

Six

~ Reality's Past ~

Sunlight filtered in through the tinted glass and onto the large wooden desk under the window. The glare reflected painfully into the emerald green eyes of the desk chair occupant just as she finished typing her notes into the computer.

She ran a tired hand through her blond waves as the warm breeze touched her skin and attempted to take several papers from her inbox. Her hand held the stray sheets of paper in place. How long have I been looking? The pictures and DNA blood tests the Centra Agency had been collecting for the last several months proved her search could be over.

Seven months prior, a small scouting mission returned with photographs of a man tortured in the desert 25 miles from CA headquarters. When the mission had mounted a rescue, the people had disappeared as if mirages. Upon further investigation, they had found blood samples taken for testing.

Since that first encounter, the CA sent a scouting mission to the location each week. Most often, they turned up nothing. However, the last trip had turned up not only more blood evidence, but traces of magic usage. The scouts had tracked the group two miles into the lower mountains where the tracks suddenly disappeared. It was as close as the CA scouts had ever been.

Now they knew they needed the help of a larger organization, especially since they discovered the identity of the prisoner. One of their own had nearly identical DNA.

The woman glanced over the computer file one last time before she picked up the phone, dialing the number of a certain Timber TV station reporter.

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Zell chucked a rock across the Training Center, not caring that he hit the slender tree. He only bent to retrieve another small rock from the area around the base of the boulder he sat on, pitching that at the same location. It hit. He stared at the target for a long moment before releasing a deep breath and lowering his focus to the other pebbles at his feet, resting his arms upon his legs.

“Zell?”

Zell looked up, standing from the rock in the same motion. “She wake up?”

Selphie’s step forward hesitated and she sent Marshal a sidelong glance. He shrugged. “Sorry, Zelly.”

“But it’s been a week!”

“Dincht, the doctor says her brain activity has settled,” Marshal reminded, scowling. “That’s a

damn site better than it could be.”

Zell slumped back onto the rock, Selphie sitting beside him. “I shoulda forced her to go to sleep. Why didn’t I make her go to sleep? We were right there! She was already tired! I was on my way out!” Zell slumped forward. “Dude. I swore to the doc... I screwed up. Big time.”

“Zelly, it wasn’t your fault.” Selphie rested a hand on his back. “The doctor says this is normal with coma patients. It could’ve happened with anyone.”

“But it didn’t. It happened with me after I kept her up an extra hour.” He shook his head. “I suck.”

“Zell...”

He stood and stepped toward the inner-gate of the Training Center mumbling, “I suck, big time.”

“Zelly,” Selphie called after him, “it wasn’t your fault!”

He closed the door behind him, immediately kicking at a large piece of debris. “Not my fault?” he grumbled, stuffing his hands deep into the pockets of his dark blue jeans. “How can she say it wasn’t my fault? I did the party, didn’t I? I told the doc I’d only let her stay for a little bit and wheel her back when she looked tired.” He kicked at another rock. “Then I went and... damn it, Dincht. Watcha thinkin’?”

Glowing, Zell picked up a rock and chucked it hard. It clattered against the far metal wall.

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

Zell shrugged. “I don’t know, Beita-Dawg. It’s just... it’s the library girl.”

“Her name is Sally.”

“Dude, I know what her name is—”

‘Zell Dincht, report to the Infirmary. Repeat: Zell Dincht, report to the— hold her! Don’t let her get—’

The intercom clacked off the same time Marshal and Zell sprinted for the metal door and out of the Training Center, nearly colliding into Selphie in the hallway.

“Zell! What’s the matt—”

“Move!” Marshal roared. Then they raced down the corridor and into the main, heading for the infirmary as candidates and SeeD were yelled at, pushed, or moved of their own volition. Marshal slammed into the infirmary first, the swinging door nearly clocking Zell in the face before he could push through. When he did, he saw Sally struggling against Marshal and two SeeD medics using Duel moves he’d never seen before.

He skidded to a stop. “...the hell?”

“Let go of me!” Sally screamed. “I’ve got to go to him! He’s hurt! He needs me!”

She burst free from the SeeDs' hold and wobbled forward, falling into Marshal's arms with a flail while still raging about someone being hurt.

Catching her flailing arms with a firm grip, Marshal ordered "Sally, calm down," while his hold was very nearly thrown off quite a few times. In fact, he struggled right along with the other SeeD to get her back to her bed.

Zell hadn't seen anything like it—ever.

"Let go of—" When her eyes actually focused on Marshal, she covered her face with her hands and sobbed "...go away...."

Marshal drew her close, a hand stroking her hair as he soothed, "It's OK, Sally. Shh."

"Get Doc," Zell ordered, trying to ignore a burst of irritation that exploded in his brain as he saw the library girl in Marshal's arms. She sobbed so hard that her entire body trembled, and seeing Marshal scoop her up made him feel mega-weird—as if he got kicked in the gut and the head, and then roasted with a Firaga when he wasn't looking.

"Why, M-Marshal? Why doesn't it leave me alone? I thought— he was— d-dead," she choked out.

"No one's dead, Sally." Marshal tried to pull away, but Sally continued to clutch his uniform. "Now calm down," he said, repeating the request quite a few times when she wouldn't release her grip.

That made Zell see red, and the Firaga wouldn't stop frying his brain. He grabbed the nearest SeeD. "Where's the Doc?"

Dr. Kadowaki rested a hand on his shoulder, drawing his gaze and showing a prepared syringe. "You'll need to quiet her."

Zell grimaced, shifting his focus to Marshal who still held her close.

"OK," he whispered. "Shh. Relax, Sally. I'm not going anywhere."

Zell crossed his arms, his brow furrowing as he watched them.

Sally slightly nodded, adjusting her arms around Marshal as she whispered something he couldn't understand. Marshal signaled he was ready, and Dr. Kadowaki moved in to give the shot. Sally didn't seem to notice and, very slowly, Zell saw her trembling cease and her form relax against Marshal with one last sleepy mumble.

He needed to punch something.

Marshal finally got her to lie back on the bed, holding tightly to her hand until even that relaxed. Then he turned on Dr. Kadowaki. Zell had never seen him so pissed. "What the hell was that? The whole reason Dincht started working with her was that she was 'fine'! Then she slips back

into a coma and has an episode when she finally wakes up? Just what the hell is going on?”

The SeeD quickly left to their respective duties while Dr. Kadowaki drew Marshal from the bed. “Do you want to wake her, SO Beita? Outside with you! You, too, Zell.”

“I want to know what the hell is going on!” he hissed.

Zell nodded. “Yeah! And what was that you gave her? The last thing she needs is to be so pumped full of meds that she’s off on a drug-trip when she’s supposed to be trying to get better!”

Dr. Kadowaki took a firm hold of each of them to pull them from the infirmary and down the corridor toward the main hall. “Gentlemen, comas are not widely understood. Nor is their reaction to the ment—”

Marshal shook her hand free. “That’s bullshit, Doc.”

Dr. Kadowaki sighed. “I haven’t yet been able to determine a reason for the coma. She had a concussion, yes, but nothing to result in a coma. She had surgeries but, again, they shouldn’t have warranted the coma. If anything, they should have caused partial or temporary paralysis. When we moderated her brain activity, it was extremely active. It was this constant activity which led Dr. Levinne and myself to believe that her coma was self-induced.”

“What?” Zell and Marshal both stared at the doctor in disbelief.

“Matron and Dr. Levinne haven’t yet been able to reason what could have caused the coma.” She motioned to Zell. “For some reason, you’re deeply involved.”

“Wha...? I didn’t do anything!”

Marshal stared at the floor with a somewhat blank expression.

Dr. Kadowaki smiled. “Not a negative involvement, Zell. Simply a powerful motivator. In fact, I hazard a guess that you’re the reason she woke rather than being the reason she slept for nearly 28 months.”

“Really?”

“It very well could be. And the reports prove that her brain activity while ‘asleep’ qualified as that of a conscious person. So, whatever she was... experiencing during that time, your visits, as well as the others’, had quite a profound effect on her. Now whether or not that is causing her relapses and emotional... inconsistencies, I’m not certain. We can only continue to monitor her reactions to different stimuli and keep a close eye on her.”

“Oh.” Zell tucked his hands into the back pockets of his jeans.

Smiling again, Dr. Kadowaki rested a hand on each shoulder, drawing their focus. “What I gave her was only meant to calm, so that she drifted to sleep was a reaction to feeling safe, I imagine.”

Zell’s ears reddened. “Sorry about that.”

“It’s all right.” She gave their shoulder one last grip and then motioned toward the infirmary. “Due to the scene she made a few moments ago, I’ll let one of you stay until she wakes.”

“Oh. Um...” Zell cleared his throat and looked first toward the infirmary and then down the hall toward the main corridor. “I’ll be back a little later.”

“What?” Marshal snapped. “Dincht, you can’t just leave her!”

“She said that she’s out for a while, Dawg, remember?”

Marshal scoffed and slammed into the infirmary, leaving Zell to stare after him wondering ..the hell’s wrong with him? He glanced at the doc. “Yeah...erm...I’ll check in later.” Then he cleared his throat and turned down the hall to the main corridor while staring blankly at the floor.

“There you are.”

He twitched and looked up to see Selphie approaching. “Oh. Erm.... Hi, Selph.”

“Was she okay?”

“Um... Yeah. She kinda had... well, an episode or something, I guess.” His face flushed red and he shifted his gaze. He didn’t know why he felt bad that he got angry at Marshal for the stuff with Sally. Marshal and Sally had known each other for awhile.

“What’s the matter?” she asked. “You’re all red.”

“Nothing.”

“Whatever. You’re never red. What happened?”

“Nothing.” He sent Selphie a glance. “She was just... acting weird. Or something.” He was acting weird. Marshal was acting weird.

“How did she act weird?”

Zell scrubbed at the back of his neck, and the Firaga attack returned when he thought about the way she and Marshal had— “Just weird. Don’t sweat it.”

He stepped past and headed for the dorms. Dude, you don’t care about Beita-Dawg and the library girl, do ya? He frowned, fisting his hands when he thought about how she had clung to Marshal as if it were the safest place in the world. ...the hell? I was the one that helped save the planet. He slugged the wall on his way to his dorm-room. She was cute, and he liked hanging out with her.... Everyone said she had a thing for him, and why else would she have given him that mega-phoenix when all hell had broken loose? So why was she hanging all over Marshal? The Doc said he was the reason she woke up, so what the hell?

Zell released a quick breath as he leaned against the wall just outside his dorm-room. He tucked his hands deep into his pockets.

“Zell?” Selphie came to stand beside him. “Zell, are you mad at me?”

He shook his head. “Just confused,” he mumbled. “Sorry for the blow off.”

“It’s alright. I know how much you hate being confused. Wanna talk about it?”

“I don’t know what to talk about,” he confessed.

“Okay. Just tell me what happened that’s got you confused.”

Ears reddening, Zell sent Selphie a sidelong glance. “Marshal and Sally.”

“What about them?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s just.... She was all crying and stuff because she’d just woke up from another dream or something. And..., erm, Marshal was all in her face and stuff.”

“Marshal?” Selphie’s expression showed confusion this time. “Marshal and Sally are friends. He wouldn’t be mean to her, especially not when she’s scared.”

“No...I didn’t mean that.”

“Oh. Well, what did you mean?”

“He was...well...” Zell kicked at the floor. “He was all hugging her and making her feel better.”

Selphie stared at Zell, incredulous. “You’re kidding, right? That has you confused?”

He squirmed. “OK, so...maybe I’m not confused.”

“What is wrong with you, Zelly?”

“I don’t know! I’m just....it just.... Marshal and Sally? Come on!”

“Wait, wait, wait.” Selphie waved her hands at Zell, her eyes widening. “You’re jealous?”

Frowning, Zell crossed his arms and looked away.

“Um, hello? I thought you and I were going out, Zelly. Why would you be jealous of Marshal and Sally.”

“It’s not like that,” he grumbled. “It just was weird.”

Selphie snorted. “Yeah, weird because you wanted it to be you. Thanks a lot, Zell. Good bye.”

She turned on her heel and flounced away, Zell staring after her in shock. “...the hell did I do? I just...” He scowled and turned to slam into his dorm-room.

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“Zell? Are you in position?” I asked into the shoulder-mounted radio.

‘Yeah. Whenever you’re ready.’

In our daily patrols around Winhill, we had discovered a somewhat secluded ranch-house that had experienced a lot of activity. When we placed satellite security on it to monitor that activity, we discovered some disturbing reports. Seifer had ordered us to move in and close it down. So, Zell had put together the strike-team while I had charge of the second, back-up team to offer support.

Our surveillance showed that right now was the least amount of activity, and the expected 'feed delivery' wasn't due for another hour. This gave us plenty of time to set up a counter-strike and find the other end of the supplier.

I brought up my hand-held and accessed the satellite's thermal scanner. Noting the positions of the guards, I directed, "Now," into the radio.

Zell's team moved with split-second timing, breaking through the first and second perimeter guards with barely a pause, me keeping track of their progress using the same satellite. There was a hesitation at the third and final perimeter, and then a scratching on my radio. But the signal was too broken up.

"Repeat that, Zell. You're breaking up." I sent Marshal a concerned glance.

"He'll be fine, Sally."

The repeated message was just as garbled, so I adjusted the dials and requested another repeat, keeping my watchful eye on the hand-held's screen.

'So-thi- -nk- g-ng on.' \*garbled\* 'Wh- do y- th-k?'

"Shoot," I mumbled, focusing fully on the dials to adjust them yet again.

Marshal suddenly hissed. He pointed at the hand-held to the three teams converging on Zell's position.

I adjusted the dials furiously, "Zell, six approaching from all directions. Take cov—"

Gunfire was heard and I flinched, staring slack-jawed at the hand-held as I watched it all in thermal. Three figures dropped and I collapsed to my knees. "No..." I shook my head. "No. No!" I scrambled to my feet, choking out "Zell!" as I stumbled and staggered forward against the hands and arms that kept me back. "Zell!"

"Sally! Sally, stop!"

"Marshal, let go!"

"I'm not going to let you die, Sally!" Marshal swept me off my feet and onto his shoulder, directing the other SeeD to follow him out of the danger zone.

I shrieked and pounded his back. "Marshal! Marshal, let me go!"

"Marshal!" I gasped and sat up, my hands gripping the sides of my sweat-soaked bed.

"Right here, Sally." I heard a movement, and then he lowered himself into the seat next to my bed. "That was some adventure you gave everyone. One of the SeeD has one helluva shiner."

"Is Zell—"

Marshal lowered his gaze as he leaned back in the chair, arms crossed. "Dincht is fine. Promised to stop by later."

I released a relieved sigh and laid back, covering my face with my hands. He's safe... He's alive— Then I remembered Marshal in the elevator and flushed molten. I think I suffered from emotional whiplash. It wasn't fair that I was so worried about Zell, wanting him to fall in love with me when Marshal said we.... Now I couldn't even talk to Marshal about the dreams, so he could understand why I was the way I was, because... they were about Zell and me when Marshal had lost two years. I was stuck between a rock and a hard place and didn't know who to turn to for help. Much

as I wanted it.

I could feel Marshal watching me in the silent moments that followed, and that watchfulness had me wishing he would just do something that would help me know what to do about it all. Tell me a 'Remember when' so that I can actually remember! It was horrible not remembering something as special as a first boyfriend. Especially when it was someone like Marshal. He acted tough, sure, and I knew he was tough, but with me he had always been the other way. Sweet? Gentle? Full of humor and smarts...the description sounded like Zell.

"Damn it..." I muttered.

"I agree."

That encouraged a laugh as I lowered my hands from my face, though I knew my eyes and nose were likely red from crying. I always seemed to be crying. My smile faded, though, at the somewhat blank expression on Marshal's face.

He lowered his gaze. "You don't remember, do you?"

"I remember a lot of things," I whispered. Why can't I remember you, Marshal? Why? I wanted to remember him that way. Really. I did. He was so awesome. All those days and years I had pined for Zell, Marshal had been there to cheer me up. I sniffed.

"You don't remember the one thing that matters, Sally. The one thing I had when I would sit in here and watch you sleep and sleep and sleep." Marshal punched his leg with each repeat. "You don't—" He swore with such vehemence that I twitched. "I knew I fought an uphill battle, trying to get you to forget about Dincht, but to erase me?" He stood, his chair grunting against the floor and drawing my pained gaze. "Damn it, Sally, you erased me."

"No, Marshal," I protested, "I didn't. I promise. Maybe they're waiting?"

"I've waited two years for you to come back to me!"

My heart beat thudded at the intensity of his tone. "I'm s-still working on piecing together what was real and what was just a dream. It's hard, and it's painful, and...I don't know...maybe I'm trying to find things one at a time? It...it's hard to find myself," I choked out.

Marshal clenched his jaw, the muscle twitching as I sniffed and hiccupped. Then he slumped into the chair and reached out for my hand to give it an almost painful grip. I returned the squeeze, remembering a similar time when we had talked about his sister. When he was like this, a little helpless and at risk, it made me see even more how deep of an individual he was. Very passionate in everything he did. A little like my... my... dream Zell....

"Marshal? Tell me how it went."

He shrugged a pathetic lift of his shoulders. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Us. How did it start? When? Please tell me. I need my life back, don’t I?”

“Sally...” Marshal lifted his gaze, and he looked utterly defeated. “I don’t play like that. If you don’t remember—”

“But I do remember! I remember rock bands and comedy shows. I remember chat study nights when I had such a hard time with criminal theory. I remember—”

Marshal stood and turned to go, waving his hand in a type of farewell that made me scramble out of bed after him. “Don’t you dare,” I cried as I stumbled forward. I clutched his arm to steady me. “Don’t you dare walk out on me!” I had lost so much. I didn’t want to lose his friendship, especially not if it had been more of what I had wanted.

“I can’t go back, Sally.” He finally met my pleading gaze. “I had you to myself for a damned awesome week before your accident. I had finally won out over Zell ‘the Sorceress Slayer’ Dincht!” He caressed my cheek, just as I remembered Zell doing in my dreams.... Then he lowered his head and touched my lips with his. My brain popped. “There is no way in hell I’m going back,” he whispered.

Then he had left and I could only stand there, a hand raised to my lips as I stared at the swinging door.

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The man opened his eyes to the painful glare of sunshine – blessed damned sunshine – and smiled.