

8: Day Six - On the Way Back to Garden

I snuggled into the warm embrace with a smile. "If this is a dream, don't wake me up," I mumbled.

Chuckle. "Got to. We're here."

I frowned and moved my hands slightly under my cheek. "Nuh-uh."

Another chuckle and a gentle nudge. "Come on. Or I'm letting the train take you back to Timber."

I moaned my complaint but opened my eyes just the same. Zell stood over me with a smile as he crossed his arms and slightly shook his head. I gave him a silly smile and adjusted my arms around my jacket as I snuggled it closer. "Hey."

"Hey yourself, sleepy head." He gestured to the left. "Come on. The conductor's getting ancy."

I took in a deep breath and stretched before sitting up and rubbing my eyes with the back of my hands. I yawned. "Okay, okay," I said through it. Then I stood, scooping up my jacket.

"Better put it on. I think it's raining."

I shrugged into it, still drifting in and out of the dreamworld I'd left - and visions of Zell and me having fun and laughing and hugging and kissing... yeah. I definitely liked that part. "Where we off to now?"

"If there isn't a message from ma saying she can't make it back in time, I figured we'd watch T.V. or something."

"And if there is?" I asked as I followed Zell from the train.

"Then we'll hoof it back to Garden before the big storm hits."

"Oh."

Zell looked over at me. "Unless you want me to rent a car. It's no big deal."

"Walking's fine," I told him. *It's just that I don't want this day to come to an end, is all.*

Up to that point the day had been a surreal experience from one moment to the next. I stared at the floor under my feet as we made our way down the stairs. It sprinkled more than rained. "I don't mind getting wet. I don't melt."

"You know what's really fun?"

I shook my head as I looked over at him. *Besides you and your sense of humor and your grin and getting you to laugh?* "No. What?"

"Swimming in the rain."

"Really? I've never done that before." Visions of Zell in blue swimming trunks danced in my head. I flushed and lowered my gaze.

"It's a trip. Too bad you didn't bring your suit. We coulda swum around a bit."

I nodded with regret. "Maybe I could come back another day? We could do it then." *Did I just ask that?*

"Hey. That'd be cool."

We hurried our step a little bit to his house, and I closed the door after me as he went to the computer to log in and check his email. *Please oh please don't let there be an e-mail...*

"Oh yeah!" Zell exclaimed. "I think she's coming. No e-mail."

Yes! "I'm glad. I'm looking forward to having dinner with her. After all, you had lunch with my mother."

Zell swivelled around in the computer chair, spinning full circles while grinning that same boyish grin I'd grown to love ages ago. "Your mom's a riot. And those stories about the animals from the shop? I was laughing so hard I thought I'd fall out of my chair!"

I shrugged out of my jacket to put it on the coat rack close to the door. Then I sat tailor-style on the floor in front of his chair. I couldn't help it. I was a floor-sitter. "Her and

Dad have tons of those. Sometimes she'll e-mail me them. I've thought about making a book for the junior classmen."

"Hey, that'd be sweet," Zell said as he stopped spinning. "You should send it to Timber Maniacs, too, and see if he knows someone who'd publish it. I know they'd sell."

I examined an ink spot on the knee of my right pant leg and scratched at it. "I'll think about it some more, but I'll probably do it."

Zell spun around in the chair once more. Then he leaned his elbows back against the computer desk. "So... What d'ya wanna do? T.V.? Video games? Too bad it's raining. We coulda gone fishing."

Zell didn't strike me as the fishing type, though. I gave a shrug, still picking at the ink spot while only occasionally sending Zell a glance.

"I might have a new Combat King magazine we could look at," he said as he stood. "I'll go up and check in my room. Hold on a sec."

Zell ascended the stairs to his room, and I sighed before looking back to my worn jeans. So many thoughts were dancing around in my head that I didn't have a chance to completely think one before another was pushing its way through. My life couldn't get any better. Well, except for graduation if I passed the field exam.

"No way!"

I looked up. Zell hadn't come down yet.

"Ohh yeeaah!"

I smiled, giving a shake of my head as I stood to hover at the bottom of the stairs.

"Zell?"

"Yo, Meg! Check it out!"

I waited for him to come downstairs so I could... When he didn't, I hesitantly began the climb. *Oh my gosh*. It seemed to me like I entered the shrine of a... well, never mind. Zell sat on his bed intensely reading an article in the promised Combat King magazine. I

self-consciously cleared my throat, shifting my weight from one foot to the other as I wrung my hands in front of me. I stayed near the doorway.

"What?" I asked after another clearing of my throat.

"They published my submission!"

Inhibitions and boundaries were forgotten as I hurried over to his side, sitting on the bed close beside him as I pulled the magazine closer to my side. "Where?"

Zell pointed several times in quick succession to the left side of the page where I read the verbal description of the move and the pros and cons of it, just as Zell had described to me and my mom over lunch that day. "See? They published it!"

"How cool is that?" I asked with a wide smile. Then I threw my arms around him to give him a tight hug. "Congratulations!"

Zell's left arm went around me to return the embrace. Then, when my sluggish brain realized what was happening, I pulled back as calmly as possible. Once his arm had left the now very warm section around my waist, I scooted a fraction of a measurement away from him.

"This is so sweet," he said, seemingly oblivious to what had happened.

Whew. "It is, isn't it? Are you going to send in another one?" I asked calmly.

Zell looked over at me with a grin. "Damn straight! I get 1500 gil each time they accept a submission."

I blinked. "Really? Wow. Maybe I should start submitting?"

Zell's expression grew thoughtful. "You know? That's not such a bad idea." He closed the magazine after another moment, sending me a momentary point. "Tell ya what, when we meet tomorrow to start naming your better moves, we can start putting together a submission packet."

I'm getting together with Zell tomorrow, too? I smiled. "Okay. Sounds like fun." *Be still my beating heart.*

Zell stood and headed for the doorway of his room. "Come on. I've got two

magazines downstairs we can look at, too. I think I saw a couple moves that we could mesh together that'd be perfect for you."

I gave a slow, happy shrug of both shoulders as I released a quick breath and surrendered to another silly smile. I stood to follow after him. "Cool." That word could've described my entire day that far. Actually, it didn't do it justice. I don't think I had the words in my vocabulary for a description of the day.

So, Zell and I lay opposite one another on the floor, our heads occasionally brushing against each other when we pointed at articles here and there. We shared viewpoints and critiques of the moves published. We shared opinions on moves that shouldn't have been published.

I found out who his favorite submitter was and why. I found out who his favorite judge/master/whatever was and why. I also found out just how smart he was. I'd always suspected he knew a lot, especially about what he taught at Garden. I'd seen that when he'd given me the lesson. When we discussed the articles in the *Combat King*, I saw it on an even grander scale.

Zell was smart.

"What about this one?" I asked, pointing at a move that combined a few different kinds of leg/feet moves.

"Here. Let me see."

I turned the magazine around and tapped the page.

"Which one?"

"This one," I said as I tapped again.

"Hmm. You know, I think that's a good one to try next. Your coordination's on the high side, so you should pick it up really fast."

Attack of the warm fuzzies... I turned the magazine back around. "I need to find more fist combos, though."

Zell flipped through the pages of his most recent Combat King. "I thought I saw one in here... yeah." He turned it around and tapped. "It'll take longer to master than the other one, but I really think you should give it a shot. It does a good job of combining body strength and balance with speed and dexterity. The only thing you'd need to watch would be the contact. We need to work on your focal points a bit, but you'll get it quick enough."

The door opened. Zell looked over his shoulder to give his mother a grin. "Hey, ma. Have fun?"

"Hello, Zell. Hello, Sally," she greeted as she shook out her coat and hung it next to mine. "Yes, I did, as a matter of fact. What about you two?"

"Of course," Zell said as he sat up. I gathered the magazines and handed them to him. He took them and straightened them in his hands. "This is Meg and me you're talking about."

"Meg?"

Zell stood, watching me out of the corner of his eye as I did the same. Then he looked back over at his mother. *Well that was weird.* It was as if he'd been checking to make sure I didn't need help. I nearly giggled at the whole gallantry thing of it.

"Yeah. Short for Mega-Phoenix. She gave me one of those a while ago. Remember that whole thing with choosing between Headmaster Cid or Gardenmaster Norg? It was then."

"Oh. Then you've known her for a while," Ma Dinct observed as she hung up her scarf.

"Well, almost. So what's for dinner?"

Ma Dinct laughed. "Let me change out of my wet clothes, Zell. And in case you haven't noticed, I've been simmering a pot roast all day. If you and Sally could cut up some potatoes and add them to the crock pot, that would help. Don't forget the carrots and celery, too." And then she was up the stairs and closing the door to her room to change.

"Pot roast! Ohh yeaaaah!" Zell exulted, and he hurried in search of the aforementioned crock pot. He found it in the right corner of the kitchen. He removed the lid to take a deep whiff of the slowly simmering meat inside. "Ma makes the best pot roast. Here. Take a whiff."

I leaned slightly over the crock pot and closed my eyes as I took a sniff of the fragrant aroma of spices, juice, and meat. My mouth practically started watering there into the crock pot. "Oh my gosh. That smells good."

"Don't I know it." Zell turned for the fridge to grab three potatoes from a basket on top. "Here. Wash these and cut them in half."

I took them and moved to the sink. "Then I'm to put them in the pot?"

"Yup. I'll get the celery," he said as he opened the fridge and bent inside, "and cut 'em up," he finished in a muffled voice. "Celery with pot roast rocks."

"Shouldn't we have another green?"

"Yeah. Probably. I wonder if she has any... hmm... do you like broccoli?"

"Strange as it sounds, I do. She has some?" I finished washing the potatoes and moved to the counter near the crock pot to cut them in half with a knife from the knife holder beside the toaster. I carefully put them into the crock pot.

"Yeah. Fresh, too." He straightened, celery in one hand and broccoli in the other, and gestured to the cabinet at my feet. "Grab me a pot, will ya?"

"Sure." I opened the cabinet to pull out what I believe is called a 'dutch oven'. I straightened to hand it to him, but then pulled it back again with a smile. "You've kind of got your hands full, Mr. Dincht."

Zell grinned. "Yeah. Just a little."

I giggled. "You want some water in it, right?"

"Yeah. About half an inch." He moved to where I'd been standing once I moved to the sink. Then he set the celery and broccoli onto the counter. He wiped off the knife I'd

used for the potatoes and started picking and choosing the stalks of celery lucky enough to go into the stew. He looked over his shoulder at me. "Got it?"

I nodded and brought the pot back over. "You want me to break apart the broccoli and put it in?"

"Perfect. Oh, and you better turn on the stove. It takes a little while to heat up. Go ahead and put the pot on it, and you better get the lid. Don't want all that steam getting loose."

I nodded again, doing as I was told and enjoying every minute of it. So, he cut up the celery as I broke up the broccoli, both of us putting the unused stalks back into the refrigerator. We didn't talk much, but I didn't care. The silence and the crunch, crip, crack of the celery and the broccoli was good enough for me. After all, I was helping Zell Dincht make dinner. Who needed conversation?

The celery went into the crock pot, the broccoli remains were thrown away, and then we cleaned the counter, washed our hands, and drifted back into the living room to wait for his mother. Before she came down, Zell remembered a website he wanted me to see and ushered me over to the computer.

So that's where we were when Ma Dincht came downstairs and took over the preparations, me looking over Zell's shoulder as he pointed and talked and discussed the website and how it did a great job of displaying fighting techniques, etc, etc.

Ma Dincht praised our kitchen duties, gently scolded Zell for forgetting the carrots (he didn't like them, apparently), and thanked us for cleaning up after ourselves. Then she promptly teased Zell by accusing him of not cleaning up after himself unless there was company. He denied it with a grin in my direction, and then remembered another website that had a better search engine.

So I was back to looking over his shoulder, leaning in more this time, as he typed and pointed and talked.

I was in heaven.

At dinner, Zell told a couple more stories from his adventures with Squall and Selphie and the others against Sorceress Ultimecia. Then he was pushing for me to tell the story of my adventure with the Fire Cavern. I did and Zell had been right. Ma Dincht did love it. When I finished, Zell laughed and said I'd added more fancy stuff the second time around, and then he laughed harder when I blushed. Ma Dincht gave him a poke while telling him to "leave the girl alone," to which he gave an innocent 'who me?' look.

Did I already say I was in heaven?

Then it was time to go back to Garden, and I found myself enveloped in a warm hug by Ma Dincht while promising to visit again soon.

"Hey, Sally," Zell said as we made our way to the door, "could you head on over to the car rental to see what they have? I gotta talk to Ma."

"Okay. Bye, Ma," I said again with a wave and a smile.

"Bye, Sally."

Then I left the Dincht home with a deep sigh and a content smile as I stuffed my hands in my pockets. *Wow. Nobody will believe I've spent the entire day with Zell Dincht. That I've teased and laughed. That I've tickled and smacked and pushed. That I've been more myself than I thought possible. Why should they? I don't even believe me.*

I snuggled deeper into the warmth of my jacket as I walked toward the car rental station. Tomorrow wouldn't be so bad. Not after today. I liked him. It wasn't a big deal. He liked me, too. So I liked him as more than a friend. That wasn't a big deal, either. We had fun together, and I really doubted that would change when I told him how I felt.

I stepped up to the window of the rental place. "Hi. What do you guys have available to rent tonight?"

"Where you headed?"

"Back to Garden."

"Oh. Well we have a car specially reserved for SeeD use."

If it was anything like the train car, it was probably ritzier than anything I'd seen before. "Really? Wow. That would be great."

"I'll just need to see your ID and then," he pulled out some paperwork, "just fill this out. Then you're all set."

"Oh." I looked down at the paper as I dug for my ID. I took it out, set it on the counter, and then picked up the pen to start filling out the paper.

"You're a candidate?"

"Uh-huh," I said as I continued to fill out the paper.

"The car's only for SeeD. I'm sorry."

"Oh," I said again. I looked up, worrying the inside of my lip. "Well, what else do you have?"

The man turned to his computer and typed a few letters. "Let's see..."

"What's the matter? The SeeD car gone?"

I looked to my right to see Zell approaching. He was slipping into his jacket. "I can't rent it. I'm only a candidate."

Zell made a face before stepping up to the counter. "Yo, Henry. Come on. Stop doing everything by the book and give us the SeeD car. Geez."

The man named Henry laughed as he turned to grab the keys from the wall on the opposite side of the office. "I didn't know she was with you, Zell. Cut me some slack. Here you go."

Zell took the keys. Then he sent the guy a salute. "Thanks, Henry. Later."

We piled into the pale blue economy car and buckled up. Then we left Balamb. I snuggled my hands deeper into my pockets as I stared out the window at the dark night with the bright stars and glistening water.

"Tired?"

I nodded with a sigh before sending Zell a little smile. "Yes, but it's a good tired. I've

had a lot of fun today. Thanks for asking me to come along."

The smile he returned to me made him even better looking. "Sure."

My gaze moved back outside. I actually felt comfortable. I wasn't stressing or worrying or wondering or anything like that. I just sat there enjoying the view and the company and the memories I had. It was nice. I'm not saying I was cured of my shyness. No. That's something a person wrestles with their entire life, but I felt comfortable. And that felt nice.

"You up to working out tomorrow morning? Same as last time?"

My eyes met his sidelong glances. "Of course. Are we going to try some of those moves we saw in the magazine?"

"Maybe one, but I don't want to overdo it. We've got to keep testing you for the field exam coming up. If I overload you with new moves and stuff, you'll freak out and flunk. Well, maybe not flunk, but you'd freak."

"Okay. Just one then. That's okay."

"Then, after class, I'll meet you at the library."

My eyes widened. "Really? Why?"

"We've got to come up with some possible names for the moves, remember? And we've got to start figuring out what we should submit to Combat King. I'm thinking we should start work on a leg move and save the combos for later."

Oh my gosh. "Okay." It couldn't get better.

Garden's brightness loomed in front of us then, and my stomach settled clear to my spine. I didn't want the day to end. Zell pulled the car into the parking lot and got out, coming around to my side as I struggled with my seat belt.

"I think I'm stuck," I said absently once he'd opened the door.

"What?"

"I can't get the belt undone."

"Here. Let me see." Zell leaned into the car and over me, examining the seat belt as I sat back further into the seat and closed my eyes.

Oh boy... He smelled better than great.

"What the hell?" Zell muttered.

I opened my eyes and looked over, but his head was in the way. "What's the matter?"

"The button won't go in all the way, but there's nothing blocking it. Hmm... Geez. Come on, you stupid little..."

I stifled a giggle behind a strategically placed hand and looked away. "Sorry about this," I said when I trusted my voice.

"Nah. Not your fault- there. Okay. Free to go." He straightened and promptly bumped his head on the door frame. "Ouch!" He glared at it as he rubbed his head.

"Are you okay?" I asked as I carefully got out of the car.

"Yeah. Geez. I knew there was a reason I didn't like this car."

I giggled aloud that time, tugging his arm and gesturing toward the entrance to Garden. "You want to stop by the infirmary and get some ice?" I asked once he started walking.

"Nah. I've had tougher bumps than this and lived to tell about it."

Thank goodness for that. We entered Garden's main corridor and turned right toward the dormitory. "Thanks again for today, Zell."

"No sweat. Thanks for inviting me to lunch with your ma. It was fun. Too bad your dad couldn't come, though. That would've been a riot playing ball with you and him."

"I've still got to go swimming in the rain with you in Balamb. So we'll just have to make a day to play ball together when I know my dad's going to be in Timber." *Way to go, Sally!*

"Sounds like fun."

But something didn't sound right. I sent him a sidelong glance. Zell had started

lightly rubbing his tattoo, something he did when he was really thinking about something.

Uh-oh. "You okay?"

"Yeah." Zell seemed to shrug something off moments before sending me a grin and a nudge. "See you bright and early tomorrow morning, Sally. Okay?"

I nodded, not knowing if I should push or let it go. "Okay."

"See ya."

Then he headed away at a jog. I stopped at the corridor that led to the dormitory and watched him until he'd moved out of sight. Then I released a slow breath and turned, quietly heading toward my room and the sweet promise of tomorrow.