

Prologue

~ Time ~

“Zell!”

The spike-haired blond twitched. He looked up from his tray of hot dogs and stack of written tests to the SeeD approaching at a run. “What?” he asked around a mouth full of hot dog.

“We just got a report of a pair of rogue T-Rexaurs that broke free. They’re attacking a trio of junior classmen!”

Zell choked down his bite as he stood. “What?”

“Squall and Selphie are there getting them out, but with no junctions—”

“Shit!” Zell sprinted out of the cafeteria, the SeeD keeping pace beside. “Anyone hurt?”

“I don’t know. Squall said there was a candidate who took the brunt of the attack; she threw herself in front of the kids and took the T on with just a quarterstaff.” The SeeD sent Zell a sidelong glance. “It was the library girl.”

Zell’s shoes made a screeching sound on the cold flooring of the Balamb Garden hallway. “...the hell?” He took off, almost not making it around the corner into the main corridor of the training center. When he dove into the main section of the T.C. beyond the metal double-doors, he could hear the fight: Squall barking orders, Selphie ordering the lower-level SeeD back– A thunderous growl rumbled and Zell dove forward.

He heard the report of Squall’s gunblade followed by the pain-filled roar of the T-Rexaur. “Squall! Shout out! Where are ya?!”

“Here! Selphie, get down– Look out!!”

Another collection of roars thundered, the T-Rexaurs’ rampaging steps shaking the ground. Zell retrieved some sharper rocks on his way deeper into the T.C.. Then he rounded the corner, using the forward inertia as he hurled the rocks at the T-Rexaur lowering its head for a snap at the petite form covering the crying junior classman. Both projectiles hit the T square. It lifted its head and growled in pain, blood spurting from its eye.

Squall charged forward and slashed at the area behind its leg, slicing the critical ligaments that supported the huge frame. The T-Rexaur staggered and fell, Squall hurrying forward to submerge his blade deep into its brain. It thrashed and then went still.

The other charged–straight into a hail of gunfire from SeeD security. It moaned and growled, roaring before it turned tail and fled deeper into the training center, leaving destruction in its wake.

Zell charged toward the girl everyone called “the library girl”, skidding to his knees beside her. He eased her body away from the junior classmen, staring with wide eyes at the bloody mess of her uniform. “Shit.” The torn flesh of the candidate’s back and shoulder caused a heave of nausea. “Squall...” He looked to his friend as Squall dropped to one knee at her other side. “Dude, she’s messed up.”

“She’s still breathing.” Squall motioned to Zell with a lift of his chin as he stood, the scar on his face taut with his frown. “Come on. Let’s get her to the infirmary. Hurry.”

Zell lifted her into his arms and hurried from the T.C. after Squall.

§

Zell bolted from his seat outside the infirmary doors as the doctor stepped out. Squall stood more slowly, as did Selphie. “Is she going to be OK?” Zell asked, stepping forward.

“It’s too soon to tell, Mr. Dinct. She’s lost a lot of blood. We were able to save her arm, though she will have a lot of scarring on her left shoulder and upper back near her left scapulae, even with the skin grafts. We won’t know about trauma to her spine until later. There is no swelling. No internal bleeding, either.” Dr. Kadowaki shook her head and sighed. “Other than that, it’s too soon to tell.”

Zell looked down. “Oh.”

Squall sent the doctor a small smile. “Thanks, doctor. Keep us informed, will you?”

“Of course.” She bowed and then turned to enter back into the infirmary.

Selphie came to stand beside Zell, hugging his arm as she rested a cheek against it. “She’ll be OK, Zelly.”

Moving to his other side, Squall gripped his friend’s shoulder.

§

Zell poked his head around the doors of the infirmary. “Doc?”

Dr. Kadowaki lifted her focus from her desk and the medical charts she reviewed. “Hello, Zell. What can I do for you?”

“She wake up yet?”

“Ah. No. I’m afraid not.”

He stepped fully into the infirmary. “But it’s been a month!” he protested. “I thought she was gonna wake up weeks ago. Isn’t she doing better?”

“Technically, yes. Otherwise... I’m afraid I couldn’t say.”

“Huh?”

Dr. Kadowaki smiled. “She’s doing better, Zell. Healing. That’s all you need to concern yourself with right now. So, if you would like, you can step in and see her sometime next week. Right now, she’s resting.”

“Resting? But she sleeps all the time!”

“We had to perform a little surgery to relieve pressure again.”

Zell cringed.

“The procedure wasn’t invasive,” the doctor assured, “but due to her past injury during the Galbadia Garden attack, I would rather no one bother her for a while. All right?”

Zell sent a glance toward one of the curtained-off rooms and then tucked his hands into the back pockets of his jeans and headed out of the infirmary. “Thanks, Doc!” he called.

Dr. Kadowaki stepped away, smiling as she shook her head and looked over the chart once more.

§

“Zell Dinct!”

Zell sharply stood and turned to meet the stern expression of Dr. Kadowaki as she stood with hands on hips at the foot of the bed. “H-hey, Doc.”

“And just what are you doing in here, young man?”

“W-well, I w-was just kinda... erm...” He cleared his throat and sent a glance to the young woman sleeping in the bed. “I only wanted to see how she was doing, and if she’d woke up at all,” he mumbled.

“Mr. Dinct, my patients always do fine, and with no help from you. Now get out of here and let me do my job before I lose my patience!”

“Oh, come on!” Zell complained. “I’m not doing anything but sitting here telling her about the fight at Ultimecia’s castle and stuff. What can it hurt?”

Dr. Kadowaki’s right eyebrow lifted. “And how many hours have you been here, Mr. Dinct?”

Flushing, Zell lowered his gaze and kicked at the linoleum. “Two.”

“Visiting times are limited to 30 minutes, and you know that.”

Zell once more focused on the doctor. “Come on, Doc! I’m almost done!”

Dr. Kadowaki pointed to the door. “Out, Mr. Dinct. And don’t let me catch you in here longer than 30 minutes again.”

“Aw, man,” Zell muttered. He stalked from the infirmary and down the corridor toward the main area of Balamb Garden. “I was just talkin’, sheesh. The hell’s wrong with that?”

“What’s the matter with you, Zelly?”

Zell looked up and smiled at Selphie who watched him with green eyes full of curiosity. “Hey, Selph. Just got kicked out of the infirmary.”

Selphie laughed. “Again? That’s the third time this month.”

Grimacing, Zell nodded. “Dude! I know! You’d think I was sucking her blood or something the way they kick me outta there!”

Taking him by the arm, she led him toward the cafeteria. “There, there, Zelly. Let’s go get some hot dogs. You can tell me how she’s doin’ while you eat.”

Zell grinned. “Booya!”

§

“Hey, Zell. How’s it goin?”

Zell glanced toward the voice. His buddy from the infirmary sent a wave. “Hey, Elton.” Then he wrestled his focus back to the stack of papers surrounding him in the commons area of the main corridor.

“So, yeah, like, all of a sudden she sat up and asked for the doctor!” Elton told the female SeeD to his right. “She sounded a bit weird but who wouldn’t? I mean, she’s been asleep for, how long?”

At the word ‘asleep’, Zell bolted to his feet, his papers scattering. “She’s awake?”

Elton turned. “What? Oh, yeah. The library girl’s awake. She sat up and talked as if nothing but a day or two went by.”

Zell threw his red pen and dove down the corridor toward the infirmary. “This is so wickedly cool!” Rounding the corner on a slide, Zell missed Selphie by a fraction. “She’s awake, she’s awake!” he bellowed as he continued on, this time stepping backwards as he gestured toward Selphie. “Go tell Squall!”

Selphie bobbed her head to the affirmative and took off at a sprint.

Zell faced forward in time to keep from bowling over a trio of candidates, did a fancy hop/skip/jump around them, and continued toward the infirmary at a sprint.