

2: Day Two

I lounged on cloud nine the next morning all through class. While a part of me knew it would probably never happen again, another part admitted that stranger things had happened. All I had to do was talk to one of the people who'd gone against Sorceress Ultimecia to know it. So, I decided to enjoy the daydream and the memory while promising myself to do it again sometime.

I think I floated down the halls to the library. In fact, I vaguely remember hearing giggles and whispers of "what's with her" as I passed. But I didn't care. Life was good. *You did it, Sally. You had a somewhat two-sided conversation with Zell, you didn't make a fool of yourself, and... Well, who cares what else!* I felt all warm and fuzzy and found myself giggling at silly things.

Again, I didn't care.

At the library I had a pleasant surprise. Zell's books were in. I thwumped my bag onto the counter and scooted behind the computer almost at the same time another instant message chirped up onto the window. It was Zell. *I wonder if he even realizes I'm the girl from the cafeteria yesterday?* Of course, I was logged on as 'Balamb Librarian'. Not very exciting.

BOOYABOY: i no i axd yestrdy, but r the books in?

I smiled as I quickly typed a reply. **BALAMB_LIBRARIAN:** As a matter of fact, they arrived this morning.

BOOYABOY: gr8! il stop omw 2 clas. thnx.

BALAMB_LIBRARIAN: You're welcome.

He logged off and I got attacked by goose pimples. *Zell's coming by the library!*

So I set the books he'd ordered out of harm's way -- to the left of the computer --

and finished my chores of going through the previous bulletin postings, clearing the email inbox, and checking in the returned books. Then I filed those away and looked for more stuff to do.

I couldn't really concentrate on anything, though, because all I heard was the too-slow *tick-tock-tick-tock* of the clock. I knew Zell's schedule. His first class wasn't for another hour. *Oh phooey. I'll die of boredom and expectation before he comes.* I giggled at how pathetic yet wonderful that sounded, ignored the odd looks sent my way, and traipsed back to the computer. I needed to do research on Guardian Forces and the cause/effect relationship with those that used them. Not very exciting, but if it made the time go by faster, I'd take it.

Besides, it was interesting.

"Hey. It's the hot dog fairy."

I blinked and turned. Tattoo. Grin. Spiked blonde hair. Gorgeous eyes- *Zell. Zell Dinct.* I looked up at the clock. *Same time.* My eyes quickly migrated back to Zell. He'd dressed in his usual Balamb-blue sweatpants with the Balamb emblem on the left pantleg, and a gray sweatshirt with the raised letters 'Mach Kick' across the front -- along with several things symbolizing painful contact with people's various body parts.

He looked good enough to squeeze.

I blinked again as he leaned against the counter with his infamous lopsided smile.

Zell gave me a salute of finger to forehead. "Hiya."

I swallowed my heart so that I could say something. "Hi." *Maybe I should reach out and touch him to make sure he's real...?*

But he suddenly snapped his fingers with an accompanying exaggerated movement of his body in a type of 'Duh'. "Now I remember where I've seen you before! Mega Phoenix!"

I flushed molten. *He remembers me?* "Guilty," I confessed with a sheepish nod.

"Hey, thanks a lot for that. We didn't need it, but it was handy to have."

Hyne, am I awake? I pinched myself and winced. "I'm glad."

"Me, too. And thanks a lot for that Combat King issue you gave on the train! That issue so rocked! I really needed that move against Ultimecia's goons."

I blushed so hot that I thought I might spontaneously combust. "Y-You're welcome." *Why can't I say any more than two words?!*

Zell continued to smile at me for several silent seconds before saying, "So... books?"

"Oh! Sorry." I turned in the chair and placed the books onto the counter one at a time after checking them out onto his account.

Zell gathered them under one arm before giving another grin and salute. "Thanks. Later." Then he snapped his fingers again in an 'oh yeah'. "Zell." He stuck out a hand after wiping it on his pantleg. "Zell Dincht."

I couldn't believe I was doing it, but I reached out and took his hand. His enveloped mine in a... hug. A warm, soft, and very nice hug. "Sally Regal," I squeaked.

"Sally."

He said my name... And I nearly passed out when Zell sent me one of those 'I'm adorable, you've gotta love me' boyish smiles.

"Better than 'the librarian'." Then he jerked a thumb in a motion behind him. "Why dontcha stop by class after you get outta here - I'm in the Training Center all day - and we'll pop by the cafeteria to grab more hot dogs." He grinned. "Physical Endurance Tests today. I'll be hungry."

I smiled and giggled, much to my surprise. "Uh-oh. I'm sensing a pattern." I felt a wave of teasing come over me and put my hands on my hips. "You're not using me are you, Mr. Dincht?" *Who are you, and what have you done with Sally Regal?*

Zell's grin broadened as he backed away toward the exit. "Yup."

Then he disappeared into the corridor. I leaned my arms onto the counter, cupping my face in my hands as I wistfully stared at the exit. *Sally, whatever you do, don't wake up!*

I didn't.

It was busy that day, probably because of exams, and there were constant bodies to and from class. I didn't leave the library for break or lunch, but it didn't matter. I had plans. *You have plans, Sally, with Zell Dincht!* It was enough to put a lilt in my voice, a glow in my eyes, and a spring in my step.

Then my bubble popped.

I slumped into the chair behind the computer with the realization that there was no guarantee of a hot dog feast when I got to the cafeteria. *I told him I never asked her to save them... didn't I? If she didn't have any, he wouldn't be too disappointed... would he?* But there was nothing I could do about it. I'd have to do my best to give him a heads-up when I met him in the Training Center. Not exactly the best thing to look forward to when you're about to go out with the guy of your dreams. That look of disappointment was the last thing I wanted to see, especially when my ability to get him hot dogs might really have been his only interest.

Not only had the bubble burst, my cloud lost altitude fast.

I tried not to, really I did, but I began to mope. I started to dread what I was going to say, as well as the possible reaction to each. *Come on, Sally, don't do this. He's easy going, remember? He'll shrug it off. Just be prepared with an alternate plan... Alternate plan like what?* I couldn't exactly invite him to Balamb for dinner... *Could I?* The thought made me queasy and nervous and... *and am I actually considering it?* I must have hit my head on the bedpost that morning.

"Bye, Theresa," I mumbled as I slung my bag over my shoulder.

"Night."

I was oh-so-tempted to keep walking past the Training Center... but the thought of Zell expecting me -- something I never thought would happen -- kept me plodding forward. Tough situations, *oh how I hate them.* It wasn't that I was a coward, because I don't think I am, I just didn't like hurting people. Whether or not it's my fault doesn't matter. The

last thing I wanted was to dash Zell's hopes of a hot dog feast. *But you can't keep life perfect, Sally. Situations like this happen every day. You just have to learn how to deal and move on. Like Zell.*

Like Zell...

Yes, I did like Zell.

I sighed and kicked at a pine cone as I entered the first section of the Training Center. I could still hear Zell's class inside, they were laughing of course, so I decided to sit on the rock I'd sat on before and wait. The extra time would be good for me. I had to pull my spirits out of the basement by reminding myself that Zell Dincht had asked me to come by after class. I had to remind myself that I had the perfect opportunity to get to know him better... I stared down at my hand -- the one he'd held so firm... but gentle... warm... comforting--

I squeezed my hand and eyes shut tight. Then I shook my head and stood.

But I could only stare at the exit, gnawing my lower lip as I gripped the strap of my bag. I was terrified, to put it simply. Not of Zell. No. He was a sweetie. No, I was scared of the situation. Of the possibilities, both good and bad.

Mostly bad.

How did girls do this on even a semi-regular basis? Didn't it hurt to say 'good-bye' to someone you'd thought you'd been in love with? Was the risk of being hurt worth the short little bit of happiness? I didn't know if I was brave enough to find out. I wanted to but... I rubbed my forehead with cold fingers. The fear squeezed my throat, threatening tears. Maybe it wasn't fear? Maybe it was relief? That I finally had a chance. That I was giving myself one.

I looked over my shoulder at the closed gates of the deeper section of the Training Center. *Nothing ventured, nothing gained... and Zell's worth the venture, isn't he?* I released a deep breath and forced myself to sit down. *Yes. He is.*

The adventure started soon thereafter.

Zell ushered the class from the Training Center, made sure the gates closed securely behind him, and then adjusted the strap of his duffel over his shoulder. He was still dressed in his blue sweatpants with the Balamb insignia in white on the left leg, but he'd shed his sweatshirt for a T-shirt with the words 'Balamb Rocks' emblazoned in dark blue letters.

He saw me and smiled with a "hey" lift of his head.

Really? I'm not dreaming?

I stood, timidly smiling as I worked the strap of my bag to death. "Class sounded fun," I said quietly.

"Tests should always be fun."

I fell into step beside him, staring at the ground. "Yes, they should." *I'd have fun if you taught my classes.*

"I probably would've gotten a higher SeeD rank if my Instructor'd made it more fun." Zell looked over at me. "Who d'you have?"

"Instr-- Selphie," I corrected.

"Selphie?" Zell laughed. "Your tests oughta be a riot."

I shrugged. The scores on my Fire Cavern exam qualifiers were the last thing I wanted him to know. *How embarrassing.*

"You're awful gloomy," Zell said suddenly. "Reminds me of Squall. Before."

I grimaced and flushed. "Sorry." I sent him a sidelong glance. "I'm afraid I've got bad news."

"Yeah? Like what?" He grinned, and it lit up his face. "As long as there isn't a hot dog shortage, I'm fine."

I paled and stopped, blinking up at him.

Zell's grin vanished as he halted and faced me. He covered his mouth with both hands and a **slap**. Then he slowly lowered his hands and leaned slightly forward. "What'd I say?" And he sounded concerned.

"N-Nothing," I said quickly, vigorously shaking my head. I changed my focus to my hands on the strap. "I... I don't know if there will be any hot dogs."

Zell straightened sharply. "Is that all?" He laughed and cuffed me on the arm. "Geez. I was joking. I'm used to not getting those. Don't worry about it. But if we don't hurry, it'll be our own fault."

When we got to the cafeteria, the dinner rush had come and gone, obviously, so I was really reluctant to go up to the counter and ask... I straightened suddenly, balling a hand into a fist as I raised my chin. *Come on, Sally. Geez!* I pulled my bag from my shoulder, **thwumped** it onto the table, and then strode up to the counter. I thought I heard Zell follow.

"Well hello, girly," Francine greeted with a slight glance behind. "I'm glad you stopped by. I've got a letter for you to send off to Mark. I'm taking your advice and planning a trip."

I smiled, the fear forgotten, and leaned against the counter. "Really? That's wonderful! When are you leaving?"

Francine laughed. "Well now, young 'un, don't be thinking you'll get rid of me as fast as that. Mark and I still have to discuss the details."

I giggled. "I know. I just thought you might have a goal date in mind."

"Spring, probably."

I took the offered letter. "What a great time of year to travel."

"And I'll be sure to get you a souvenir and a bunch of pictures."

"Thanks, Francine. That's great."

She gestured to me and Zell. "You young 'uns hungry?"

I smiled very slightly. "Me? Not so much." I spared a glance to Zell, who was doing his best to look nonchalant with his hands in his pockets and a tune on his lips as he looked around the cafeteria. He only succeeded in looking adorable. "Him? Tests all day today."

He's very hungry."

Francine laughed. "I'll see what I can wrestle up, girlie. Go take a load off."

I nodded. Then I surprised myself by giving Zell's arm a gentle tug. *Warm...* "Come on."

Zell ceased the tune and sauntered to the table after me. "See? What're you worried about?"

I sat, placed the letter to Mark into my bag, and then set it on the floor as he straddled the chair across the table from me. "I think it's in my genes."

"Tch! Nah." He folded his arms over the back of the chair. "You ready for exams? Need any help?"

Help? I could hardly believe the opportunity had just fallen into my lap. "Actually... I..." *No. I can't do it.* I shook my head. "Thanks. I'll be fine."

"You sure? Last chance to get help from an Instructor," Zell said with his usual grin.

Oh come on. It's not cheating. Besides, he offered. I traced a pattern in the table design. "I never do very good with the Fire Cavern."

"Tch! I remember that one. You know what? I think Squall got the record time on that. You should ask."

I looked up with wide eyes. "I can't just walk up to Commander Squall and ask about the Fire Cavern!"

"How come? That's what we're here for!"

I flushed and lowered my eyes. "Good point."

"So what's the problem? I know Garden's not doing the GF stuff except for on major missions, but they still let the candidates take Shiva there, what with Ifrit being a pain in the ass."

I morosely nodded.

"And Selphie helps, right?"

I nodded again, lowering my head toward the table as I scrutinized the pattern I traced with my finger. He waved a hand in front of my face. I looked up.

"You gonna make me guess?"

I flushed darker still, lowering my eyes back to my finger and the table. "Sure. Why not?" I asked quietly.

Zell laughed. "It'll take forever!"

I giggled, giving him a sidelong glance just as Francine came with two dinner trays: hot dogs -- five for Zell and one for me -- cookies -- same number -- and some milk. For me she had another little plate with celery and steamed asparagus, my favorite.

"Wow! Fran, you rock!" Zell exclaimed as he took his tray.

I smiled. *You're so cute!* Then I whispered "thank you" to Francine.

"You're welcome, girlie. Have a good evening."

Believe me. I will.

"Why don't you walk me through what you do at the Cavern?" Zell asked with his mouth full of hot dog. He shuffled it over to the side of his mouth and pointed at me with the uneaten portion. "My time wasn't as good as Squall's," he swallowed, "but I still passed."

I nibbled on an asparagus spear as I replayed the last attempt at the Cavern in my mind. It was all so embarrassing. "I... uh..."

"Yes?" he prodded, working on a cookie.

I glanced up but immediately looked away. "Do you have any idea how embarrassing it is?"

"Not 'til you tell me," he laughed. "It can't be that bad!"

"Don't laugh," I complained with a reluctant smile. "It's different for you. You're all buff and strong--" I flushed deep red and lowered my eyes.

Zell didn't notice my discomfort or the compliment. "Aw come on. Quis and Selph had to go through it, too." He swallowed some milk as he gauged me closely. "What are

ya? 5' 1"? 105?"

I slapped a hand to my forehead. "Oh geez."

"What?"

I lowered my hand and shook my head. "Nothing." *You're just never supposed to guess a girl's weight...* And he'd been right, too.

"What weapon you do?"

"Quarterstaff."

"Really? Hm. That's weird." He absently munched a cookie as he tapped his knuckle on the table. "I've got written exams tomorrow, but we could meet at the Training Center with Selph the day after that. Maybe between the two of us we can figure it out?"

I couldn't believe he offered. "B-But I have to work."

"So? What time?"

"Ten to seven."

"Okay. We'll meet at eight."

"I... I have class until 9:30."

"No prob. I usually work out at six in the a.m.. How 'bout then? Is that okay?"

Is that okay?! "S-Sure. What about--"

"I'll grab Selph tomorrow on my way to class. Don't sweat it."

I had no idea what to say. I couldn't believe he was going to all the trouble. For me. *Of course, why not me? I need help. I deserve help.* "Zell?" I asked in a soft voice, and it seemed like my heart was suddenly in my throat.

Zell looked up, catching my gaze with a somewhat wide-eyed one of curiosity as he munched his hot dog. "Yeah?"

"I really appreciate this."

He swallowed his mouthful and grinned. "Hey. No prob."