

Eleven

~ The 'M' Word ~

I don't remember a time when I laughed as much as I did with Marshal on the way to the T.C. He was charming, and funny, and only mildly irritating (only because he liked saying things to make my face turn crimson). In addition to that, because we were both in security (mostly), we had so much in common. By the time we got to the T.C., we had fallen into comparing security stories and were having difficulty speaking through the laughter.

Why wouldn't I say 'yes' to dating Marshal?

My knee suddenly gave and he grabbed me to prevent a fall. "What the hell? Are you ok?"

"Ow... my knee suddenly—"

"Here. Sit." He guided me to a nearby fallen log and steadied me as I sat. "Has it done that before?"

"No, but I haven't walked this much yet either."

Marshal frowned and fisted a hand, scrubbing his scalp with the other. He swore under his breath.

"Mars, it's—"

"It's not OK, and it's not your fault. I'm the ass who left your chair by the lift."

"Fine. You can carry all the blame, but do it over here and stop fuming. You'll overheat the temperature control." I patted the log beside me.

He continued to glare, arms crossed.

"Or you can stand there and be grumpy by yourself."

"Thank you. It's more fun this way." He plopped down beside me.

"What happened to being grumpy by yourself?"

"What's the fun in that? You should be just as miserable."

I laughed so hard I thought I would tumble over backwards. "You're impossible!"

"Not really. That's my charm."

"Is that what they're calling it now?"

"Ouch." He covered his heart with his hand, except he covered the wrong side. "Candidate Regal, that hurt."

I moved his hand to the appropriate side. "There you go."

He laughed and drew me close. Such a simple gesture, but it shot tingles up and down my

spine that made me nauseous. I couldn't let him hold me like Zell would and make me feel like Zell would. It made me hurt inside... as if I cheated on Zell and Marshal both. I pushed a little away, trying not to notice the mild resistance or the pained expression when I sat up.

"Do I need to go?"

All I cared to risk was a shake of my head. It was something I had to work out, I knew it, and doing that would be a constant thing. If he went, then I wouldn't have a reminder of what I was doing it for. Of course, I didn't even know if that made sense. I only knew that Marshal was a constant. Something I thought I would have in Zell, but... but I don't know.

A knife seemed to prick my brain just behind my left eye, and I did a poor job of hiding the wince.

Marshal stood. "I can give you ten alone, Sally."

"No." I met his gaze. "Please. Don't go."

He clenched his jaw. "You've had a rough time. I get that, but I can't help unless I know what you want me to do." He sat close, his silver eyes sparking as he squeezed my hand. "Talk to me."

"Dr. Levinne says I'm not supposed to. He and Matron say that if I keep talking like it happened, I won't move on. I won't ever stop missing it." Looking up to meet Marshal's silver gaze, I whispered, "I don't want to forget, but I don't want it to hurt anymore."

Marshal brushed at my cheek with his thumb. "Sally, shutting down is driving you nuts. You want to talk, so talk. It's like anything else fun you would talk about. And weren't you having a blast just a bit ago telling stories about security?"

I worried my lower lip. "You really think I should talk about them?"

"Where's the harm? You can't tell me that on the way here you didn't feel better. And they were great stories!"

"But what if... What if it's something really different, and might make the other person uncomfortable? I should... I should keep that to myself. Shouldn't I?"

"That's up to you. You've got to trust your gut."

I lowered my gaze to my clasped hands as I mulled it over.

Marshal let out a deep breath, and I caught the motion of scrubbing his scalp out of the corner of my eye. It made me feel bad, that I caused such stress. Neither he nor Zell deserved it, they were both great guys, and I didn't know how to stop.

"I better get the chair," he said as he stood.

"I can probably walk. It feels better."

"You can 'probably' do a lot of things, like sitting your ass on that log and waiting for me to

get back.”

I laughed. “Yes, sir,” I acknowledged with a salute.

“That’s better. I’ll be back in ten. Twenty if I’m cornered by Fujin.”

He winked and left the T.C., leaving me to my conundrum of Zell versus Marshal. I groaned and dropped my head into my hands. The Fates could kill me now and relieve a lot of strain.

“Hey.”

I looked up, straight into the beautiful blue eyes of Zell Dincht. “Hi.” My stomach felt as if I had swallowed a lead balloon.

“What is Beita thinking bringing you out here? And where the hell’s your chair?”

Frowning, I crossed my arms. “He went to get it. I was tired of being wheeled around everywhere and so I asked to go for a walk. OK?”

“No, it’s not OK. Beita knows you’re on med watch. ...the hell?”

“I’m not a cripple. I have feet. I can walk.” Sally Regal! Did you just snap at Zell?

“You can walk yourself right into an injury,” he reminded.

The tension began to escalate, something I definitely didn’t need at that point in time. “You’re right.” I held my breath a moment. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t take my frustrations out on you. I’m just tired.”

“And you hurt yourself, didn’t you?”

I grimaced down at the offending knee.

“Damn it.” He knelt, feeling my knee with gentle but probing touches. “Dude. This knee is way tight. Shit,” he hissed. “Did you twist it?”

“No.” But I hadn’t been paying that much attention to how I walked.

“Geez,” Zell muttered. “Doc’s never going to let you workout if things like this keep happening on my watch.”

And the way he groused and hovered over me as he treated my knee brought back all the memories of my workout sessions with him here. The fun, the hardships, the trials of working out the new routines.... I lifted my gaze from Zell’s spiked hair to the T.C. around me, allowing the visions to trickle in and not caring if it sent me deeper into my conundrum. “My most favorite memories of this place are my workout sessions with you,” I said softly.

Zell blinked up at me. “Workout sessions?”

Nodding, I released a soft breath. “At first you were helping me pass the Exam Qualifier. Then you told me the quarterstaff wasn’t right and started teaching me Duel.”

“Teaching you Duel? Seriously?”

I smiled, and the action hurt my face. “That first day we worked out together, here, I... I was scared to death. But looking back, you made it easy. You made me feel as if I could do it.” I lowered my gaze to his hands that continued to massage my knee. “You always did—” I felt a tear run free and swiped it away. “Sorry. I don’t mean to be a cry-baby.”

He stared up at me for a long moment before focusing on my knee. “You can talk about it if you want. I don’t mind if you go off.” He smirked. “I go off all the time.”

I reached out to smooth his blond hair into place before I could stop myself, remembering so many wonderful things. Even when my conscience twisted my insides I couldn’t pull away. If it hadn’t been for our walk to Balamb to visit his mother that glorious day... “Could you show me ‘Booya’?” Sally. Don’t do this.

Zell looked up. “The move? Sure.” He stood, set his stance, and performed the movements as smooth as ever.

Shaking my head, I ignored the part of me that warned to let this dream-memory go. “No, Zell. I mean can you show me ‘Booya.’”

He blinked down at me. “You mean do it on you?”

I nodded. Sally, no. Do you hear me? NO.

Zell rubbed the back of his neck, just as he had back then... so many amazing years ago. “Sure, if you really want. What about your knee?”

“I just want to try something.” Something that should have been best left alone, I knew, but— “Please?”

Zell grinned and helped me to my feet. “What the hell. Sounds like fun.”

He set his position. I did the same. He was quick. I wasn’t. Not even with all my remembered training. Not even with my almost painful desire to be good at this one thing. He infiltrated my defenses without a problem, grabbing my shirtfront and pulling me close— and then he kissed me.

I jerked back and slapped his face, my next response a gasp and quick “I’m sorry!” as my entire coma life crumbled away. All I saw was Marshal’s pained expression. I heard the agony in his voice when he accused me of erasing him from my memory... and I felt as if I was going to vomit.

Zell’s face and ears reddened. “Sorry, Meg.”

My stomach churned and I actually heaved, slapping my hand over my mouth to try and preserve my dignity.

He was quick to steady me. “You OK? You need the doc?”

“N-No. I’m fine, it’s just... It’s just this is...” Swallowing was difficult, and I didn’t want to look up into his gaze and see confusion. “You first called me that here. When we first worked out. I... I

guess I didn't think I'd ever hear it again."

"Called you what? 'Meg'?"

I risked a nod. "Short for mega-phoenix. I always liked it best," I admitted, and I was careful to keep my eyes focused on a particular section of his Balamb-blue t-shirt. " 'Kitten' was nice, especially how you said it, and I always liked how you said my name. Who knew a name could sound like that..." I sighed, closing my eyes to drift in the memories... but now I heard Marshal say my name.

"Can I ask you a question?"

The jolt to reality was harsh, and I winced before I opened my eyes. Zell's expression showed concern.

"How come you freak out around me?"

I paled and dropped my gaze.

"I guess I should suck it up, but... It... Well, it's kinda freakin' me out, I guess."

"I'm really sorry, Zell. I don't mean to do it."

"I know. And I kinda figured that, but geez. I know I've got quirks that tick people off and stuff. Just tell me which one it is. I can stop. Swear."

"You can't stop being who you are."

"...huh?"

"I..." I closed my eyes, willing the Zell from my dreams into my mind's eye. Please come back to me.... My eyes opened and were drawn to his. "Do you remember me saying I dreamt in my coma?"

Zell nodded.

"I..." I stopped, wondering again if confessing would be such a great idea. Yes, he had asked, but he didn't know what he did with that ask.... But right then I wanted to tell Zell everything. "My coma dreams took place over about eight years, and I... I woke up after..." I swiped at my cheek, my throat tightening so that I could barely hear myself... "I woke up after we'd been married for two."

Like in my fantasy when he had discovered my crush, Zell leaned back with a shocked "Wha-?" But as realization dawned and I didn't say anything more, his eyes darted to the nearest avenue of escape.

I shifted my stare to his sneakers, my throat tightening as only the roars and mewls of the Training Center inhabitants broke the silence.

"I've... uh..." Zell scrubbed at the back of his neck as he got to his feet. "I forgot I've got a ... er." Zell stepped back once, twice... "Appointment! Yeah. You'll be okay by yourself, yeah? Yeah. Um... I'll see ya 'round... maybe... Yeah..."

Then he continued out of the T.C. and didn't look back.

I was the only one to blame, letting myself be persuaded that Zell wouldn't mind this particular fantasy. I fought the tears and rubbed at my throbbing forehead. I only told him what he wanted to know! But why had I said anything? Like the 'Booya' kiss debacle, any confession of the dreams were a manipulation. Was that the type of person I wanted to be? Someone who used things like that to make people feel sorry for me?

Did I want to get Zell that way? Or did I want Zell to want me?

"Stupid, stupid, stupid," I muttered. The animals in the T.C. seemed to yell it back at me. "Oh shut up."

But he had been so attentive, and he gave me the stuffed animal... So what? That's what guys do, I reminded myself. Had I put a lot of meaning to things just because it was Zell? I puffed out a sigh as Dr. Levinne and Matron's words haunted me. All this time I had known they were right, but I couldn't put aside the hope that things could be the same, even just a little.

The killer being that I didn't realize how much hope I had held until now.

Lifting my gaze to stare at the metal double-doors of the Training Center, I just sat there. Not knowing where to go next. In my fantasy I had a definite purpose. Now, I floundered. I pushed myself to my feet and stepped forward, ignoring the pain in my knee. When I got to the double-doors, I pushed them open to make my way deeper inside. The mewls and growls of the inhabitants quieted somewhat as they watched me. I'm sure I didn't paint a very threatening picture with my hesitant gait and petite form.

This isn't very smart, I chided. Your training was in your fantasy. Remember?

It was at that moment I realized what Jaxon must have felt to be surrounded by memories of his fiancée and yet not have her. He had used a GF to escape, even at the risk to his person, and at that point in my struggle through one reality to the other, I was this close to doing the same thing. Then, when I heard the T-Rexaur roar, it flared to life a desire to let the beast finish what it had started two years before.

To just let me go.

My throat tightened, a tear brimming and falling as I clenched my hands into fists.

"You alright?"

I twitched, the startle reaction freeing a choked sob. Marshal stood there, holster clasps undone and expression wary as he watched me. I looked away again, out toward the shadowed lushness of the T.C.'s deeper forest. I couldn't answer his question. Every time I thought I was, something reminded me how much starting over I still had to do. Every time I thought 'I can do this',

something showed me I wasn't so sure I could.

I didn't know how.

I slightly shook my head.

Marshal moved to stand beside me, watching my profile as I kept staring ahead while hoping and wishing that stupid T-Rexaur would come through those trees and take me on. So I could kick its butt? So I could just get eaten? Who knew? I wanted to blame something. I wanted to do something to make it go away. GFs were banned and I didn't even know where to get one. Going back into a coma was out of the question because I didn't want to dream any more.

What else could I do?

A cold touch to my arm drew my attention. Marshal offered Janine forward. "Here," he said in a low tone. "It usually makes me feel better."

Shaking my head again, I tightened my fist hands so much that it hurt. "No. Thank you." I heard a pop from my knuckles.

"So what do you suggest?" Marshal said, tucking Janine away. "You want me to lure the T out so you can try and beat its brains in and end up being its snack instead? You know what? That sounds like fun. Let's do that."

"What else am I supposed to do?" I turned on him, tears coursing down my cheeks. "If it hadn't been for that T, I wouldn't be in this crappy existence!"

"Asleep and living a fantasy isn't any kind of life, Sally, and you know that!"

"I'd have Zell!" I screeched. "I'd have rank and station and a life that I lived based on choices that I made! This life is crap, Marshal, because I have nothing!"

"So you lost your fantasy world and a little bit of good luck. Your life doesn't revolve around an ass named Zell Dincht!"

I punched him before I even admitted that's what I wanted to do. "Why couldn't it have been you in my dreams?" I lashed out. "Why did it have to be him when he wasn't like how he was supposed to be?"

Marshal just stood there, deflecting some strikes but taking all the others as I ranted and sobbed. I couldn't stop hitting him, even when the hits were weak thumps to his chest. I sobbed and he simply stood there, taking it again and again. Being stable. Being a wall. Being Marshal.

I felt my legs buckle. He caught me by the arms and drew me close, saying "I know, Sally. Life sucks shit," as I kept crying. There just wasn't anything left to do.