

## 1: Day One

"Hey, Sally."

I raised my eyes from the book I wasn't reading to smile softly at the pair of candidates entering the Training Center of Balamb Garden. "Hi."

Then they moved on, busy with their own lives of boys and adventure, and the occasional stop at the library to study. I sighed, shifting my eyes back to 'reading' - I don't remember what the book was - in time to watch the 5' 5" man with the spiked blonde hair and unique facial tattoo demonstrate his 'Booya' to the many students of his class.

I rested my chin on my hand with an absent smile as I adjusted the book in my hold to hide my 'stare'. *He's so cute.* And he always looked as if he had a lot of fun, too. Although he never viewed his responsibilities at Garden as a joke. At least, not that I could tell. And I'd never built up the nerve to actually have a lengthy conversation with him, mostly just posting a 'be careful and good luck' on Garden's message board. Or a 'happy birthday'.

He almost never came into the library, either. With him and the Commander being such close friends? No, he never really had the time for that. Teaching at Garden kept him busy, too. Sometimes it seemed he barely had any free time at all, although I had seen him once or twice in the cafeteria when he'd just missed out on the hot dogs for that day.

I stifled a giggle as I lowered my book and eyes. "Poor Zell," I said quietly.

I'd saved Zell a whole tray-full one time, some time after the second Sorceress War. Unfortunately, the thought of actually going up to him - Zell Dincht! - had made me run to the bathroom suffering from a panic attack. *It's not fair. If he came into the library and asked me for help with something - like he and Squall and Rinoa did when the Garden had been in chaos*

- *I wouldn't be such a noodle head*-- Well, at least not as much - but it was Zell, and I was only a librarian. I seemed to do so much better from the sidelines, hiding in the background.

I wrinkled my nose as I raised my eyes-- class was dismissed and Zell approached!

My eyes widened and I gasped. Then I quickly stood from the somewhat newly placed stone within the grassy patch just outside the main section of the Training Center and gathered my books and jacket. *Why didn't you notice his duffel by the tree*-- My bag slipped from my shoulder, causing books and notebooks to tumble. *Oh no! Not now!* I knelt, hurriedly stuffing and shoving - all the while hearing his shoes scrunching the rock and dirt and grass--

"You missed one."

A shadow fell over me as I gathered those sadistic books. "I see it," I whispered as I reached out. "Thank you."

"No prob." Zell moved to the tree and picked up his duffel, slinging it over his shoulder as easy as anything. "See ya."

Then I watched him saunter off, one hand in his pocket and one on the strap of his duffel as he whistled a jazzy tune. I sighed, the books and notebooks forgotten. "Zell Dincht, will you go out with me?" I whispered.

If I lived in a perfect world, he'd say 'yes' when I actually asked him that. *But I don't, so he won't. Especially since I won't ask.* I shook my head, redistributing the books and notebooks in a less haphazard manner. Then, I heaved the bag onto my shoulder and left the Training Center.

It wasn't that I thought Zell was stuck up, or that he only went for girls with 'bodacious bods'. No. That wasn't it at all. I'd seen all the girls he hung out with - Rinoa, Selphie, Quistis, and even Xu on a rare occasion - and they were all so different. Of course, he wasn't really... well, Zell didn't strike me -- no pun intended -- as the kind that even noticed when and if a girl liked him 'that' way. He was Zell. Pleasant. Outgoing. Open.

Serious about his duty there at Garden. Maybe a little clueless about some things, *but that's what I like about him. He's real. Not afraid to be himself.*

I, on the other hand... Well, I didn't like tough situations. Non-confrontational I guess is what you'd call me. Rinoa had said Squall was the same way, but I didn't believe her. The Commander seemed to care about everyone and everything. He did so good in tough squeezes. Sort of like Zell.

I shook my head as I turned into the corridor leading to the library. I only left my post when Zell had class in the Training Center. I did my best to watch all of them, taking breaks and lunches at the right times to see the middle or end. That had been the norm for me since he had returned from defeating Sorceress Ultimecia and taken the exam for his Instructor license: three years ago. *I guess I'm a stalker.* The thought was almost funny. Shy little Sally Regal a stalker of Zell Dincht. SeeD. Sorceress Slayer. Hero.

The worst thing being I knew he didn't have a clue.

I placed my bag on the counter of the check-out desk. "I'm back, Val. Thanks for covering."

A tall blonde dressed in the Instructor/SeeD uniform of black, burgundy, and gold came from behind the book stacks. "Val had to go to the infirmary. Bad migraine. I covered."

I flushed, clearing my throat as I self-consciously began to unpack my bag. "Oh... Thanks, Instructor Treppe. I appreciate it."

"It wasn't hard. I remember working here when I was a candidate. Brought back memories."

I logged into the Garden's computer. "Well, thanks again." I started checking in the returned books, very aware she was still there. It made me nervous.

Quistis leaned her arms against the counter. "So, how long have you been watching Zell's class?"

I know I blushed beet red, but I'd gotten good at acting nonchalant in spite of it. I

shrugged. "Never counted. The Training Center's the closest place to the library that has fresh air. It's good to get away."

"Uh-huh. Right." She pointed at me. "You go there every day, Sally. You watch his class as much as you can, and then you high-tail it."

I checked the library's bulletin board, bringing my face closer to the computer screen as I tried to decipher some typonese in a posting. "I do get a break and a lunch every day I work." I softly smiled. The posting was a request from Zell for some specific books on combat. I ordered them from Trabia and Galbadia Gardens via the network and put a rush on it.

"Sure you do, but do you work every day?"

"Of course not," I said, still calm and quiet. I went to the next posting. "I'm not a bookworm." *Although I have been accused of that once or twice.*

"But you're in the Training Center every day."

I released a deep breath, sending another book-order request before meeting the Instructor's blue gaze. "I'm still a SeeD candidate at the age of 19, Instructor Treppe. Why wouldn't I be in the Training Center every day? If I don't pass before my birthday and get a job here, I have to leave." I couldn't do that to my parents, failing after all these years.

I had to prove I could do this.

"Hm," she said as she pushed back from the counter. She crossed her arms, tapping her fingers against one arm as she suspiciously regarded me. "Fine. I guess that's true enough." Quistis headed toward the exit. "Let me know if you need help." She paused at the door to send me a meaningful look. "With anything."

"Thanks. I appreciate it." *But I'm okay.* Maybe if Zell had started paying attention to me after the victory celebration three years before things would have been different, but...

She gave me a 'yeah, right' expression before disappearing into the corridor. I

turned back to the computer just as it chirped with an instant message window from one of the instructor terminals. I blinked. The ID# and log-on was Zell's.

**BOOYABOY:** bks com yet?

I blinked again before lifting shaking fingers to the keyboard.

**BALAMB\_LIBRARIAN:** I placed a rush on the order, but I only just received the request. I'll be sure to notify you when they come in.

**BOOYABOY:** o duh. thnx.

I smiled. **BALAMB\_LIBRARIAN:** You're welcome.

He logged off.

I giggled under my breath with a shake of my head as I pulled my textbooks closer. The previous day I hadn't been so cheery. I'd actually been pouting. Pouting didn't accomplish much I knew, but I'd done it just the same.

Val had been out with a full-fledged migraine the whole day, so I hadn't been able to leave the desk. As Zell's first afternoon class began, I'd been stranded in the library with my tuna-fish sandwich as my only company.

I'd moaned about how it wasn't fair, but I'd also known it wasn't anyone's fault but mine for being so anal. So, I'd just tucked my sandwich back into its box and started logging in the books received or returned from other Gardens or students. Like usual, barely anyone was in the library - maybe one person using a study booth in the back - and I'd been left to the task of amusing myself while keeping busy. I'd already dusted, organized, straightened, and refilled all the books used that morning. All I'd had left were five books returned by a student on their way to Zell's class.

All of two minutes work.

I knew there'd been no reason for my boredom, especially not with exams coming up, so I'd retreated to the book stacks and started studying the Fire Cavern. I even believed I had a shot at passing this time. Instructor Tilmitt did, too. All I had to remember was not

to waste time on the cave inhabitants. The fight with Ifrit was the important part. I'd been close a couple times, but I knew that didn't count.

The book on the Fire Cavern I'd practically memorized already, but I'd figured reading it again would be better than brooding. Zell didn't ever really brood. Then I'd smiled and giggled as I'd remembered how unhappy he got when missing out on hot dogs.

That thought had been the only thing I'd needed to launch me into an escapade of nonsensical dreams and 'what if's that I knew I would never dream of actually following-through with.

I sighed now, wishing with all my heart that I had a spine, and gathered my things as Theresa came in to take over. *It's fate, I tell you. She's out to get me.*

"Bye, Theresa," I called over my shoulder.

"Good night."

I slung the bag over my shoulder and headed for the cafeteria. I had a note for the cafeteria lady. Her son and I were pen pals, and he would give me letters in email and envelopes to give to her. It was a great feeling to see her face get all wistful as she reminisced over his boyhood. And it was a great way of getting a secret stash of hot dogs. *Now if I could only get up the nerve to ask Zell...*

But I wasn't going to hold my breath.

Of course, I had to give myself some credit. *Didn't I speak to him when giving him that Mega Phoenix? And on the train that time when I found that rare Combat King issue? Didn't I sit by him at the victory party and keep him from choking on hotdogs? I can talk to him if I really set my mind to it.* Just like I could pass the Fire Cavern. It was all a matter of how badly I wanted it.

*So how bad do I want to go out with Zell?*

I absently picked up a piece of trash to put it in a nearby garbage can. I'd had a crush on Zell as long as I'd been studying at Balamb Garden, which meant five years. *What's so awful and terrifying about talking to him and asking him out?* The worst he could do

would be to say 'Are you kidding? Get lost!'

I could see that happening the day Commander Squall fell in love with me...

...don't ask.

Zell would more than likely say 'Huh? Go out? Oh! Sure!' while immediately assuming I meant hang out as friends. *What's so bad about that? It's better than nothing. It's better than being labeled a chicken-wuss and being hounded by Seifer and his 'posse'... Isn't it?* I gave a shrug and entered the cafeteria.

I pulled the most recent note from my bag's outer pocket. "Hi, Francine. Mark sent another letter."

Francine's tired face brightened as she wiped her hands on a nearby towel, pausing her duty of washing the lunch trays. I vaguely noticed the usual long line of students and instructors waiting for their chance at the hot dogs.

"Thank you, young lady," she said as she eagerly retrieved the letter from my outstretched hand. "I've been looking forward to this all week."

"Is he coming to visit?" I set my bag on the floor and then crossed my arms on the counter-top. "It's been months."

Francine sadly nodded as her dark eyes misted. "That it has, young 'un. But the letters and the memories are enough for me now that I know he's safe. I wouldn't want him to give up his excitement for little ole me."

I smiled, reassuring her with a hand covering hers. "He knows, and that's why he loves you so much." I vaguely heard the other cafeteria lady announce "No more. Sorry" and then the general commotion of everyone leaving. "Maybe one of these days you two can set up a meeting? You know? You leave Balamb Garden and take the train or ship somewhere to meet up with him? It wouldn't have to be far, and you know you'd have fun."

Francine's expression grew thoughtful. "Let me give that thought a whirl, girlie,"

she said as she gave my hand a squeeze. "In the meantime, why don't you sit yourself down over there. I'll bring you some dinner."

I smiled wider as I picked up my bag, slinging it over my shoulder with a slight "oomph" before saying "Okay. Thanks, Francine."

"No problem at all, girlie." She turned away.

I watched her a moment, hoped I'd grow old as gracefully, and then turned-- and bumped into Zell. My bag dropped to the floor. **Splut** "Oh!" I flushed red and knelt to pick up the books and papers that refused to stay inside. "I-I'm sorry," I stammered.

"No prob." Zell crouched, picking up a pencil that had retreated from the circle of my reach. He handed it to me. "Don't sweat it."

I took the pencil with shaking fingers, stuffing it into a random pocket. "Thanks." We stood at the same time and nearly hit heads. He swerved in a quick dodge and then grinned at me. Horror that I'd nearly caused a concussion made me back off a step. "Th-They're out of hot dogs," I stammered. *'They're out of hot dogs,' Sally? Is that all you could come up with!?*

Zell's grin faded as quick as anything I'd seen. He snapped his fingers. "Aw man! Late again."

"B-But you can have some of m-mine," I offered quickly.

Zell took a startled step back, as I'd seen him do so often, and blinked in shock. "Wha- Really?"

I nodded, not trusting my voice, and tightly gripped the strap of my bag.

"Wow. Thanks." He looked around. "Where are they?"

I swallowed hard. Am I really doing this? "F-Francine... She's g-going to bring them out."

"Cool." Zell performed his up-beat lumber toward the nearest table.

I stared after him. *Now what? Tell Francine to give them to him while I leave, waving good-bye on my way past? Saunter over there as if it were the most natural thing in the world for*

*me to be sitting with Zell Dincht?*

Zell spun a chair around to straddle it, gesturing at me with an inviting smile that - to him - was as innocent as could be. To me, it turned my legs to jelly and dragged me over as if he'd had a hand on my arm. *Hyne, please don't let me throw-up. Anything but that.* I slowly lowered myself into the chair, giving him a very timid smile in response to his easy-going grin. I clutched my bag to me as a shield.

"So how'd you work a stash of hot dogs?"

A million and one things crashed together on my tongue, making it impossible to say anything. Zell, of course, didn't mind and just jumped to the most logical conclusion.

"You buds with the cafeteria ladies, huh? I've tried that since I've studied here. Never worked. What's your secret?"

Smooth stories and cool answers vanished as I opened my mouth to try and regain some dignity. His grin kept distracting my mind from sending complete sentences to my waiting and half-open mouth. I must have looked like a grat.

"Pen pal," I faltered.

"Pen pal?" he queried with a confused expression in those gorgeous eyes-- "For what?"

*Look away, Sally. Look away.* I lowered my eyes to my hands as they clutched the strap of my bag. I took in a slow breath. "I'm a p-pen pal with Francine's son. S-sometimes I b-bring her letters and e-mails from h-him."

"Pen pal, huh? Hm. Good plan."

I momentarily looked up, but I looked down again when conscious thought began to fade. "I-It wasn't a plan," I whispered. "It j-just... It just h-happened. I never a-ask her to do it."

Francine rescued me from having to say more when she set a tray of six hot dogs on the table between us.

"Here ya go, girlie. I brought you some extras." She cuffed Zell on the back of the

head. He protested, but she ignored it. "I know how this hooligan eats. Nearly choked to death one time."

*I know*, I thought with a somewhat wistful smile. I had been able to 'rescue' him.

"Well if you saved me hot dogs once in a while, I wouldn't need to scarf!"

Francine laughed and moved away.

Zell grinned - a normal expression for him - and handed me a plate. "She's a riot."

I motioned to the plate. "I-I only want one. You c-can have the others."

"You sure?" he asked, but the twinkle in his eyes shouted eagerness and anticipation.

I nodded.

Zell scooped up the hot dogs, added them to his pile, and then started talking about classes and battles and Seifer as he ate. I listened, watching him with a slight smile as I occasionally pinched myself or stepped on my toe to make sure I was awake.

I was, and I have the bruises to prove it.

"So we're running through Balamb - Irvine, Squall, and me - trying to track down the 'captain' so we can get into the 'commander' and find out what the hell was going on," Zell continued while waving his half-eaten hot dog in the air for effect. "We finally track him to my house - my house, can you believe it? - where he stinks up ma's kitchen with a rotten fish!"

"Oh no. Your poor mother."

"Damn straight!" Zell took a full bite of the hot dog, attempting to wash it down with his soda. He coughed a little before continuing. "Squall remembered about the dog at the harbor, so we high-tailed it and let the dog take it from there."

"Where was he? The 'captain', I mean." By this time I was so enthralled in the story and how he told it that I hadn't noticed the brightness of the lights compared to the dark outside, or the fact Francine had long since waved good night.

"Hiding on the train, or something."

I absently handed him my untouched hot dog as I leaned slightly forward. "What happened?"

Zell laughed as he took it, waving it again as he graphically portrayed the action. "The dog chased him out like a bueel out of the Fire Cavern. Funniest damn thing ever. Raijin with a dog on his ass. Looked like the biggest dork I ever seen!"

"And then you got to the commander?"

Zell nodded as he polished off the last of the hot dog. "Had to beat both of 'em, though, before they'd get out of Balamb."

I rested my chin in my hand as my other fiddled with the now empty tray. My mind was somehow blissfully ignorant that this was real anymore. "Wow," I whispered.

Zell nodded again. "Thanks for the hot dogs." He stood, making a gesture over his shoulder. "I'm gonna jet. See ya."

I blinked and straightened. "Oh. You're welcome. Have a good night," I called to his escaping figure.

Zell waved without looking back. I slumped back into the chair with a silly smile, giggling as I hugged my bag to my chest.