

Nine

~ Losing the Memorable ~

Zell glared at the door of the infirmary for at least half a class period. He couldn't make himself go through the doors, afraid that he would make the library girl get that weird look again. It twisted him up inside when he saw that look. He punched his palm and strode for the Training Center. But even after another half a class period, he still felt off kilter, and that pissed him off.

He fisted his hands as he lumbered around the main corridor, grumbling under his breath as he tried to figure what to do.

"A word, spike-boy."

Zell cringed before turning to watch the elder Regal sibling approach. Zack looked about to spit fire. Oh man... He must have stopped by the infirmary. "Don't let him get to you, Dincht. You're a SeeD. Suck it up," he muttered. Zell forced a smile. "Hey, Zack. How're things?"

Zack didn't speak until he was nearly toe-to-toe with the scrapper. "Mind explaining my baby sister's condition to me, spike-boy?"

"I don't know, Zack. She had a minor flip when I pulled out a Triad deck."

"Can I see them?"

"They're in my space."

Zack gestured toward the dorms and Zell reluctantly led the way. In his room, Zell retrieved the deck from his desk and handed them over. Zack sifted through while sending Zell occasional glances.

He handed the deck back. "What did you try?"

"Try? What are you talking about?"

"She starts crying and you don't try anything?" Zack scoffed.

Annoyance started redlining to temper. "Of course I tried something. I couldn't just let her sit there crying. When I tried, she told me to leave. So I left. What'd you want me to do? Force myself on her!"

"Talking about it would have been recommended."

"Oh, yeah. That'd been great. She looks like she's gonna hurl and you want me to talk about it?" Zell scoffed. "She asked me to go, so I went. Just back off from Sally about me, okay? I'm not gonna jump her or whatever hell else you think I'm going to do. I like her. Back off a step or two and quit thinking I'm plotting to jack the girl. If you should be worrying about anyone it's Marshal, ass

who thinks he's Hyne's gift. He's the one that got her that damn bunny, not me. And that pisses me off because she loves it to pieces. And just so you know, I'm getting her a bigger one!"

"Dincht. Chill."

"Like hell. I'm sick and tired of being pushed around and I'm not going to take it anymore."

"I thought I'd be able to push for a few more weeks."

Zell leaned back in his typical fashion, face twisted in confusion. "Wha?"

"You think I want some wuss-ass pansy dating my sister who can't even stand up to me?" Zack pressed a finger hard into Zell's chest. "When you date my sister, her protection is your responsibility. If you can't take me, you can't take on that responsibility."

The scrapper shoved Zack's hand away. "So you got a choco-feather up your ass to push my buttons?" He fisted his hands to keep from clocking the guy. "We're not even dating!"

"That makes me a jackass, a prick, and a lot of other things, sure," Zack admitted, "but I don't trust you, Dincht. Mostly because I don't like the idea of anyone going after my somewhat naive sister. She's sweetness itself, always thinks the best of everyone, and has a tendency of getting herself hurt. That and she had a past history with you."

"Pas—"

"Let me finish. You seem to be a good guy. I've asked around, done some research, and most of what I hear is good. You've a tendency of being a prankster and a social klutz, but you're only 19. You've got some years to grow yet."

Zell frowned.

"You don't have an uncontrollable temper, which is good, because that's what I've been trying to set off for the past few weeks. I expected you to clock me a couple times, but you didn't. Next time, though, call me on the shit I pull. You don't and I'll walk all over you until you do." He extended a hand. "Can I see that deck again?"

"Wha? Oh. Sure." Zell handed it over. "Seriously. That's all that happened. She saw this and freaked."

"Do you remember what card was up?"

"I had them face down because I was going to let her pick some of my cards to add to hers. I've got some really good ones and she's got crap. Marshal found her deck in her desk on the second floor."

Zack shook his head and handed the deck back. "I don't like it that these fantasies of hers are causing such havoc. Dr. Levinne and Matron have already discussed the possibility of terminating her enrollment here because of it."

“They can’t do that!”

“I agree with you. The reaction would likely make things worse for Sally rather than better, but they’ve mentioned it more than once as a possibility.”

Zell scrubbed at the back of his neck. “Dude...”

“There’s always room for her at the shop, or in the research department at the TV station, but losing the opportunities here... I don’t know.”

“What should we do?”

“I don’t believe there’s anything to be done. Dr. Levinne and Dr. Kadowaki will make recommendations. It doesn’t matter if Sally, you, or I don’t agree with them. Of course, with her reaction to those cards... Now I’m not so sure I disagree as much as I did before.”

“You can’t be serious! We can’t let them flush her career with Garden just because the docs are too scared to put her to the test!”

Zack bristled as he glared down at Zell. “And if that test sends her back into a catatonic state? What then, Dincht? Two more years asleep, or maybe more? You really want to do that to her? I don’t.”

“Hell no I don’t want to, but I don’t want her flushed, either! She wants to be SeeD. Don’t take that away from her.”

“If being SeeD means she might slip away from her family and friends again, I’m not letting her do that. If the doctors say ‘terminate enrollment’, I won’t say ‘no’ to my dad. I would rather have Sally up and around hating me than asleep in that damn room for another lifetime.”

“She’s tougher than you think,” Zell said. “You guys should be pushing her forward not back.” With that, he stalked out of his room, leaving the door gaping open.

Zack stared after him before retrieving a mini-disc labeled ‘A Different Daydream’ from the back pocket of his jeans. Each day he met with her in the infirmary he was beginning to see how it had changed her. For the better. Maybe Dincht’s right? But the risk of losing her again, and this time permanently, kept kicking at him. She was his baby sister.

He always protected her, even while she was studying here – though she never knew.

Shrugging, he tucked the disc back into his pocket and headed out of the dorms and to the main portion of Garden. There was a small meeting and, unfortunately, he didn’t have time to sort out Sally’s future.

SO Beita beckoned from the lift. “You’re needed on the lower level, sir.”

“The lower level, you say? This building has a basement?”

SO Beita twisted his key and pressed the appropriate code, initiating the lift to close its doors

and purr downward. "Security Center."

"Security Center! My security clearance seems to be rising." SO Beita didn't respond, however, Zack did notice a glance. "Question?"

"No question, sir."

"Soldiers that don't have questions don't send sidelong glances."

"No question, sir. Just thanks."

"Thanks, is it? For what am I thanked?"

The lift stopped, but the door didn't open. "For giving us the tools to bring one of our own home."

Zack smirked. "Truth be told, SO Beita, I began the ordeal as a way to get in to see my sister. Garden is self-sufficient, with exception to one item: finesse research. Without the dangle of that carrot, Sal-Gal continued to be held away from me."

SO Beita's expression grew taut before he focused on the control panel and turned his key. The lift doors opened. "I understand that, sir."

"SO Beita, one question."

"Yes, sir?"

"Well, perhaps more than one question."

SO Beita smirked. "Yes, sir?"

"You seem a capable sort. Why did you stop your plot against Galbadia Garden?"

"Someone special helped me see it wasn't what I wanted." With that, he stepped from the lift and motioned deeper within the construction. "After you, sir."

"Naturally." Zack regarded the young man's profile. Dincht referenced SO Beita and Sally, didn't he? Something about a pink bunny? Hm. "Women. They start wars and cease others."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I hope she is worth the trouble. Most often, the first six months are best. Stretch out much further and you've an expectation of trouble."

SO Beita chuckled but didn't offer any information.

"Let me know if you and the lady would have use of Timber Wolves tickets. Season Ticket holder."

The two stopped outside a sturdy door, which SO Beita unlocked with a swipe of his key. "Yes, sir."

Zack smirked and let himself into the conference room. "Thank you for the conversation, SO Beita. Enlightening as usual."

SO Beita saluted and shut the door.

“Interesting character,” Zack mumbled.

“Mr. Regal.”

Zack turned, offering a greeting nod to Cmdr. Squall, Lt. Eryn, and Lt. Cmdr. Serra from the Centra Agency. “Greetings, all. Kept you waiting again, I see.”

“No more than what we’re used to,” Eryn offered.

“Touché.” Zack sat in the first available chair. “So, now that you’ve found the man that can lead you to your other man, what do you need with me? I’m just in it for the story, not glory.”

“Garden doesn’t have your network of information,” Squall said, “and we need that tie if we’re going to continue our search. There is no guarantee we will get the informant.”

“And there’s no guarantee he will talk, right?”

The SeeD nodded.

Eryn leaned forward, attracting Zack’s attention from across the table. “We’ll do our duty, what you call ‘glory,’ and bring that bastard in for questioning. But, we need you and Serra to keep at the information retrieval. We can call in trackers; I know the best in the business. But you can call in favors that will reveal the who and where.”

“I’m happy to do it, of course,” Zack said. “I’ll pull out all the stops if I’m allowed to witness the interrogation.”

Eryn sent Squall a quick glance. “We’ll need to take that under advisement,” Squall said.

“Concerned the civilian populace won’t understand the means that are necessary?”

“Civvies never understand,” Eryn grumbled, arms crossed.

“Excuse me.” Serra stood, her green eyes sharp and her tone calm. “We should stay on topic here, that being the discovery and retrieval of Seifer Almasy. We have the location of the man responsible for Candidate Almasy’s ambush. So, we should focus on the best tactic to retrieve him. Everything else will settle itself.”

Zack chuckled. “Three cheers for the new kid.”

“Lt. Dwyre, you say you have the best tracker on staff. You should have him report here as soon as possible. I have a feeling that more will be revealed than simply the location of a traitor.”

§

Zell tapped on Selphie’s door. “Please be here,” he mumbled. Though she could still be pissed from before.

The door opened to reveal Selphie in sweats and a sweatshirt. She wrinkled her nose. “Hey,

Zell. Come on in.”

“Thanks.” He stepped past, shoving his hands deep into his pockets as he turned to watch her close the door.

“What do you need, Zell?”

“Are you still mad?”

“If you don’t know why I’m mad, then yes.”

“So you’ll get madder if I ask? That’s not fair!”

“What isn’t fair, Zell, is you.” She sat cross-legged on her small couch.

“Why!”

Selphie waved a hand. “It wouldn’t make any sense to you, so I won’t take the time to explain.

What do you want?”

Zell frowned. “Tch, c’mon! You’re just saying that to piss me off.”

“Do you blame me?”

“Yes, because I don’t know what the hell I did!”

“Wrong answer.” Selphie shifted her focus out the window and tightly crossed her arms.

“Dude.” Zell slumped onto the couch beside her. “Selph, c’mon. You’re the only one who ever puts up with me, and now you’re pissed. Give me a break. What did I do?”

“We were going out, weren’t we?”

“Yeah, what’s that got to do with it? No one else wants to hang with me.”

She frowned at him. “Going out doesn’t mean ‘hang with’, Zell.”

“Wha?”

“Boyfriend. Girlfriend. Hand holding. Kissing. Wasn’t that where we were going?”

Zell’s face twisted in consternation. “I like hanging out with you and stuff. You’re cool and stuff. You know?”

“And stuff. Great.” She shrugged and rolled her eyes. “Should have known that, I guess. This is you we’re talking about.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means nothing, Zell. Just a reason.”

“Um...ookay.”

She lifted her shoulders in a sigh and shook her head. “Nothing. Never mind. It’s gone. Over. Whatever.”

“What is?”

“Exactly.” She faced him. “So, what can I do for you, Zell?”

Confusion colored his blue eyes for a long moment before he shrugged it off. “Can I have one of your stuffed animals?”

“You what?”

“I want one of your stuffed animals. A big one. A rabbit or something.”

Selphie stared at him for a long, silent moment before bursting with laughter.

“It’s not for me! It’s for Sally because I found out that Marshal gave her that bunny thing. I can’t let him up me like that! She loves that thing, and I thought I should get her something better. I’d go to town and get one, but I’ve got an evening class and won’t have the time until tomorrow. But what if Marshal gives her something else? He’s been hanging around the infirmary and asking after her. She’s all confused and stuff about me, so what if... what if...” He stood. “Oh forget it.”

“Zell, wait.” Selphie pulled him back onto the couch. “I didn’t expect you to ask for a stuffed toy. The thought of you carrying a big stuffed thing of cuteness past all those SeeD and candidates....”

“Better than Marshal hanging all over her,” he said. “The guy’s being a jerk.”

“Just because he’s nice to her doesn’t make him a jerk! It’s not his fault you’re jealous.”

Zell scoffed. Marshal was better with girls than him. If he went after the library girl... the hell!

“Stop moping. Geez. But, as a matter of fact, I picked up the cutest thing the other day. I was at that little market, and it was the only one. It was such a good deal and so adorable...” Her voice muffled as she went back to her room, fading back in as she reappeared holding a stuffed Tonberry about the size of a dog. Instead of the usual lantern, it carried a basket of silk flowers – which had a miniature cactuar in the middle – and it held a single flower instead of the usual knife.

“Sweet! A Tonberry!”

“They usually have that creepy look, with those glowing eyes and dirty robe? But doesn’t this one have the cutest shy expression. And the robe has some kind of flowers stitched around the bottom.” Selphie snuggled against it before handing it to him. “He’s so cute and soft! I thought about giving it to Sally as a ‘get well soon.’ But you can give it to her instead, I guess.”

“Thanks, Selph! This rocks!” He left the room before hearing her reply, not even taking the time to close the door after him.

Instead, he hurried down the hall of the dorm toward the infirmary. Anyone that sent him a weird look or laughed a comment about the doll received a rude gesture in return. At the infirmary, he took the time to straighten his uniform, slicking back his hair and checking his spike in the reflection of the door before pushing through– and stepping into Marshal.

Marshal glared as he straightened his uniform. “What are you doing here?”

“It’s a free Garden. I can go where I want.”

“Don’t you ever have a class?”

“Don’t you ever...erm...don’t you ever shut up!”

Marshal scoffed. “Dincht, if you ask her out, I swear I will hurt you.”

“It’s none of your damn business what I do, Beita.”

“It is if she’s involved.”

“Tch! What’d you say?!”

“Think about it for a moment or three, Dincht,” Marshal said, and his tone matched the dangerous gleam of his silver-blue eyes. “Why the hell would I be threatening to do harm if you asked a sweet thing like Sally Regal out on a date? I mean, what the hell am I thinking? Everyone and their senile dog knows that you two are an item—oh wait. Something seems to be wrong with that statement. Hm. Oh yeah! I remember.” He leaned forward, pushing a finger hard into Zell’s chest. “You didn’t care, I always have. You didn’t do a damn thing, so I did.”

Zell’s gaze blanked.

“That’s right, Dincht. I asked her out the week before that damn T-Rexaur took a bite, and you know what? She said ‘yes’. So what does that make what you’re about to do? Encroachment, maybe?”

“If you two are... then why the hell is she paying attention to me? Huh? I think you’re full of shit, Beita-Dawg, and I’m damn well going to prove it!”

Marshal’s glare would have given an ordinary man pause. “Dincht. You watch your step around Sally or you will find your face on the other side of your head.” Then he did an about-face and stalked away.

Zell sent a rude gesture his direction and then slammed into the infirmary. He heard a soft sniff and peeked around the partially drawn curtain, hiding the Tonberry behind his back. “Knock-knock.” Beita made her cry? ...the hell?!

Sally looked up and brushed the tears from her cheeks. “Hi.” She offered a hesitant smile.

“Can I come in?”

“Sure.”

Zell stepped around the curtain, doing his best to keep the Tonberry completely hidden. “You doing okay?”

She nodded again, lowering her focus to the little pink bunny in her lap.

...the hell.... He hated that rabbit. “Want to talk about it at all?”

She shook her head while nuzzling the bunny. That action sent Zell’s temper solar. He

clenched his jaw and then lowered himself into the chair beside her bed. He drew the Tonberry from behind his back. "I got you something."

When Sally lifted her gaze, her smile brightened. "He's so cute! Where'd you find him?"

"Secret." Yeah. Like he'd confess he got it from Selphie. Tch!

Sally gave the Tonberry a hug. When she pulled back, she focused on the basket of flowers. "A cute little cactuar! Look at him, he's so tiny!"

Zell couldn't stop smiling. Rock on, Dincht. You owe Selphie, big.

Then Sally set the Tonberry and cactuar carefully down and shifted to give Zell a tight hug. "Thank you, Zell."

"Hey. You're welcome. I felt bad about before, and I never know what to do when it happens, and that made me feel worse, so..." Dincht, shut up!

She pulled away, her gaze focused on the Tonberry and the bunny. While Zell hoped she picked up the Tonberry, she didn't. In fact, she didn't pick up either of them. Instead, she rested a hand on each animal's head. "I wish I could tell you."

"Well, why cantcha?"

"Because it doesn't matter. It never happened, and Dr. Levinne doesn't want me to keep thinking about them."

"Them' what? The coma memories?"

She sighed. "Yes. Those. They were only dreams, not memories."

"If they were dreams, you'll forget eventually, wontcha? I never remember my dreams."

She gave a slight nod. "I've already forgotten so many things already," she mumbled.

Zell shuffled his feet and sent a glance over his shoulder. "So, I guess you're kinda weirded out with Marshal, not knowing if you guys were...you know, going out."

She didn't say anything. Her hand only caressed the top of the bunny's head.

Dincht, you jack ass! "So, you wanna do some workout stuff, or did you wanna wheel around the Garden some?"

"Can we... can we get out of here, please? I need to get out."

"Sure we can. Let me get your stuff." Zell tossed her the sweatshirt and sweatpants and then closed the curtain. I'll ask her out, Beita-Dawg. Just watch me. He just had to work up to it.

§

Eryn stared at the blank computer screen, her head propped up by her hand at her chin. All of their hopes had finally been confirmed, Seifer Almasy was alive, and they were now one step closer to

finding him. She would finally have the chance to lead the retrieval they had all planned for so long.

Eryn had to admit to herself that she was dying to meet the somewhat infamous Seifer Almasy. Ever since the day he had taken control of Galbadia, her Garden, under Sorceress Edea's wing, she had been curious about him. She almost had to admire him. It took a special kind of person to rally an entire Garden to engage another of its own in combat...No small task.

Before she came to Balamb, Eryn had been in security at Galbadia, Special Operations. While she had been good at what she did there, she didn't see herself in security forever. Instead, Eryn had moved on to teaching both Battle Theory and History at Galbadia before becoming a student advisor. When Quistis Trepe declined the head of instruction position at Balamb, Eryn was able to transfer. Her skills from her former position proved useful on more than one occasion at Balamb, but she was always anxious to return to her students.

Eryn continued staring into the blank monitor, already planning who she wanted on her teams, what their functions would be, silently weighing the pros and the cons in her mind. The last step before the retrieval of the informant was verification of all the information received. She was still hesitant to put all of her faith in Zack Regal and his source, so she decided a small team would be best. First to be sent to Seifer's last known location. Then they would proceed to the location of the man who had started this hell.

They would need a tracker, a SeeD with the ability to disappear...Someone who could work quickly while still being a strong leader. There was only one man she'd consider; the best tracker in the entire Garden network, and her best friend: Jaxon Crest.

Eryn picked up the phone and dialed the number to Trabia, absently tapping the eraser end of her pencil on her desk as she waited for the call to connect. "Lt. Crest please. This is Lt. Dwyre calling from Balamb."

"One moment, please, Lieutenant," the operator said. While she listened to the hideous hold music, she couldn't help but smile a bit. She hadn't seen Jaxon in over a year, it would be like old times again.

The two had met when Eryn went to Trabia Garden as part of her rotation before proceeding to Balamb. They became fast friends and spent many a cold night huddled around a warm bottle of whiskey. There was not a soul on the planet she trusted more than him, and he was perfect for this job.

"TGS. Crest speaking."

"Jaxon, didn't the operator tell you it was me?"

"No, she didn't. How's it goin, E?" She could hear the smile in his greeting. It wasn't much of a

nick name, but Jaxon had called her “E” since the day they met.

“Fine, fine. I have a request and wanted to ask you first.” She tried to sound serious, at least for a moment.

He hesitated. “Go ahead, what’s up?”

“We’re going to get the one responsible for the Seifer Almasy ambush. Things have just... exploded in the last 48 hours. We have an informant from Centra, but we need visual confirmation. I want you on the advance team. You’re the best tracker SeeD has.”

“I am?”

Eryn chuckled. “Well, that’s what I’m telling anyone who asks.”

“Alright, I’ll do it. When do you need me?”

She glanced up at the clock hanging on the wall above her door, “How ‘bout tonight? I won’t be able to greet you, but I’ll tell Dincht you’re coming in.”

“Eryn, short notice like this always sends my superior into a tailspin, especially since the man is in traction.” He hesitated again. “But you know what, I don’t care. This sounds like an adventure and I’ve been looking for one of those lately.”

“Good, get packed and on the next transport to Balamb. I’ll see you at 0800 in the morning, Commander Leonhart’s office.” She flipped on her computer and waited for it to boot.

“Are we going to have time to go carousing? Or is this trip a test of my sobriety?”

She chuckled, “Oh. Trust me. We’ll have time. The OP is only supposed to take one day. I’ve got your temp transfer set for seven.” She typed the needed information into the transfer request.

“Eryn, I think I love you.”

“Whatever, Jaxon.” she said with a laugh. “You don’t love me, you love my signature on forms that get you out of that frozen popsicle stand.”

“What do you mean? I love Trabia. It’s so... cold... here.” He began humming the Trabia Garden song.

“Yeah, right. I’m going to transfer this request, you go pack.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good boy. See ya soon.”

“Bye, E.”

Eryn sat at her desk for only a moment more to finish her friend’s transfer papers before she jumped up and sped towards security.

Seifer Almary glared up at the sun. It glared back.

“Are you kidding me?” he grumbled as he trudged on. Lost in the middle of a desert, the taste of freedom began to sour.

“Survival lessons. Yeah. That’s what I’ll do. I’ll take effin survival lessons. No. No, I’ll stay awake during those effin lessons.” Swiping up a rock from the sand, he chucked it hard. “Puberty boy better be busting his ass to get me out of this god forsaken shit hole, or so help me Hyne I’ll hand his ass to his face.” Seifer chuckled. “That’s damn funny. I’ll have to tell Raijin that one—”

He stumbled and went down, the sand scorching his hand. “God damn it!” Blowing on his palm as he staggered to his feet, he sent the sun another furious glance.

It glared back.

“When I get back to Garden,” he said with a shake of fist, “I’m going to put a missile right in your smug pie-hole.” Chortling to himself, Seifer Almary trudged on. “That’s damn funny.”