, his cake now hidden on the other side of Selphie, lightly frowned before feigning taking a bite out of her back. She squealed, "I'm not your cake, Zelly, sheesh!"

The scene looked so much like... how we used to be. Swallowing hard, I lowered my gaze to my cake. Do you know what it feels like to be kicked in the stomach? I'm going to throw up. It was just too much all at once. Too much to try and remember, to take in!

"No one should ever get between a man and his cake," Zell informed seriously, drawing his plate of cake closer. "Everybody knows that, Selph." He looked toward me; I could tell by the hairs on the back of my neck stood to attention. "Tell her, Sally. Isn't that right?"

My pretense for not looking at him was cutting a particularly sized bite from my cake. Instead, I nodded and said "Uh-huh" in a voice I hoped sounded normal. Selphie and Zell... It had always been a possibility. They were close, they had fought evil together, and they were both so much alike. Yes, it had definitely been a possibility. Maybe that was why I had said 'yes' to Marshal?

Selphie patted the top of Zell's head. "Sorry, Zelly— Oh! I asked Squall if I could setup a CPU in your room at the infirmary and he said it would be OK. So, I'm gonna take your old one and put it in there. The tech guys can do that next week, I think is what they said. Dr. Kadowaki won't let us have you involved in candidate classes until then."

"OK," I whispered.

"Quistis is your instructor this term," Selphie informed. "But if you want a transfer, Quistis said that's fine. Her schedule is really busy and so she won't be able to come to the infirmary very often."

"I could do it," Zell offered. "I don't have as many classes as Quis and the others. And we get together anyway to do the workout stuff. We could just do it then."

"You sure?" Selphie asked him. "I thought you hated teaching."

I stared at Zell. He had always loved teaching in my reality. Lowering my gaze, I caught myself wishing for an excuse to leave. Could I feel any more disconnected? Probably not.

"I don't hate it," Zell protested. "It's the homework that sucks."

Selphie laughed. "Alright, fine. Anyway, I'll ask Squall if the transfer is alright. He probably won't care. He and Quis are getting ready to leave anyway."

“It’s that time already?” Zell asked, the seriousness in his voice drawing my attention. “Geez. Seems like they just got back.”

“Yeah, I know.” Selphie released a deep breath and then stood, resting a hand on Zell’s shoulder as she focused on me. “Congratulations and everything, Sally. I’ll be sure to let you know as soon as your classes are going to start. OK?”

I nodded, not willing to risk my voice.

When she focused on Zell, she smiled while giving him another pat on the head, further enhancing my confusion and misery.

Once she turned to mingle in the crowd, he focused on me. “You feeling OK? You’re a little yellow.”

“I guess I’m just tired.”

“Should we go? We’ve been here about an hour, so I guess it’s OK. There’s just a lot of talking and stuff going on. I don’t think they’ll be too pissed if I take you back.”

The way he sent worried glances over his shoulder to the exit made me melt and put on a brave face. “I’m alright. We don’t need to go yet.” The last thing I needed was to be alone with my thoughts at the moment. I motioned to the punch and soda. “Maybe just a clear soda or something?”

“You sure?” he pressed. “We can go. I promised the doc I wouldn’t let you stay out too long. I swore.”

Still smiling, I gave his upper arm a rub before I could stop myself. The tingle that shot up my arm almost made me cringe. “I’m good for another... 30 minutes?” How could I be like this with two different guys?

He regarded me with a thoughtful expression, tapping his fingers on the arms of my wheelchair before giving me a boyish smile and heading toward the punch. I watched him go, my smile fading. How are you going to do this, Sally? How are you going to keep from looking at him like you’re in love with him. And how was I going to look at Marshal the same way I did before? Especially since I couldn’t remember anything!

My sigh sounded like a whimper as I lowered my gaze to my clasped hands, not looking at the place where my rings should have been.

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I yawned again and felt a tap on the crown of my head.

“You weren’t kidding when you said ‘30 minutes,’” Zell said.

“I’ve never been good at big parties,” I admitted. “They tire me out really fast.” Although our

wedding had been one big party after another, and I hadn't fallen asleep until nearly two in the morning, snuggled in Zell's arms.... I cleared my throat and shoved the thoughts away with an outward grip of the arms of the wheelchair.

"Oh. Well, I guess I shoulda done a smaller one like Doc said."

Yawning for the fifth time in five minutes, I shook my head. "No, Zell. It was fun. At least, I had a lot of fun watching everyone." Watching while trying to reason out where I would want to fit. I was so different from before and, staring at the medical ID tag on my wrist, I had to remember how 19-year-olds acted. I hadn't been 19 for, what?, six years?

The wheelchair slowed as we made our way down the side-hall from the cafeteria. "Kinda reminded me how Seifer would always watch people," Zell suddenly admitted.

His voice sounded odd, and the past tense of the statement terrified me. "Isn't... isn't he in security?" I couldn't imagine him doing anything but security for any place other than Garden. It wouldn't be Garden without Seifer Almasy.

Zell cleared his throat and I heard the creak of his hands adjusting their hold on the grip of the wheelchair handlebars. "Kinda sorta."

"What?"

"He... erm... Seifer's missing."

Shock wouldn't let me speak.

"I can't really say anything else. Classified."

All I could do was shake my head as I fought back the tears.

The rest of the journey to the infirmary remained quiet. Everything about this reality was so different! I was afraid to ask questions about it for fear that something else would pop up and hit me in the face.

Dr. Kadowaki wasn't in, so Zell wheeled me to my cubby and helped me to my feet. Then he wrapped my arm around his neck and shoulders and scooped me up into his arms.

"But—"

"Nope," he interrupted. "You're tired, so there's no way I'm gonna make you walk and then climb. You'd fall on your head and get me killed by the doc."

"She wouldn't either, silly boy," and the endearing tone was out before I could stop it. I flushed crimson, content to have an innocent expression on my face when he sent me a glance. "Her bark is worse than her bite," I continued, my tone under control.

Talking like this while knowing that Marshal believed we were a couple... I felt like an absolute slut.

“Yeah, well, I’ve been bitten by her a couple times. It hurts.”

I sent him a reluctant smile as I adjusted my arms around his neck, remembering a knightly rescue, a wedding-night jaunt, a honeymoon realization—I shoved the memories away as he placed me carefully on the bed.

Forcing a smile, I met his gaze. “Thank you.” At that moment I was glad I couldn’t read his expressions. I couldn’t take any more doubts about who felt what when I didn’t even know what I felt about anything!

He rubbed at the back of his neck as his gaze remained focused on my knees. “I’m giving you a day off tomorrow, so just do those exercises from yesterday and we’ll call it even.”

“Alright.”

“Here, let me help you with your shoes,” he offered, stepping forward and taking initiative before I could even decline. Then he lifted the blankets and helped get my legs under. “OK, yeah, um....” He finally met my gaze. “I’ll see ya later, then.”

Nodding, I hugged my arms around my legs. Even if nothing in my fantasy had happened, it would be hard to put my crush on Zell on a shelf. Especially with him standing there looking adorable. “Thanks again for the party. It was fun.”

Zell’s lips twitched upward with that. “Sure thing. No prob. Glad to do it.”

Then I found myself saying, “You don’t have to go,” but, more importantly, I didn’t want him to go. I know that it was horrible, because of Marshal, but Zell was... I don’t know, stability? The norm? Something usual and customary?

“Aren’t you tired?” he asked, smile gone and expression serious.

“A little, but that’s OK.” I rested my cheek on my knees. “You could tell me what’s happened since the accident. Of course, I’d love to hear about the fight with Ultimecia again.” I could still remember when he told it at the celebration party afterwards, everyone listening with bated breath as he acted it out. The laughter. The gasps. The fun....

Zell lowered himself into the seat beside my bed, leaning his arms onto the mattress as usual. “That’s cool that you remember ‘em all. I’d be in here telling them to you when you’d be all frowny,” he did an interpretation of a pout that had me laughing, “and then I’d tell a story and you’d be all smiles. I kept telling Doc that you heard me, but she never believed it.”

I laughed again. “I remember that story, and the one about catching Lunatic Pandora in Esthar, and climbing Odin’s Tower, and the Tomb of the Forgotten King, or was it the Lost King?”

Zell smirked. “Hell if I know.”

I giggled.

Then Zell motioned to me with another lift of his chin. “So, what was it like?”

“Like? What was what like?”

“Being in a coma! Is it like sleeping, so you get dreams and all that? Or do ya just lie there not know anything?”

“For me it was like sleeping,” I confessed, squirming.

“So you had dreams and stuff?”

Forcing a smile, I nodded. “I dreamed I passed the Fire Cavern and beat Squall’s score. I dreamed I was a Special Security Officer, too.”

“Seriously? Sweet! What does a Special Security Officer do?”

How could I not tell him about the code-cracker that he and Seifer caught in Timber? I told him of my Field Exam, of our mission to Winhill to investigate the possibility of saboteurs on the building staff of the proposed Garden, and him being Head of Instruction while Quistis went undercover at Deling Garden to stop yet another Purist faction from annihilating the Garden organization. The only bit of my other history that I left out was our relationship – the only part of my history that should have been worth remembering.

When I started telling the story about Marshal and Fujin in Winhill, a sharp pain hit me right behind the eye. I cringed but continued, telling him about the Purist faction that tried to smuggle Garden missiles to a black market ring in Winhill. Of Fujin and Marshal’s capture and how Marshal— My hand pressed hard against my eye to stop the throbbing. “Ow...”

“What happened? What’s wrong?” he asked as he stood. “Do you need the doc?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “My head really hurts.”

“Damn. Lie back and I’ll get the doc.” He steadied me as I did as directed, expression serious. “Don’t move. I’ll be right back.”

Then he hurried away, not hearing my broken cry just before darkness enveloped everything.

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One last rage-filled tug and the clang and rattle of falling chain filled the blackness. The man remained silent and still for the space of five breaths before supporting himself against the cold wall of stone and ordering himself to his feet. The blackness was too thick to do anything but hear his way through to where he knew the door to be, doing his best to stay within the path he had etched into his mind.

No sounds.

Feeling at the hinges of the door, he grinned with malicious intent. Then, with hurried yet

silent movements, he popped the hinge stakes from the brackets and tucked them quickly into the pockets of his torn and tattered trench coat. He knew he had only a few moments before the next shift would make its rounds.

Gathering strength, he shifted the great door from its loosed position and carefully eased it open, slipping through and then quickly guiding it closed again. The lights of the dimmed hall hurt his eyes, but he ignored the pain as he crept toward the exit. There would be no others to free this time, for the most extreme of penalties had punished the risk of escape. The man still remembered each name and face of those that had paid and vowed vengeance—personal payment.

Arriving with almost super-human stealth at the next doorway, the man quieted his breathing to focus on hearing beyond what he could see outside the small window. No footsteps; no laughter; no droning of conversation.

He tried the door and found it unlocked, just as it had been all other failed attempts, and retrieved the two hinge stakes from his coat pockets. When he still heard no sounds, he slowly opened the door and slipped through, making his way to the left and the staircase he knew led to a main hall. Once beyond that, it would be only a matter of staying out of sight under complete cover until he was certain the way was clear and the night was dark.

The moon had been their enemy on more than one attempt—

A soldier in a dark uniform exited a room at the top of the stairs and the man didn't hesitate in his action: he grabbed him, covering his mouth with a large hand as he shoved the stake into the soldier's throat. The man held his hand over the soldier's mouth for several seconds, not risking even a low moan before dragging the body into the exited sleeping quarters. He retrieved the bloody stake from the soldier's throat and exited, closing the door behind him.

The man dropped to a combat crawl, moving only a few feet before waiting and listening, gauging the environment and adjusting his readiness accordingly. He had made it this far so many other times that the man no longer allowed hope to fester. It was simply a matter of proceeding to the next stage. If he did, then it was simply a met goal with the next dropped into play.

There was never hope of escape; only resistance to surrender.