

5: Day Five

Have you ever been so nervous and anxious that your butterflies turn into Thrusteavis and start pelting your stomach with windstorms and head butts? That was how I felt the next day. I didn't know if I was going to throw up or have my heart blow up in my chest. I went from light-headed to dizzy to feeling like I was going to smosh into the floor.

One time I even had to sit down and put my head between my knees to keep from passing out.

When I was finally able to leave my room without hanging onto the walls for support, I concentrated very hard on my breathing and where and how I walked. I was going to meet Selphie by the front gate. Then we were going to head on over to the Fire Cavern. I didn't know how much Zell had told her, if he'd talked to her at all, about my sudden change in weapon choice. I certainly didn't know what it would do to my grade.

Has anyone switched proficiencies in the middle of the term before?

I groaned, pausing to lean against the wall of the hallway from the dormitory. *I really hate tough situations...* But I was determined not to whine and moan. I was going to face the consequences with a stiff upper lip. Well... I was going to do my best anyway.

Whenever I was tempted to run back to my dorm room and hide under the bed, I just remembered the previous day's training session with Zell and what he'd said. *'It's all in the focus and doing what you know your body can do... You've got a lot of muscle tone here because of working out... Now you just need to focus that...'* I could do it. He'd said I could and then proved it.

I'd proved it myself.

I nodded and pushed up from the wall, forcing myself to straighten and walk without a wobble. Very nearly, anyway. A few students passed while sending me sidelong glances, whispering amongst themselves once I'd walked by. I probably looked a little yellow. Maybe everyone knew about how bad I did on the Fire Cavern? Maybe there was a pool going whether I'd fail miserably, or barely pass, or just barely fail. Who knew? Who cared. I was going to do my best. Then I would ask Zell out on a date.

Really. I am.

Swear.

I released a deep breath, following the circular walkway around past the parking lot and the Training Center and the library, and then I headed down the main corridor to the outside gates and the beginning of my doom and destiny. *Tough situations suck.* Zell probably saw them as fun. *I wonder how he does that?* It would be nice to have his secret, so that I could do the same thing. I'd have to ask when we went out.

I am going to ask.

Promise.

Selphie lifted her arm high in the air, giving a hop as she waved at me with a bright smile. She was dressed in her SeeD uniform, she'd always liked it better than anything else, while I had dressed in my normal SeeD candidate uniform. Well, almost normal anyway. I was wearing the slacks instead of the skirt, due to the fact that kicks and backflips were easier in the former rather than the latter.

"Good morning, Sally," Selphie greeted. "Are you ready?"

I nodded. "As ready as I'll ever be."

Selphie motioned for us to head on out of the Garden. She sent me a sidelong glance. "You forget anything?"

"Nope." I was junctioned to the hilt... well... as good as a SeeD candidate could be with just one GF. But I really liked Shiva. Probably because she was the only girl GF that was 'aggressive'.

"What about your staff?"

Zell hadn't told her. He'd probably wanted her to be shocked off her keister so that he could laugh at the story when I told it. *Hey. I could tell him on our date.* I was going to ask. "I don't use the staff anymore," I told her quietly, with a sidelong glance to her face just so that I could see her expression and tell Zell with as much detail as possible.

She blinked and stopped, turning to face me with a look of amazement that bordered on shocked disbelief and suspicion. "What?"

I gnawed the inside of my lip a moment before facing her. I picked at a fingernail. "I don't use--"

"I heard that. Why not?"

I cleared my throat. "It wasn't right for me."

"What are you talking about?"

I peeked up at her. Disbelief and confusion battled in her face and eyes. I lowered my gaze to the ground. "Zell said--"

"Oh you're kidding!" Selphie shook her head. "You can't change your proficiency in the middle of the term without talking to your Instructor."

I cringed. I'd been so afraid of that. My throat tightened and my eyes teared up.

"Come on. We better go talk to Squall."

I fell into step a little behind. "I'm sorry, Selphie."

"It's not your fault, Sally. Zell should've known better." She shook her head again.

"I hope we don't have to postpone your test. I had high hopes for you this time."

So did I.

We made our way through the main gate and down the corridor and up the stairs to the elevator, taking it to the 3rd floor. Squall stood by the secondary elevator talking to Zell.

"She's a natural, Squall," Zell was saying, "so I totally spaced talking to Selphie--"

He saw us come in and grinned. "Hey, Meg. Selph. 'Sup?"

Then he saw the irritated expression on Selphie's face and the droop to my own expression. His grin vanished.

"Aw man," he said as he kicked at an imaginary rock.

Zell lowered his head and shoulders. They immediately lifted as Zell took a step toward the approaching Selphie with outstretched hands that pleaded with her to understand. "I was gonna tell you, Selph," he insisted. "Swear. I just forgot."

Selphie, fists on hips, stood toe-to-toe with the scrapper. "Well it's a little late now, isn't it? I probably have to postpone her test until after the end of the term, and then she won't be able to graduate!"

I sunk my head lower, not wanting to see the guilt on Zell's face. I didn't blame him at all. I blamed myself. I should have talked to Selphie after class. Walking around with my head in the clouds had put it right out of my mind.

"Aw come on, Selph. You don't have to do that," Zell complained. "Squall, tell her. It's my fault, not Sally's. She shouldn't get in trouble for me not telling you."

"Calm down, guys," Squall said as he stretched out his hands in a calming motion. "You're not helping anything." He moved his focus to Selphie. "Do you have any other scheduled classes or exams today? Any other students needing to test in the Fire Cavern?"

"That's not the point," Selphie argued.

"Selphie," Squall said, "just answer the question."

She sighed. Some of the irritation deflated. "Sally's the only test in the Fire Cavern, and I don't have written exams until this afternoon."

Squall nodded before looking over at Zell and motioning to Selphie. "Okay then, Zell. Tell her why you're changing Sally's weapon." Then Squall stepped forward, gesturing for me to follow him from the office. "Let's go wait downstairs, Sally."

I gave a slight nod, peeking over at Zell as he rubbed the back of his neck while

trying to figure out where to start the explanation. Then I gave a sigh and followed after Commander Squall.

The elevator door closed, and he pushed the button for the first floor. He looked over at me. "You'll take the Fire Cavern test today, Sally. Selphie just doesn't like it when Zell does things like this without telling her."

I nodded morosely. "It's okay if I don't. It was my fault. I should have told her yesterday during class."

Cmdr. Squall waved it aside. "It doesn't matter whose fault it is. Garden is about the students and not the rules. You should get every chance possible to make it to graduation. And you should get every chance to be at your best. That's all Zell wanted, more than likely. He saw something wrong and fixed it." Cmdr. Squall chuckled and very slightly smiled. "Now if he could just remember to tell everyone else."

I sent the Commander a sidelong glance. "He's not in trouble, is he?"

Cmdr. Squall's slight smile remained as he looked over at me. The elevator dinged, letting us off at the ground floor. "No, he's not in trouble. He came to tell me about the switch as soon as he remembered that's what he had to do."

I changed my gaze back to the floor as we descended the steps and came to stand by the Garden Directory. "Good."

"Don't worry about Selphie, either. She stays angry shorter than Zell does. They'll probably come down the elevator laughing about Quis or me and something stupid we did as kids. Who knows?" The elevator shot back up. Cmdr. Squall looked over at it. "See? I bet that's them now."

I raised my eyes, waiting with clenched hands for the elevator to come down and show Zell's laughing face rather than his gloomy one. I didn't like to see him gloomy.

"Good luck today," Cmdr. Squall said. Then he moved away toward the Infirmary.

I absently nodded as I continued to stare at the elevator shaft, still empty- It

zoomed down and opened to reveal Selphie and Zell talking intently amongst themselves. Then the door opened and they stepped out, Zell saying one thing more before looking up to give me a salute and a slight tip of the head. Then he moved down the stairs to the Infirmary the same as Squall. Selphie descended the stairs with a quirky smile. Then she motioned for me to follow after her.

"Come on. Let's go have some fun and beat this Fire Cavern. Okay?"

I nodded with a hesitant smile as we left the Garden.



"You beat Squall's record!" Selphie exclaimed as we jogged out of the Fire Cavern.

I stopped, resting my hands on my knees as I bent over and tried to calm my heart rate. "What?" I asked absently.

"Your time, your time!" she repeated with several quick hops. "You beat Squall's time!" She clapped her hands and gave a delighted giggle.

I stared up at her in shock, my mouth wide. "You're kidding."

She shook her head with a bright smile. "I'm serious."

I straightened and covered my mouth with my hands as my wide eyes stared at her. *I beat... No way.* I lowered my hands and gave a high jump with a loud "yes!"

"Wait until Zell and Squall hear about this!" Selphie said with another giggle.

We ran back toward the Garden, and I couldn't resist another pinch. It hurt and I grinned. "I can't believe this is happening."

"Believe it. I have the time written down to prove it." She looked over at me with a smile. "Zell was right. You are a natural."

I flushed. "It's just because he's a good--"

"No. It's because you're good, Sally. Accept it."

I'm good. I smiled. *I'm good.* It was nice to finally be out from under the looming doom of the Fire Cavern and have the expectancy of the field exam and graduation.

Graduation. Finally. My throat tightened, and I sniffed.

Selphie slowed me to a walk, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. "Congrats, Sally. You passed. I knew you could do it."

I nodded and sniffed again. "So did Zell. I was the only one that needed to be convinced."

"No," Selphie corrected, "I'd convinced you after the last Fire Cavern test. Remember?"

I did. "You're right." I looked over at her as we approached the Garden's front gates. "It feels great to actually be done with it."

"Now we just need to get you a field exam scheduled."

I smiled. "Finally."

Selphie giggled. "No doubt. At least you'll have earned the party after graduation. Stay there as long as possible. Dance as much as possible. Laugh as much as possible."

I giggled. "Yes, ma'am."

Selphie gave my shoulders a squeeze. Then she looked toward the front gates. "Hey, Zell!" she called. I looked up in time to see Zell stop pacing and face us. "Guess what? She beat Squall's time!"

Zell leaped up into the air with a holler of "oh yeah!" and then jogged out to meet us. I blushed molten and tried to beat back the Thrusteavis that had set up house in my stomach. *You're going to ask him, remember? Just wait for Selphie to leave and then do it. Okay? I could do it.* What was so hard about saying 'Zell, will you go out with me?' Nothing. *Right?*

Zell gave Selphie a high five, and then he motioned to do the same with me. I flushed and made contact with his hand. "Sweet!" he exclaimed. "How much did ya beat it by?"

I shrugged. "I don't know," I said softly.

"Who cares? She beat it." Selphie gestured to the Garden. "Come on. Let's go post

the scores so everyone else can see."

My smile vanished. "No! Don't do that!"

"Why not?" Zell and Selphie asked at the same time. "You worked your butt off for that score," Zell continued.

Selphie nodded. "Come on, Sally. Squall won't care. He'll be thrilled."

"B-But... But everyone will know."

Selphie and Zell exchanged astonished looks, fists on hips, and then looked back over at me. "That's the point." Selphie giggled and shook her head. "You're so funny."

Zell took a firm hold of my arm and Selphie's to walk us toward the Garden. "It's getting posted, Meg. Now come on. Let's scoot to the cafeteria and celebrate with a mouthful of hot dogs, ice cream, and soda pop."

Selphie and I laughed, but Selphie extricated herself from Zell's grasp. He let go of both of us. "Can't. Sorry. I've got to get ready for exams this afternoon. Besides that, I've got about a billion papers to correct from earlier this week. Then I've got to start planning field exams."

We headed into Garden and started down the main corridor. "Okay," Zell told her. "But it's your loss."

Selphie giggled and veered to the elevator as Zell and I went right toward the cafeteria. *Okay, Sally. Do it now.* I gave myself a slight nod, took in a deep breath, and--

"So what happened? Tell me all the gory details."

"Oh." The question skittered to a dark corner. "Well, it was the same as usual--"

Zell frowned and gave me a slight push. "Tch! You call that a story? Come on! How many monsters did you have to fight before getting to Ifrit? Did you get hit the most or did Selphie? Who used Shiva? Did you do more physical than magical damage? Tell me!"

I giggled. "I didn't know you were wanting a bedtime story," I said. *Sally? Are you joking around with him? Good for you!*

"Damn straight! I worked you hard yesterday, remember? I pushed and you

pushed back, harder. You've got to give me a little something as payback!"

"Okay, okay." I said with a sidelong smile toward him. Then my eyes twinkled and I felt an imp rise up within me. "It was dark as death and smelled of horror and grief as we entered the red and black cavern of the fire god Ifrit," I began in a tone of gloomy stories and ghosts.

Zell laughed, giving my arm a slug. "Now that's a story!"

I giggled. *Maybe this could count as a date? Couldn't it? Yeah.* Maybe in an alternate dimension.

"Don't stop," he said as we passed the library. "Keep going."

I grabbed at the different stories I'd heard, and thrillers I'd watched and read, and struggled to piece together more of the same. "Shadows and flames teased our senses, hinting at the danger that hid beneath boulder and crevice. Selphie and I cautiously made our way deeper within, keeping our weapons ready as we searched the darkness for the eyes we felt watching."

I sent Zell a sidelong glance. He stared at the polished floor of the walk that led to the different sections of the Garden, deeply engrossed in my story. My eyes twinkled with my withheld laugh. "Fire bat!" I exclaimed as I reached out to grip his arm. Zell gave a startled jump, laughing as he met my gaze. I giggled and looked away, pointing ahead at the imaginary foe. "'Look out!' I warned Selphie, not seeing the buel rising up behind me. Clink-- thwack-- and the buel fell, leaving me safe to dispatch the fire bats. Fists and feet flew, littering our path with broken bodies. We moved on, our eyes alert and our ears strained. Deadly silence. Eerie peace and nothing."

Zell opened the door into the cafeteria, holding it as I passed. Then he released it to hurry up and walk beside me. *This is so awesome!...* "Shivers, doom, and gloom raised the hair on our necks and arms, but there was nothing behind us save the bats and buel of before. My wary gaze examined our trail ahead, jagged and dangerous. So close to the

entrance of Ifrit's lair we could imagine the feel of his breath on our faces. We pressed onward, readying ourselves to meet the fire god himself."

Zell and I grabbed a spot in line as I continued the story, Zell turning to face me as he listened with rapt attention. *Have I died and gone to heaven?*

"Up he roared from the fire pit," I intoned with a raised arm, mimicking Ifrit's action, "power and strength exuded from him by way of the waves of fire and flame that surrounded us. Selphie and I took a step back, but then we steeled ourselves against his intensity and prepared for the attack." I made a ridiculously melodramatic summoning motion with my arms and hands. Zell accepted a tray of hot dogs, cookies, ice cream, etc and followed beside me to a table, still intently listening.

"Shiva', I summoned, and I only vaguely heard Selphie begin her onslaught of cold and ice and weapon. The ice goddess appeared in a water chrysalis of elegance and power, shattering her prism of ice and releasing a barrage of her essence against the fire god. Ifrit bellowed with rage, countering the onslaught with a ball of fire. I stumbled," and I enacted the motion to my chair, "staggering in an attempt to hold my footing. The relief and renewal of Selphie's cure was immediately felt and I straightened, again calling forth the ice goddess. Again and again waves of fire and ice, heat and cold, weapon and rage were exchanged until at last, when Selphie and I believed we could take not another assault, the fire god roared and agreed to join, dedicating his power to my need."

I stood and took a bow. A few of the candidates and junior classmen actually applauded. I flushed deeply before sitting quickly into my chair.

"That was the best telling of the Fire Cavern I've ever heard," Zell said with an appreciative nod as he finished his second hot dog. I finally began my first, slightly smiling as I munched. "Do the junior classmen ever come into the library for your stories?"

"Nope," I said. I took a drink of milk.

"You're kidding! Tch! You've definitely gotta tell Selph. She should put some of

your stories on her site here at the Garden. They'd be great!"

I giggled and shook my head. "No thanks."

"Aw come on. You'd love it. Besides, the minute Selphie posts your scores, everyone's gonna wanna meet the person that beat Squall's score anyway. You might as well have the story ready."

Zell, I don't care what everyone else thinks about me. Or how popular I am. I just want you. But I wasn't ever going to say that. "I hope not."

Zell made a face. Then he pointed a partially gnawed cookie at me before dunking it into his vanilla ice cream. "You're kidding, right? You beat Squall's score!"

I shrugged. "So what?"

Zell dropped the cookie into his ice cream - **splut** - as he stared at me. "So what?" He blinked. "So you should be blabbin' it on the entire network!"

"Why?" I finished my hot dog and reached for the dressing and my celery. "That doesn't prove anything. I just wanted to pass. You made that happen. Now I can do my field exam and graduate. That's all I want."

Zell rested his right elbow on the table and put his cheek on his fist, watching me as he munched another ice cream slathered cookie. Goose pimples raised on my arms, but I ignored them as I swirled the dip in the little plastic cup with my celery stalk. *Okay, Sally. He's quiet. Ask him out. You can do it.* I cleared my throat-

"Say, you wanna meet my ma?"

My finger tightened on the celery stalk. It collapsed with a crisp squinch. I raised my eyes to meet his. "Your mother?"

Zell nodded and lowered his fist from his cheek. "Sure. I've got a day off tomorrow, so I'd planned on heading over to Balamb and saying 'howdy' to ma. She likes meeting my friends, and it would be great if you told her that story. She'd get a kick."

Meet his mother. Zell Dincht's ma. I swallowed my heart and gave a slight nod followed by a timid smile. "That sounds like fun," I said softly. *Boy, does it ever.*

"Great. You work tomorrow?"

I shook my head. "I asked for the day off because of the exam qualifier today. Thought I'd need the time to myself." *Go to Balamb...*

Zell laughed. "You thought you'd fail, didn't you?"

I shook my head again. "No. I didn't know what to think. That's why I wanted the day off." *Meet his mother?*

Zell popped the last of his cookie in his mouth and finished his soda. He pointed at my plate. "You gonna play with it, or eat it?"

A giggle escaped the shock. I set down the celery. "I'm not really hungry. Too excited. I can hardly believe I passed."

He stuck out a hand. "Give me your cookie and then we'll head over to the Training Center."

I blinked. The smile vanished from my face, replaced a moment later with a grin as warm fuzzies and goose pimples attacked. "Okay," I said as I passed him my cookie.

We stood and left the cafeteria for the Training Center, Zell immediately telling me that while I'd been in the Fire Cavern he'd figured something out to help my delivery. I put my hands behind my back to give myself a pinch. It hurt, and I barely withheld a giggle.