

4: Day Four

I teetered between elation and chronic nervousness the next morning as I dressed in T-shirt, sweatshirt, shorts, sweatpants, and running shoes -- hey. You never know what you might need. Then I grabbed my quarterstaff on my way out of the dormitory. Disbelief kept everything else under control as I made my way to the Training Center. Thank goodness. The Fire Cavern exam was all I could think about. I wanted to pass so bad. To make Zell proud... To make Zell notice me?

I shrugged with an accompanying shake of my head. Zell did notice me. I was one of his 'buds'. One of his 'circle'. Only problem for me being I didn't want to be in that particular circle.

"A circle of arms would be nice," I mumbled as I adjusted my hold on my staff. But, like usual, I wouldn't hold my breath.

"Hey, Meg. 'Sup?"

I recognized Zell's baritone voice as I turned into the corridor leading to the Training Center. I sighed. *It would be cool if he sounded that happy to see me.* I sighed again. *Oh well.*

"Meg! Yo, Meg!" Running steps.

I frowned. *The girl could at least acknowledge his existence! Sheesh! Poor Zell. Trying to be friendly--* A touch on my arm turned me to face-- "Zell!"

"Didn't you hear me?" he asked as he jerked a thumb back the way I'd come. "I hollered."

I flushed but surprisingly held his gaze. "I didn't know you were calling me. I'm sorry."

"Oh. The 'Meg' thing, huh. Sorry. Short for MegaPhoenix. Thought it sounded pretty cool."

"It does," I said timidly. *Zell gave me a nickname!* "I should have guessed."

"Don't sweat it." He motioned to the Training Center and matched my pace when I moved forward. "Let me guess: Nervous?"

I nodded. "Yeah."

Zell gave me a gentle slug on my arm with an accompanying grin. "Don't be. I promise I won't do anything mean or stupid. All you hafta do is work as hard as you can. No slackin' off."

"Okay," I said softly as I nodded. "I'll try."

Zell laughed while giving me a soft shove. My gaze met his. "Loosen up, Meg. Geez."

I flushed and looked away. "Sorry."

"You don't have to be sorry," he said with a smile in his voice, "just take it easy. I'm not gonna drag you through hot coals if you screw up. We're all screw ups at some point you know."

I gave a slight shrug. I'd never seen him screw up.

Much to my shock and horror, he brought an arm around my neck to draw me close to his chest moments before rubbing my scalp with a knuckle. "Come on! Relax!"

My staff clattered to the floor as my hands went to his arm to try and loose his hold. But what was I thinking?

"You gotta try harder than that," he teased. "Come on. Make me leggo."

"Zell, let go," I said, and the tone in my voice was pathetically close to a whimper.

"Aw man, Meg. Come on." He did let go, putting his fists on the hips of his dark blue sweatpants.

I straightened my hair back into my ponytail, my face burning with humiliation.

I'd failed my first test. "Sorry." This time my voice sounded suspiciously teary.

"You're not very aggressive, are ya?"

Aggressive? If I were aggressive I'd grab you by the front of your sweatshirt, back you against the wall, and give you a nice, long- I shook my head. *If I were aggressive I would have told you three years ago that I had a crush on you...* "Nope." *If I were aggressive, we'd be going out and you'd be wild about me the same as I'm wild about you.*

I really wanted to be aggressive.

"We're gonna work on that. I'm not saying you have to be an ass like Seifer, but you shouldn't be scared of wrestling around with me. I'm not gonna break."

I slightly nodded my head, still not raising my eyes. "Okay."

Zell shook his head and lowered his fists from his hips. "Come on. Let's get to work." He picked up my staff and headed toward the main section of the Training Center.

I released a deep breath and followed after him. Believe it or not, I wanted to be anywhere but there. I knew I was a little on the pushover side. I wasn't a coward, no, but I... I didn't like confrontations. Remember? *I have a spine, sure, but wrestling around with Zell Dincht?* I rolled my eyes, dread growing in my stomach like a fungus. *I really, really don't want to do this.*

Well... a part of me did.

Zell rested my staff against the tree on the right side of the stone I'd come to call my own. Then he shrugged out of his gray sweatshirt to the crisp white T-shirt with the bright red letters 'Booya' on the front and 'Meteor Strike' on the back. *He always looks so good in T-shirts and sweatpants...*

He adjusted the lightweight sparring gloves on his hands. "Come on, slowpoke. Let's get down to business."

Hyne, please don't let me look like a chicken-wuss. Not to him. Anyone but him. But I knew that would be up to me. "Okay." I cleared my throat, debated with taking off my hooded sweatshirt, and very quickly decided against it. I didn't look nearly as good as Zell did.

Zell motioned over his shoulder to the metal gate on the right. "Before we head in, I wanna take a look at a few things. Okay?" He pointed in front of him with a meaningful lowering of his head. "Set up."

My stomach slithered to the soles of my feet, grabbing a firm hold of the ground underneath them. "What?"

Zell gestured more forcefully. "Set up. To attack." He put his fists on his hips. "Come on, Meg. You know this stuff. It's basic."

I knew it was basic; I was only hoping he wasn't really asking me to attack him. "B-But--"

"Meg. Set up."

It was the first time I'd heard a no-nonsense tone from him. I blanched and flushed at nearly the same instant as I gave a slight nod. I set my stance, feet slightly apart, on the balls of my feet, slightly crouched and ready to move. *Please don't attack me. I don't want to hit you.*

Zell moved toward me. I watched him with a slightly widened gaze as he slowly paced around, gauging my stance and occasionally reaching out to adjust an arm or push on me slightly to see if I was set too firm. He gave a nod before returning to where he'd stood before. He set up. I nearly moaned.

"Now when I attack, I want you to defend. Okay? Don't worry. You won't hit me, and I'm not gonna hurt you."

I gnawed my lower lip, giving a slight nod as I absently adjusted my hold on the staff.

Zell adjusted his footing and moved closer. I watched him, adjusting my own stance as I carefully moved to keep him in constant sight. *You can do this, Sally. You know you can. Just don't think about it. Do it. Do it--* He moved with near-perfect precision and quickness. I reacted as best I could, blocking an attempted strike at my head that was followed quickly by a left hook. I blocked both, but I didn't expect the second right cross.

It made contact on the side of my head. "Damn. Thought you were gonna get that one." Zell stepped close, and his fingers gently probed my head where he'd hit. "You okay?" he asked as he gauged my expression.

I lowered my staff, nodding once he'd lowered his hand. My scalp still tingled. "It didn't hurt." *But that felt wonderful. Can you do it again please?*

Yeah. Right.

Zell stepped back as he brought an arm across his chest. The other stroked his chin. He regarded me as I examined the ground at my feet. "You're quick with it, but... Hmm.... Let's do it again."

I think I'm gonna hurl. The pattern was repeated again. This time, though, I blocked the third hit, deflected the fourth, but didn't get to the kick in time. He pulled back to keep from getting me in the stomach. I startled back a step and tripped over my own feet, landing in the dirt with a thud and a very humiliated expression.

"Aw geez. Sorry about that." Zell stepped forward and extended a hand. He helped me up.

"It wasn't your fault," I mumbled as I brushed the dirt from my backside.

"You know what? The staff's not your weapon. You're okay with it, but it doesn't jive with your body build."

I stared down at the staff in my hands. "Oh," I sighed.

"You do anything else?"

I shook my head. *Kiss your chances of passing the Fire Cavern good-bye, Sally.* Which meant I'd be leaving Garden that April. My throat tightened, and I sniffed.

Zell enfolded my upper arm with a warm clasp. "You ever try gymnastics?"

Gymnastics? I lifted my gaze to meet his. "What?"

"With your slight build you're probably quick as anything."

"I can't use gymnastics against enemies."

He released my arm. "Tch!" He turned to stride to the metal gates. "Come on."

I dutifully followed, staff in hand. "What are you going to do?"

"Show you something."

The gate closed behind us. My grip tightened on the staff as I looked around for a grat or T-Rexaur, or one of the other nasties they bred in the Training Center. I heard a recognizable shift and shudder and looked ahead to see a grat emerging from the bush.

Zell motioned for me to stand beside him. "Set up— Give me that." He took the staff from me and then pointed beside him and a little toward the grat. "Set up and do a backflip."

For the first time in my life I actually wanted to argue, but I did what he said anyway. I set my stance, trying my best to copy his, set my balance and power, and did a backflip. I felt my feet make contact with the grat - twice. I landed in a crouch, my eyes wide and my mouth open in an expression of shock.

"Well would you look at that. The hot-dog fairy's done gymnastics before."

I stood slowly, still staring at the grat that had backed off while wondering if it really wanted to risk having that happen again. I absently nodded. "My exercise routine..." I looked over at Zell, who was grinning at me, and pointed at the grat. "Did I do that?"

Zell laughed. "Nobody else standing here is there?" Then he grew suddenly very serious and intense. "You see?" he continued, "it's all in the focus and doing what you know you're body can do. Your body knows gymnastics, so all you have to do now is teach it how to use that. Kicks. Spins. Flips. You can use it all. You just got to figure it out."

I nodded, thoughtful. "But I shouldn't just use my feet, right?" I asked slowly.

"Right," Zell said with a curt nod. "We've just got to teach you how to use the power in your arms." He took hold of my hand, pulling my arm out straight before gently wrapping a hand around my upper arm and giving a slight squeeze. "You've got a lot of muscle tone here because of working out with the staff. Now you need to focus that. Here."

He bent my arm and folded my fingers into a fist before giving it a slap with his hand. "It's all got to come out here. Come on." Zell released my hand and arm and motioned to the grat that had decided to take another shot at the petite girl - me. "Give it a go. I'm sure you'll be fine, but I'll be right here to take up any slack."

I gave a nod, my expression very serious and intent as I faced the grat and took up my stance. I would've checked my feet to see if they were floating on air, but I decided it wouldn't be the wisest choice with Zell in his instructor-mode.

"Just focus and pow. Release it."

I nodded again, slightly adjusting my footing. "Should I wait for it to make its move?"

"Why? Do it yourself."

I nodded yet again, taking in a deep breath and holding it as I rushed forward and **thump, thump, thump**, backflip back **thwack-thwack**. I landed in a crouch moments before I jumped up with a "rock on!" and grinned over at Zell.

He crossed his arms with a 'See, I told you' look and gave me a nod of approval.

And the feeling I got from that expression, and seeing the grat shudder and keel over because of me... I ran over and threw my arms around him. "Thank you! Thank you!"

Zell laughed while giving me several pats on the back. "Hey. No prob."

I pulled back with a flush, lowering my arms to my sides as I cleared my throat and stepped safely away. *Oh my gosh...* "I never dreamed..." that it would have felt so awesome to give Zell a hug.

"Yeah, well if Selph hadn't said something was all wrong when you used the staff, I wouldn't have known what to look for." He cuffed me on the arm and drew my attention back from a slowly growing euphoria. "We've still got a lot of work to do. No slackin' off."

I nodded, eagerly following him deeper into the Training Center. *A scrapper? Me? Just like Zell?*

It was so cliché that it was adorable.



"You're gonna be sore tomorrow unless you take a soak in the hot tub. Seriously," Zell said as he walked me to my dorm room. "You worked hard. If you've got time between classes, hike down to the infirmary and have Dr. Kadowaki plug you into one of her spas."

I nodded, my face bright with a myriad of rushes. Exhaustion and soreness were the least of my worries at that particular moment. I didn't even care that I barely had time to take a shower before heading to class. "I'm sure I'll be okay. I've worked out that hard before and not felt it."

"Better safe than sorry. Remember your qualifier's tomorrow. You need to be 100%."

I nodded dutifully. "I will be."

Zell suddenly laughed. "Geez. You'd think you were my student. Sorry."

I giggled. "Don't worry about it, Zell. I needed the push and shove and kick." I giggled again.

Zell laughed again, too. Then he pointed at me, Instructor-mode on. "No hot dogs tonight. Study, study, hot tub, study. That's what you get."

My smile faded. "But--"

"Study," he pressed. "We've gotta get you past the Fire Cavern so you can take your field exam. Being a candidate sucks."

I smiled. "It's not that bad."

Zell stopped outside my room and gave me a salute. "Good luck tomorrow, Meg." Then he made his way back the way we'd come.

I leaned against the door to my room with a sigh and a smile as I watched him go. *Tomorrow. I'll ask him to go out with me tomorrow, whether I pass or not.* I gave a curt nod and turned to enter my dorm room.