

Two

~ Finding 'Me' ~

I thought dreams were supposed to be a way for a person to hope for their future. Or they were supposed to be a small insight into what you truly feel or think about something or someone. That's what I had always thought. Then I found that dreams that seem so sweet and lovely could also be the most painful. What do you do when you don't have what you thought you did? Who do you get mad at for the stealing of a dream? Who is to blame for the loss of a fantasy? Of a life?

There's no one. Only a different life staring back at you. A different you.

That was a very scary thing to see when I opened my eyes. To realize I had to start over. One word had ripped everything out from under me: Coma. I couldn't understand it. How could everything have seemed so real and be nothing but a dream? How could I remember my Fire Cavern test; my Field Exam; our first date; my job in security; our first kiss.... How could I remember so many years and have it all be untrue?

I sighed, staring at the ceiling while trying to keep from remembering my every moment with Zell. Trying not to remember how happy I had been. Trying not to visualize my "happily ever after" that had just been a life lived in fantasies.... It wasn't fair that I had to lose that life. There had been so many struggles to face. How could it be nothing? How could he still think of me as just "the library girl" when I had faced the agony of rejection to tell him how I felt!

Matron entered, sitting slowly into the chair to the left of my bed. "How are you doing this morning?" she asked.

I couldn't answer the question. Couldn't even think of an answer. After all, I had just woken from a coma and found a different life waiting for me. I mean... how could she ask me that? Turning to meet her gaze, I didn't care that my expression looked lost and confused. I was! Nothing was the way it was supposed to be; nothing was as I had worked so hard to make it. Everything was so wrong. So different. So not... right.

Matron didn't smile or anything. She only looked back at me with an honest expression that I didn't know how to read. One that scared me. So I looked away, turning onto my side and clutching my blankets tighter against me to try and protect myself from a past, present, and future that I didn't want to admit was real. All my hard work. All my struggles. All my hope gone and leaving me no place to stand. I didn't have anything in this reality, and that made me cold inside. Afraid. Lost.

I wanted to go back.

To sleep.

To Zell.

§

Zackary Regal stalked back and forth in front of his desk, wireless headset keeping his hands free to fist at his sides or roughly point at no one in front of him. “Look,” he barked, “it’s been three days since the doctor there called to say there had been a quote-unquote positive turn to my sister’s condition. I want some answers!”

His pacing halted for a long moment before resuming.

“Don’t give me that shit, whoever-your-name-is. I received a file detailing the last work-up that had been done, and my specialist concluded that due to the rise in—” Zack clenched his jaw, his pacing ceasing yet again as his body went rigid. “If you don’t give me a straight answer without referring to some cock-and-bull privacy code, I will pull whatever strings I can to have your facility shut down—

“Hyne’s holy ass,” he muttered. “Who’s your supervisor? Put them on the line. What do you mean ‘they’re not in’? Never mind. Put me through to the head of your department. Let me guess: they’re not in?” Face and neck reddening, Zack brought a fist down hard onto his desk, his nameplate clattering to the floor. “If you don’t transfer me to someone that can answer with something other than code and conduct rules, I will—” The line went dead.

Snatching the headset from his head, he tossed it across the room, curses flying as vehemently as the headset. It ricocheted from his collection of plaques of achievement and sent them crashing to the counter and then the floor.

The sounds of chaos drew a loud knock and insistent, “Mr. Regal? Do you need some help?”

“No, I don’t need any damn help!” he barked, and he kicked his wastebasket across the room at the door for emphasis.

He needed answers and, as usual, Garden was less than eager to give him a straight one. Paperwork, chain-of-command, and the impenetrable wall of “brothers in arms” met him at each turn. Zack scrubbed at his scalp as he collapsed into his office chair with a deep breath. Patience had never been a strong point in his character, and now that his sister was out of reach behind Garden’s perimeter, his phobia of being out of control drove him to do some things he normally wouldn’t have done so quickly.

Like call in favors.

Zack muttered under his breath and snatched up his phone to punch in a number. “Hey, Dad.

It's me. I got a call from Garden the other day. What about you? Yeah? Yeah. That's all they told me, too. Does Mom know? Good. How'd she take it? Oh, that's good." He ran a hand down his face. "No, I've tried all I can think of. Nothing. I thought maybe you or Mom could try. You're better at the 'charm' than I am." He smirked. "Yeah, Dad. I know. Anyway, I'll be over for dinner tomorrow, but not tonight. I'm going to work late and try some angles. I've got a source or three I haven't called yet. That and I think Desi is hiding something. She's been overly cheerful the past couple days." Chuckling, he nodded. "Yeah, Dad. You, too. Night."

He replaced the receiver and punched the intercom button. "Ronda, send Desi in. Thanks."

He slipped into his attitude of the "don't mess with me" boss and watched the door for Desi's entrance. He could get her to crack in less than 10 minutes, or he was losing his touch. Of course, if he hadn't been so distracted with Garden and Sally he would have called her on her change in attitude sooner, but a man had to have priorities. Now he had a feeling that her change in attitude had everything to do with the source of his distraction. He just had to find the right phrase to get her to confess, as it were.

Reporters hated to confess anything.

Desi tapped and entered the room, holding Zack's gaze as she sat in the chair across from his desk. She appeared ease, which was one of the main reasons she was one of his best anchors; nothing ever seemed to faze her. He doubted she would say it hurt if her hair was on fire.

"You needed something, Zack?"

He retrieved a pen from his desk, it had been a gift from his parents, and tapped a rhythm on the desk blotter. As he regarded her, he admitted that he had no idea how to get her to confess a possible bit of knowledge. She was one of those damn good reporters that held the story close to their chest until they were ready to submit it in its final form. Desi Reynolds had done it more than once since he hired her.

Finally, Zack chucked the pen aside. "Tell me what you know."

One of her eyebrows arched. " 'Know' about what, Zack?"

"The story is yours, Desi, if you tell me what you know. If you don't, I take it and assign it elsewhere. Clear?" The moment her fingers began tapping on her upper arm, Zack knew he had her. "Clear?" he repeated.

"It would be clear," she said, shifting her focus to her manicured nails, "if I knew what the devil you were talking about. Making vague threats about even less specific stories is definitely not the way to run an interview, be it of an employee or not."

Hyne, she wants this story bad. "Desi, you've been rather decent to live with the past few days.

Ever since I received a vague phone call from Dr. Kadowaki at Balamb Garden, in fact. It leads me to believe that the phone call you received, and the phone calls you immediately made, have something to do with the one that I had.” Zack stood, noticing her very slight change in rigidity of body. “But, if you’d rather have me re-assign the story of my sister’s miraculous rise from the land of the sleeping death, by all means. Fitch has been pestering me for the opportunity of a ‘heart-wrenching’ story, and I’m sure this would fill that to a tee. Interviews with sobbing parents have a tendency of doing that.”

Desi shrugged as she also stood, meeting him gaze for gaze. “You’re the manager, Zack. Do what you need to do to make yourself feel better about your lack of information from Garden. I’m sure the Commander won’t press charges for false information. I’ve heard he can be a reasonable fellow.”

Zack regarded her. Why the hell can’t I charm anyone in this damned business? Releasing a quick breath, Zack turned away and motioned to the office door. “Get out.”

She did, closing the door behind her.

Zack collapsed into his chair and stared at the phone, wondering if she based the report of being a “reasonable fellow” on her own experience. “Hell. Why not?” He snatched up the phone and dialed the number for Balamb Garden.

§

Matron sighed as I continued to stare at the ceiling, silent. She visited every day trying to get me to talk. But what was there to talk about? An eight-year long dream trapped in a two-year coma? The life experiences were nothing but shadows. It wasn’t fair.

“You’re right,” Matron said in a quiet voice. “It isn’t fair.”

My throat tightened. With the loss of that other life, I had lost love. But, more than that, I had lost the experiences that answered the question: “Who am I?” I didn’t know what I was going to do to get that identity back. Eight years was a long time.

“Tomorrow will still be there when you’re ready,” Matron reminded.

A silent tear escaped, but I didn’t shift my gaze from the ceiling. Tomorrow didn’t hold any promises for me anymore.

“Each day of your future is blank, waiting to be written—”

“I had written it!” I snapped, the anger flaring as I faced her. “Birthdays, anniversaries, hard times, good times—” I shook my head and looked away, ignoring the tears.

“Until you face this reality and accept it, you won’t be able to move on. If you can’t move on, you can’t step toward what you want.”

I hunched my shoulders to hide the twitch.

Matron stood from the chair to sit on the bed beside me and grip my hands. “Everything is waiting for you to risk that first terrifying step.”

A step I had taken so many times before. But this time he could say he didn’t want to love me. How would I live through that when I had loved him for years, even if it had been a dream? I didn’t want that ending.

“You can’t have the life you want until you risk the step, Sally.”

I looked away, biting my lip to keep from yelling at her. I had taken it once, so who was to say it couldn’t end up the same way?

“You’ve seen a possibility,” she said. “No matter how painful to know it is untrue, now is your opportunity to live life rather than dream what could happen.”

She left the room and I continued to stare at the ceiling. All my hard work to get over my shyness and ask him out, to graduate, to do my job, to make the security station in Winhill work... It was all gone, and now I didn’t know where I stood. Where I belonged. Where I could go... Why would I want to accept this reality?

I didn’t have anything in this one.

Choking on a sudden sob, I covered my face with my hands and cried.

§

Zack tossed his suit-coat onto the couch and slumped down beside it. For the first time in his career in television, he didn’t feel very much like the crack investigative reporter he was touted to be. A week and he couldn’t get beyond the Garden switchboard.

“Dad’s right. I’m going about this all wrong.”

He let his head fall back, his arm draped across his forehead. He had to get his mind to think in the Garden mentality, even if it did rub him the wrong way. The whole idea of having a law within a law made Zack uneasy. How did someone control something like that? How could civilians feel safe when conventions in an organization like Garden surpassed the laws they enforced? They were mercenaries sold to the highest bidder. Kids trained to kill. He had never been partial to the idea of Sally going into that, but his parents had insisted it would be good for building character.

Zack lowered his arm and stared at the ceiling. If he didn’t move beyond his suspicion, he would never get beyond that huge wall to the waiting stories he knew were on the other side. More than that, though, he would never get to Sally.

For the last two years, the doctor had only allowed him and his family to sit with her one time

each month for no more than 30 minutes. His parents had never questioned the order. Whenever Zack had attempted to do so, his parents had objected. Why, he couldn't fathom, other than the possibility that Garden would revoke visiting privileges for some inane reason such as security.

“Bah!”

Pushing himself to his feet, he stalked to the spare bedroom that served as his office away from the office. He sat heavily to stare at the monitor. “Regal, pull your head out of your ass and think of something. Think outside the box of Sal-Gal's coma. Think beyond the ‘brotherhood wall’ and find the way in! The more suspicious you are, the more suspicious they will be of you, and you know that!”

Zack scrubbed at his scalp until it burned. Then he brought up his word processing program and started the draft of a letter addressed to three people: the Headmaster, the Garden Commander, and the Head of Security of Balamb Garden. He had heard rumors of a certain security issue that had affected a Final Exam mission about seven to eight months before. He had heard more rumors that Garden's own attempt to discover information had led to only more questions.

Very similar to the situation in which he found himself with his sister.

“How about a trade, gentlemen,” Zack muttered, his fingers flying over the keyboard as he both typed the first draft and gathered the sources of information he would need to cite in order to grasp and hold their attention. “Just a little taste of what I might be able to offer.”

The civilian world of information always seemed to turn a different way than that of the military, and Zack excelled at using turns to his advantage.

§

It was dark.

It was always dark, though the man could never tell if the darkness was the place, or what was left of his mind. A mind that held every memory like a drug-infected society cast-off clung to the last dregs of the misty high. No, the memories never lasted, but they remained clear enough to overpower the sucking and pushing that seemed to hover just within his ability to control.

He never lost control.

He never screamed.

He never pleaded.

Never.

That was what they wanted, and so it was the one thing he never gave them. The one part he never surrendered. The one memory of a self that he always found; one that burned the brightest when all others were as dark and silent as those he could feel near but never hear or see.

It was just too dark.

Always too dark.