

Zell's Experience

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Yo, i'm Zell, champion marial artist of Garden! I'm telling you the story of when my team and I had to save the Garden from an invader! Watchout!

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Zell's Experience:

Falling

I lay in bed. I'd just woke up. I'd been dreamin'. I was dreamin' about me bein' a champion kick boxer, and that all of Balamb Garden had turned out to congratulate me. They'd given me a big trophy, and a wreath of flowers, and then Rinoa, Quistis and Selphie ran up and gave me a kiss on the cheek.

It was a good dream.

I lay on the bed in my baggy jeans, tee shirt, jacket, and sneakers. I'd stopped for a nap after lunch. We'd been on the go for a while. We hadn't gotten a chance to rest lately, and, frankly, I just couldn't stand it, anymore. We'd fought and killed Garden Master NORG about a week before, and gotten pretty beat up. Now, after a hot dog and a good nap, I was ready to face the world again, and punch it between the eyes.

What'd woke me up was the intercom. It's a handy thing, that intercom. Squall'd said a lot of things to a lot of people over those speakers. Squall was our leader, and the new leader of Garden. He was tall with scraggly brown hair and icy blue eyes. He didn't talk much, but seemed to think a lot. When he did talk, though, he knew exactly what to say.

But it wasn't Squall's voice this time, it was Nida. Nida'd graduated to SeeDom along with Squall and me. At first I only knew his name, but I soon found out that he is a really talented guy. He'd learned how to pilot the Garden in just one lesson. That's one awesome thing to accomplish.

Selphie'd graduated with us, too. She had brown hair and green eyes. She was a spunky, peppy girl. But she didn't matter right now, Nida was on.

"Squall, Tilmitt, Trepe, Kinneas, Heartilly, Dincht!" Nida said. "Get up here right now!" He sounded pretty urgent. I recognized the names.

Squall, a'course, was the famous Squall Leonhart. I talked about 'im before. I wasn't surprised that Nida used his first name to call him instead of his last like everybody else.

Tilmitt was Selphie, ditto.

Trepe was Quistis Trepe. She had blonde-ish, brownish hair and blue eyes. She was an old instructor, and about a half a year older than me. She was nice, but a real worrier.

Kinneas was Irvine, world class sharpshooter extrodinare. He's tall, rugged, a real ladies man. He flirts whenever he gets the chance. And why not? 6'0", brown hair, blue eyes, girls say he's cute, but I wouldn't know.

Girls say I'm cute, too. So I guess it's a good thing. Hah!

Heartilly was Squall's girlfriend, although he doesn't like to admit it. She has blackish hair and brown eyes. She's a tiny little light-skinned girl called Rinoa.

They were all my pals; we'd been through a lot together. I jumped to my feet and took off toward the bridge. I was Zell Dincht, and they were calling me, too.

I got to the bridge and everyone was already there. Nida was talkin' to Squall, when he was done, Squall turned to us.

"We've got a challenger down at the front gate. We've been advised to take caution, there may be some fighting involved. Make sure your weapons, and GFs are equipped."

"This challenger is threatening Garden?" Quistis asked.

"If it thinks it can get Garden, I'll knock his head off!" I grinned, puttin' up my fists and punchin' around in the air. When I get excited, I like to pretend that the creep is right in front of me, and I'm knockin' his brains out. It gets me hyped up.

"Hold on, Zell," Rinoa said from behind me. "Don't get so excited. We don't even know what this thing looks like, yet, let alone what it can do. It might be a huge monster with the strength to smack your body right out from between your arms!"

"Don't get so excited, Rinoa." Irvine slid her a smile. He's always smilin', even when things don't quite go his way. Things rarely do.

Squall spoke up again, addin' severity back into the situation. "We are heading off, now. If we get into a battle, Rinoa, and Quistis, you're with me, and then we'll substitute if anyone gets KOed."

He ran out of the headmaster's office. We tailed him to the elevator and took it down to the first floor. We had to go in threes, so Selphie, Irvine, and I waited for the elevator to come back.

"Welp," Irvine said in classic Irvine, "here we go again."

"Nervous?" I asked.

"Nah," Irvine answered, "we're on backup, we probably won't even have to fight."

"Yeah!" Selphie agreed. "This creep will see all of us and run away. There won't be any fighting at all, 'cause we rule!"

"You said it, baby!" I shouted. "We're number one!" I was really getting' into this, if ya couldn't tell.

"Look!" Selphie chirped. "The elevator's back!"

It's cool how sweet little Selphie can be so happy in the face of a battle.

But, anyway, we got on and went down a couple floors to the main one. Squall, Quistis, and Rinoa were

waitin' down by the directory. We rushed down and met 'em.

Squall took up tellin' us what to do:

"Now, our first approach is one of pacivity. We are NOT promoting violence, if we can calmly convince him to back down, we will" He glanced around. "Rinoa, get that battle-disk put away. Quistis, tuck your whip under your shirt. Irvine, you're gun's sticking out," He glanced around pointin' out anythin' remotely wrong in each of us. "Selphie! Those are huge!" He said, pointin' to her nunchaku.

"But I have no where to put them!" She whined. She was right; she lived in nothing but a tight yellow, overall-ed, mini skirt.

His eyebrows knit together, warpin' the scar that slashed across his face. "Then give them to Irvine, he's got enough trench coat to go around." He finally came to me. "Zell, gloves off."

I couldn't believe it, My gloves? Naw! But he stared down my throat, and my metal-knuckled gloves came off.

"Now, if we jump into an all out fight," he said, "it is Rinoa in second and Quistis in third. The other three are on backup. If the first person goes down, the second person jumps in to take first position, and the third person replaces the second. The reinforcements jump in third. Understood?"

We all nodded. "Right"

"Let's go."

We turned and took off toward the front gate. Squall lead, we followed. He stopped just as we got to the open-air sea deck where the street used to be. Ya see, Garden moves now, it didn't use to. We waited just outside the turn-styles as he moved out to face the stranger.

First look, I couldn't 'im real well. A ton of guards were standin' in the way, but what I did see was black and crusty. Like the dude was covered head to toe in a huge scab. He didn't look like he was built normal, either. Really tall and lanky.

Squall signaled for us to stay ready, and stepped out to talk to the thing. The guards moved back.

This man, which I wouldn't call a man really, stood up as tall as he could, which was somethin' like twenty feet, and yelled down to Squall on the ground.

"You! Puny human! Are you the leader of this facility?"

"Yes." Squall answered. He stood like a little green army man next to a Godzilla action figure. It was black and crusty all over with big sharp claws, a long, spiky tail, and the biggest, ugliest feet I'd ever seen.

"You are?" The creature growled. He bared his sharp yellow teeth as he laughed a laugh that sounded like more of a roar, "This puny thing? He's all wiry!"

I was ready to run up and clobber that creep. Squall may've been all legs, but he wasn't puny. He could take on anything! And, I've seen him do it. He's better than most of us, and insultin' him meant insultin' me.

I must've been 'showing signs of aggression' 'cause Quistis shot me a fiery look over her shoulder and said, "Cool it."

I glanced over, innocently, but she didn't buy it. I let my arms drop.

The stranger's roar of a laugh dulled into a growl as he started to demand again. "Surrender this facility to me, the Rebellion."

"The Rebellion?" Selphie repeated. She turned and whispered across to me. "That's his name?"

I shrugged. It was a strange name. "I wonder if he chose it, or if he was sorry enough to have it given to him!" I whispered back. She giggled. Quistis cleared her throat and shifted weight to her other foot, signalin' for us to shut up.

"Why do you feel you deserve this facility?" Squall asked, coolly. He never let the size of his opponent effect his self-confidence. I really admire that guy.

"The Shumi are meant to take over the world." The Rebellion answered. "Shumi hold much of the world in the palm of their hands. I am a Shumi, and have heard that this building has lost its Shumi controller. I am here to reclaim the rightful role of Garden Master for my people."

I took a second look. The Rebellion didn't look like a Shumi to me. Shumis had long hands and yellow-ey skin. This guy was crinkley, and it looked like he had paws.

He definitely didn't look like Garden Master NORG.

"Oh, I get it," I offered, "we killed NORG, so you've come to take his place."

"You killed NORG!?!!" The Rebellion roared. The other five turned to me and frowned.

"Zell!"

"Ooops." There went me and my big mouth, again. Sometimes, I really wish I would stop and think things trough before I say 'em. But I can't seem to master that. I, instead, usually blurt out the first thing I think of.

Call it a bad habit of mine.

I let my shoulders sag. At least, if I couldn't take it back, I could show them that I was upset with myself. And upset I was.

Stupid me! Stupid, stupid, stupid!

"We didn't kill Garden Master NORG without prompting." I could tell that Squall was tryin' to make up for what I'd said. He wasn't doin' too well.

Stupid me! Stupid!

"If you slew NORG, then you are my challenger!" The Rebellion roared. "Prepare to die!!!"

"I'm sure we can go about this rationally-" Squall tried to recover peace talks, but the Rebellion slashed at him with his tail. He grabbed his gunblade from behind his back, and blocked the shot just in time. The tail-spike threw sparks when it hit the metal.

"Grrrr." The Rebellion growled, smiling. "So you came prepared to kill me, too."

"Everyone! Battle Formation!"

Rinoa and Quistis ran forward, weapons ready. Rinoa took up her place on Squall's right, and Quistis on his left. The ATB counter started runnin'.

Squall jumped up first. "You brought this on yourself!" He let his gunblade drop to one side and concentrated. "Blizzaga!"

He was casting a magic spell. We use spells a lot in battle, they are good to use for an element-on-element type of strategy. The spells aren't really magic, they are more of a mental control of the matter existin' around you.

The Rebellion frosted over and then exploded in ice crystals. They broke apart and left him standin'

there. He jumped, but bounded back, roaring, "Thundaga!"

The ground under Rinoa started to break apart, and she was struck with a lightning bolt. She jumped back, "OW!"

"Are you okay?" Quistis asked.

"Yeah," she stepped up and fired her double-edged battle frisbee-thingy. I don't really know what it is, but I call it a battle disk. You see, it's a disk, and she uses it in battle. A battle disk.

But, any way, it flew out like a boomerang and sliced its way through the dude. It seemed like physical attacks didn't do much good. His nasty skin was like a livin' shield. Magic didn't do a lot, either. I could tell it was goin' to be a tough fight.

"Go get 'em, Quisty!" Selphie cried from beside me. "Tear 'em limb from limb!"

She was a violent little tyke. Irvine cast me a questionin' look. It made me grin. My buds were quite a bunch! We were as varied, and different as a box of mixed chocolates. Selphie was so sunny that she would take enemies by surprise, then, as she would say, 'blow them to smithereens!'

Irvine would always find somethin' to smile about in any situation. I was glad I was on the sidelines with these two. If I couldn't be in the fight, my second choice would be to watch it as a spectator, and Squall the strong leader, or the worrywart twins, Quistis and Rinoa wouldn't be the best company for that.

Quistis jumped forward. She didn't stay long. I guessed she was summoning a GF. Quezelcotl, probably. He's her best one. She and Irvine have to fight over him.

GF stood for guardian force. Guardian forces were element-governing immoralities that exist in various places all over the world. That's how the textbook put it, anyway. When you beat or acquire one, they fight for you when you call them during battle.

It would be a good chance to see how this Rebellion stood up against the heavy artillery.

Squall was up again. He jumped forward and held his gunblade across his chest. "Draw!" the magic swirled out of the Rebellion and into him, as always happens when you draw a spell from an enemy.

"Thundaga!" Thundaga must have been the spell he'd drawn, because he immediately turned around and cast it on our opponent. The Rebellion suffered the same effect as Rinoa, but didn't flinch. It seemed as if electricity did practically nothin'.

Which was too bad, 'cause now, Quezelcotl was up.

Quistis jumped forward. "Thunder Storm!"

She crossed her arms over her chest then, stretchin' them in front of her, released the GF. Quezelcotl was the spirit governing thunder. He was a big bird, only he didn't have feathers, or feet, or a face. He was a sight, but nothin' new.

I'd never loaded Quezelcotl, myself but he was one of our first GFs. When he was released by Quistis, we all disappeared from sight. That's what happens when you summon a GF. The effects of its attack is so strong, that, in order to avoid killin' ourselves, we go clear. Not really just clear, more of a not-solid type situation. We were there, but not physically, so that we couldn't get hurt by GF's attack.

Don't worry if you don't get it, after just saying that, I'm not sure I get it, either.

But, anyway, it happened, and Quezelcotl swirled up and prepared to attack. Up ahead, Quistis was still in her 'cast' pose. She had to keep the door open, so that Quezelcotl could get through. She had him junctioned, which meant that through her was the only way Quezelcotl could get into our world to fight. Even the three of us, Selphie, Irvine, and I, were blotted out.

Quezelcotl stretched out his wings, and shot a bolt of lightning out of what could have been called his beak, but I don't know. Maybe there is an official name for the beak of a beakless bird.

Maybe.

But, anyway, even if the Rebellion was strong against thunder attacks, there was nothing he could do to keep from being hurt by Quezelcotl's blast.

Except absorb it.

Yes, sometimes when your defense is really high, you absorb the damage to your HP. Unluckily, the Rebellion had really REALLY high stats to Thunder.

We came out of clearness. The Rebellion sneered down at us.

"So," he slitted his yellow-brown eyes, "your little party is prepared to fight big, well," he swipped his jagged tail around behind him, "then this is not the place for a real battle. Thunder Claw!" He bent down and snatched up Squall in both paws.

It was fast, Squall had no time to react, his gunblade fell, he twisted around, tryin' to catch it, but it was too late, it hit the floor by Rinoa and lay just out of reach. The Rebellion's sharp spiky tail crackled with electricity as he brought it up and slashed. The blade caught Squall right across the collarbones.

Not a good place for a deep gash.

At the same time, she was given a bagillion-volt charge, the Rebellion threw him down to where he was before.

Cue Rinoa. "Squall!"

Then Quistis, Selphie, and Irvine, "Squall!"

Me, too. "SQUALL!"

He lay out on his side, his left arm out across the pavement, and glued to his side by the weight of his body. He tilted his head a little, and caught sight of his gunblade. He reached up slowly to grab it, bringin' his right arm slowly across his chest. He let his hand fall on the handle. It was all he could do.

"C'mon!" Irvine rushed out, waving for Selphie and me to come with him. We fell to our knees next to Squall, who was bleeding bad and breathing deep. Rinoa looked down, uncertain. I think she was scared for him. I wasn't. It wasn't like we couldn't fix 'im, as long as we could get him out of the battlefield.

"Okay, Squall, we're gonna get you out of here, man." I said. He glanced up. It was a look that said 'Don't touch me' on the surface, and at the same time, much, much deeper, 'Help'.

Selphie fidgeted, "hurry, guys!"

"Get the gunblade, Selphie." Irvine directed. He reached over and moved Squall's arm down to his side, exposing a huge, dank, bloody river down his shirt. It kinda grossed me out.

I rolled him over onto my arm. He closed his eyes and let his head fall on my jacket sleeve.

Now I was getting scared. Squall would never have let anyone hold him like that, never.

Irvine and I looked at each other over our wounded friend. I saw by how e looked at me, that he was worried, too. We must have been thinkin' the same thing. He threaded an arm under Squall's shoulders, and together we dragged him back to the sidelines.

Selphie dropped Squall's gunblade. Irvine tossed her her chained wooden nucnchaku and took Squall from me. Rinoa jumped up to the first position, Quistis took over second. Selphie beat me to third.

I really wanted to get even.

But, anyway, Selphie got in fighting position and prepared to whip 'im in my place. I didn't really pay attention, I was rummaging through my oversized pockets for potions. I found a normal potion. If there was anything better on me, it was hopelessly lost in my pants, and to get right down to it, I was in a hurry.

That was when it happened.

first there was a big roar, the Rebellion had let his whole lung's worth go in one big ear-splitting noise. I jumped at the sound, and looked up fast. The Rebellion was coiled up on the ground like a panther. He immediately shot himself up to the sky, roaring, "I will await you at a REAL battle field!"

We stared up after him for a sec. Someone took the potion from me, but I didn't notice them do it. It looked as if he was headin' toward the roof.

"Let's get after him!" Selphie cried.

"Wait!" Rinoa dropped her battle disk and ran over. She nearly killed Irvine, shovin' him out of the way.

Squall slammed his head on the cement.

"Ow! Geez!"

I guess he'd drinken the potion while I was lookin' up, 'cause he looked a lot better. It looked like he'd gotten back like, two to three hundred hit points. Which was good, not as good as it could've been, but good. He wasn't bleedin' as much, anyway.

Rinoa started messin' with him and stuff, like girlfriends do in all the movies where the hero gets hurt and stuff. I was shoved aside by Quistis, who wanted a look. Selphie stood lookin' over Quistis's shoulder.

I couldn't stop lookin' for the murderous son of a wretched dog up on the Garden's roof. I was gonna kill him! I was gonna kill the heck outta him, a million times over. It would be jus' me an' him. One on one. Mortal combat. And in the end... one would stand, and one would fall. If I wasn't on top, at least I wouldn't be around to see 'im do anythin' else.

But I wouldn't fall.

Rinoa was close to abusing Squall in her, uh, emotion I guess. She was happy, and scared, and worried all at the same time, so there really isn't a name for it. He kept trying to get her off.

I think she was hurtin' him.

"Ladies," Irvine interrupted. "Why don't you three head to the roof? We can't let this weirdo walk around Garden like there's nothin' wrong. Go keep an eye on him. Zell and I will look after Squall."

"I'm not going!" Rinoa announced. "I'm staying here!"

"Go." Squall said. His voice was weak and hoarse, like he was gargling. The blade had gotten 'im across the throat, after all.

"But-"

"Let's go, Rinoa." Quistis agreed, puttin' her hands on Rinoa's arm.

"Okay."

"Let's do it!" Selphie cried. "Let's fry him for Squall!" Rinoa and Quistis started off, but Selphie turned back for a sec. "Do not worry! By Graphar's Hammer, you shall be avenged!" She took off.

She was quite a character. Squall raised an eyebrow.

So did Irvine, but he quickly got back to business. "Alrighty, Squall, lets get you off to the infirmary," he reached down and looped Squall's arm over his shoulders, "then we can join the fight."

I took Squall's other arm. "Yeah, there's no way I'm lettin' the girls have all the fun." We hoisted him up, and drug him to the check in station at the entrance where we called for Dr. Kadowaki.

She was the head MD, and really nice, too. She'd take good care of Squall. I don't remember how long it took her to get there, I couldn't stop starin' up at the battlefield. I really REALLY wanted to be there! I wanted to get my hands around his crusty throat and squeeze, and twist until it snapped from his shoulders. I hated Irvine for volunteering me for that job. He could take care of Squall himself, or get one of the girls to help. All I wanted was to fight. I wondered how Quistis, Rinoa, and Selphie were doin'.

Dr. Kadowaki finally arrived. She came with a stretcher and about eight other MD students. Squall looked like he wasn't all right with all the attention, but there wasn't much he could do about it. Irvine and I unload him onto the stretcher, and Dr. Kadowaki turned to us.

"Okay, we'll take it from here, boys."

"But-" Irvine started.

"No," she smiled and wrinkles formed at the corners of her eyes. The MDs started to wheel away. "We'll do our job, now you go do yours."

We nodded. I couldn't wait! We took off. Up the elevator, across the hall out onto the observation deck, up the wall across the roof, THERE!

Rinoa leading, Quistis right, Selphie left. They were standing in formation in front of the Rebellion himself. A repeat of what happened below. It made me wonder what was so much better about this

battlefield.

I called out as we ran up. "Hey! Guys! We made it!"

Rinoa looked back. "Zell! Irvine!" Quistis jumped forward and began loading a GF. Rinoa continued to speak. "How's Squall?"

"Not sure," I answered, "but Dr. Kadowaki's got him, so he's okay."

"Unlike You others!" The Rebellion roared. He leapt forward and caught Selphie across the back with his claws. He would have gotten her in worse places if she hadn't balled up like she did.

"Hey!" Rinoa yelled. "Stop picking on Selphie!"

"What?" The monster asked, lickin' blood from his claws. "you don't like my new strategy?"

"You're a meanie!" Selphie said, a hand on her shoulder.

"Silence!" The creature snapped.

Rinoa jumped forward. "Brotherly Love!"

It was the battle cry of the Brothers. Sacred and Minnotaur, the two demon brothers, appeared under a huge chunk of roof. The Rebellion staggered, as the ground underneath him was dislodged and launched up, up, up into the sky.

These two were men after my own heart. I had loaded the Brothers tons of times, and they were just like me, always messin' around. They fought a lot, too. Whaddaya expect? They're brothers.

Minnotaur was the oldest, but smaller. Much smaller. He only come up to his little brother's waist. And yet, he could still whoop him. That's cool. Sacred was really really big, but much smaller in personality. He was, like, six years old.

It was the end of their attack, the part where Minnotaur launches Sacred high into the air to collide with the falling hunk of roof that was on it's way back down.

Make sure you have the size proportions right when you imagine that.

The Rebellion landed back where he had started, and the chunks of rock crashed all around him. The pieces fell onto a whole roof, 'cause the building was left the same as it started when the GF left.

"GrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrooooooooooooooAAAAAAAAAARRRRRRRRR!" He cried.

I grinned> He was feelin' it, that was good.

Th Rebellion threw up a paw, shouting. "Thundra!"

Selphie again. He was workin' backwards to frontwards. Lots of out enemies do that. We've all been in that kinda place at least once.

Selphie shuddered.

Quistis jumped up with her GF ready. "Ruby Light!"

She'd been loading Carbuncle. I was surprised to see 'im, honestly. Carbuncle wasn't her best GF.

For his attack, we didn't disappear. Instead, when he popped his cute little green head outta the ground, he was directed toward us. Carbuncle, ya see, was a Status GF. He jumped up into the air, the light of the sun reflected off the ruby on his forehead. The ruby cast the light down at us. Ruby Light. But, anyway, the reflection wrapped around Quistis, Rinoa, and Selphie making a kinda magic wall in front of them. Reflect is what it's called. After that, Carbuncle disappeared again.

Irvine and me didn't get 'reflected', 'cause we weren't active in the fight.

When Carbuncle was done leaving, Quistis relaxed again. The Rebellion sneered, jumped forward, and booted Selphie in the gut with his big, crusty foot. She flew back, the spit knocked out of her. Reflect only reflects magic attacks, see. She landed and groaned, "Ooooooooooh, I've had it!"

"Irvine, you get Selphie!" I said, fast, "I'm gettin' in on this fight, Baby!"

I jumped past Selphie and took up third position.

"Hello, Zell." Quistis said across to me on my right side.

"It's about time I got in 'ere!" I announced. "Let's get – it – ON!"

"You are so sure of yourself." The Rebellion growled. I'd started to see him as nothin' but one of the

monsters in the trainin' center. He didn't have a personality anymore, but he did have a big red and white target on his forehead.

The monster slashed Rinoa, she stood her ground. "Don't you go killing Rinoa, now!" Quistis shouted. "Stay back!" She snapped out her whip. It cut across the Rebellion's face, tearing away some of the nasty junk that was his skin.

You'd expect blood or somethin' if a hunk of skin was torn off a guy, but not this time. Instead, when the skin was off, you could see what was under it.

Hair. Orangey-reddy colored hair.

I probably would have thought that that was weird, 'cept I wasn't thinkin' that much. I really take my adrenaline seriously, meanin' that, I was in a fight, and now, nothin' else mattered.

He roared, and shot Rinoa with Thundra. He was still using that same strategy. I'd show him.

I rushed forward, my fists ready. I got him in the face, I got him in the gut.

Rinoa came up shoutin' "Utlima!"

BANG

That hadta hurt. Ultima was a really strong physical spell, we actually paid money to get it.

The Rebellion jumped back and yelped. Yeah, you heard me, yelped. Like someone stepped on a dog toy. It reminded me of a moomba.

Laguna Laguna! Don't ask.

'Moomba?' I thought. 'Hold on,-' I looked him over. He was kinda built like a moomba. moombas were little lion-like things that squeal and yelp. They walk on two legs and have big paws and big feet.

And orangey-reddy color fur.

"Hey! I shouted. "Didn't that yelp sound familiar?"

"Yeah." Rinoa agreed. "Kind of like a Moo-"

"RRRRROOOOOOAAAAARRRRRRRRR!!!!!!!!!!!!!" The Rebellion smacked her off the side with his big, sharp paw. She skidded to a stop a few yards away.

"Rinoa!" Quistis cried.

She didn't move.

"She's out." I said, shortly.

"Come on, Zell, move up." She waved me up to second and jumped into first. Irvine ran off to get Rinoa before joinin' us.

"Welp, guess we're fighting after all." He shrugged, getting' out his rifle.

"Don't look now," I said, "but I think this thing's really a Moomba."

"A what!?!?!!" He looked at me. "One of those cute little things?"

"I agree with Zell." Quistis said. "It at least sounded like one."

"Noooooo!!!" The monster roared. "I am not Moomba! I am the Rebellion! I stand alone! Thunder!"

He shot me. It crackled and made every nerve catch fire, but only for a second.

Thunder was the weakest Thunder magic.

Quistis jumped up and sent her whip back at the same place on his face as before. It got him a little further up on his muzzle, light yellow fur showed under it.

"Like heck you're not." I said.

"Grrrrrr." He narrowed his slitted eyes at us. "Fine." Then he reached up and tore away the loose shell. It was kinda gross, 'cause up until then, I thought that it was his skin. He just reached up and tore half his face off. It was WEIRD! "I am a moomba."

I come out of fightin' stance. I had thought so, but it was totally different to have him say it. When he said it, it sounded wrong.

"But," Irvine said, "you said you were a Shumi."

"Moombas are one of the chief evolutions of Shumi." The Rebellion answered. "When I was a young

Shumi, all the elders told us that we would all evolve someday when we were old enough. There are lots of things Shumis can evolve into, but the most common evolution was the moomba.

"The young Shumi were taught that moombas were noble creatures. That it was an honorable evolution, but I never saw the honor. Moombas couldn't speak, and were used as slave labor in most parts of the world. I thought moombas were pathetic creatures and vowed never to become one.

"When I evolved into a moomba, my whole life ended. I couldn't do anything about it. There was no reversing evolution, I was stuck.

"And then, one day, a man came to my village. He said he was on a journey. he felt sorry for me, such a pitiful moomba.

"'It's too bad that the Shumi evolve into creatures who cannot communicate.' I remember him saying. He took me aside and began to teach me. He tried to instruct me in the art of spoken language. I hadn't spoken in years, and when he failed, I became determined.

"I ran away from the village, and went to study magic under an expert. Through that art, I taught myself speech, cast magic, and improved my appearance."

I yawned. The Rebellion stopped rantin' and started to yell at us. "I have become invincible! I rebelled against all I'd ever been taught! I changed my name! The REBELLION!" HE reared back. "and you will not tell anyone of these things! You will die!"

Whoa! Back to action! Irvine jumped forward for the first time. "Draw!"

"ROAR!" The Rebellion whipped out with his tail, and slashed Irvine's hand.

"Ack!" He gun clattered o the ground. He grabbed his right wrist, blood drippin' from his knuckles. "My trigger hand!"

I noticed that the Rebellion was eyein' his double barrel. He glanced back, and dived for it while the Rebellion sent out his tail.

The Rebellion was fast.

The dude swepted it toward himself, and stopped it under his foot. Irvine shoved himself up, avoidin' his right hand.

It was my turn, time to call in the calvary.

'Ifrit! Lend me your power!'

'Again?' he said back to me. 'Oh, alright! You always summon me in the middle of a nap!'

I started loadin' him. He didn't take long, we chatted while I waited.

'Takin' a nap, huh?'

'Yes, I just finished a chess match over tea with Leviathan, and felt that I needed a bit of a refreshing.'

'I didn't know Leviathan could play chess.'

'He can't! I whooped him!' Ifrit cleared his throat and came back little more proper. 'I mean, I am a much more advanced chess player than he.'

"GrrrrrrrOOOAAAR!" The Rebellion struck out and got me, bam!, right in the kisser! Ifrit yelled in my head.

'Arrrrrrrrrrrrrrggghhh! What just punched me?!?'

'Somethin' ugly.' I thought.

'Let me at 'im!'

'Whatever you want!' I jumped forward, energy swirling around my body. I tensed all my muscles, brang my arm down in front of my face, then grabbing my hand with my other hand and pushing it out, I released him. "Hell Fire!"

Ifrit exploded out of me. I, and Quistis, and Irvine, too, went clear. Ifrit appeared wisp of flame. He crashed down and brought up this giant ball of fire from the earth. He pounded the ball down on the Rebellion, then retreated, saying, 'That'll show 'im.'

'Great goin' Ifrit!'

We all jumped back into solid-ity or whatever. the ex-moomba shrank down into a ball for a sec.

Shudderin' I guess. Ifrit musta just taken away all that Quezelcotl had given him.

"Thundaga!" The Rebellion had recovered fast, and now, hit me with a strong electric spell. It stung like heck, but one good thing about thunder magic is that it doesn't last long.

A gunless sharpshooter stepped up and drew.

"Thundaga!" The Rebellion roared again. The bolt hit Irvine, now.

"Hey!" Quistis shouted. "Don't go for a man who's unarmed! Come and get me for a change!" She whipped him again. He caught it in mid-snap. The leather whip was twisted around his lower arm. All he did was yank, and Quistis flew forward. The Rebellion caught her in his other paw.

"Well, well," he sneered, "look what the cat dragged in."

"Hey! Let her go!" Irvine yelled.

He eyed the gunman, cleverly. "Charming to the last. Very well, as you wish."

The Rebellion threw her and she hit Irvine across the middle, knockin' them both down. The big cat kicked Irvine's gun into the air and caught it, claw on the trigger, aimed, cocked, he emptied the round.

BANG

BANG

BANG

BANG

BANG

BANG I covered my ears and turned away. He kept firing.

BANG

BANG

BANG None at me, all at them.

BANG The leader who was shoved down the ranks...

BANG And the sharpshooter brought down by his own gun.

BANG

It was over, the gun was empty. I turned back and looked. I couldn't stay long. My friends, my pals, my comrades, full of holes. The Rebellion sneered and tossed the gun over. It hit Quistis in the back. She screamed in pain.

I got mad.

"Look at you." The Rebellion, the Menace, The monster arisen from Heck, he sneered at me. "You are all alone. Do you give up?"

"No!" I growled back. "Never."

"Zell." I heard Rinoa mutter. I don't know why she said my name. My anger was boiling. It was strong. It was hot. It burned.

I broke my limit.

"Duel!" I shouted. "You an' me! Now!"

I rushed forward, a whirl of punches and kicks and all kinds of other stuff. Anything and everything I could throw at him.

Left. Right. Jab. Uppercut.

I was too fast. He backed up, trying to avoid my blows. Pitiful. I gave him a booya. One of my favorite moves. I sliced down with my heel to him.

Another left. Another jab.

Sweat. Blood. Another hit. Another. Back! Back! He backed up almost to the end of the roof. One more step and he'd fall off, and that'd be it. I spun around. A kick to the jaw, a punch to the stomach. I was in my element. Adrenaline pumping, the speed of battle. I was in control. I had the power. Left. Right. I was commander of the universe. I was high up over everything. I was soarin'. I was flyin'.

The Rebellion used one huge paw and swiped at me. It hit. I flew.

I fell.

I passed up the corner. The wall of Balamb Garden rushed up to one side of me. Down. Down. Down. "Zell!" Selphie or Rinoa yelled. I couldn't tell. My world was shootin' up all around me. I felt like I was in pieces as the Rebellion's huge, black form got smaller and smaller. Down. Down. Down.

My stomach was left up on the roof. My body was propelled by gravity. But, my heart was fallin' faster than all of it. I was turned around. The air rushed up around me. It was a long way down. It took only a couple seconds. I only had time to think brief thoughts. My life flashed. All my years at Garden. Growin' up in Balamb. All my memories were out of order.

One surfaced from earlier that day.

'At least I wouldn't be around to see 'im do anythin' else.'

I almost cried. The words were like a knife to me.

'But I wouldn't fall.'

There was nothing between me and the ocean, me and the ground, I couldn't see where I was goin' only where I'd been. 'G'bye everyone! I'm sorry I couldn't save you!

The first floor flew by.

'I'm really sorry.'

I hit.

'So, how's he doing?'

'Not too good, but better.'

What was that? Voices?

'We will have to wait and see when he wakes up.'

Yeah, they were voice, and it sounded like someone was in trouble, but they were so far away. There was no way I'd get to them.

'That was a really long fall, he's lucky to be alive.'

'I've started a super-potion drip on him. Let's hope he comes around.'

'You mean he may not come out of it at all?!?'

That one sounded like Selphie!

'There's always that possibility.'

What is this? Where was I? Was I dead? Was I still splattered on the ground outside the walls of Balamb Garden? Who was this 'he' they kept talkin' about? It sounded like it was me, but I didn't want to believe it. And they were so far away.

'Poor Zell.'

It was me! I had to get outta there! I wanted to find them, but I couldn't move. I wondered how far away they really were. I wanted to open my eyes. Everything was black. If I could see them, then I'd know how far I had to go to get to them.

'Wait! Look!'

Selphie, she was closer, now.

'Is he waking up?' Rinoa asked.

'Wait.'

I could feel the muscles around my face startin' to move. Light. My eyes saw light, then I finally got them open.

"Zell!" Selphie and Rinoa were sitting next to me. Selphie was holdin' my hand. Dr. Kadowaki was on the other side, starin' at me. The walls were white. The sheets were white. Sheets? I wasn't on the pavement! I was in the infirmary!

"What the?" I tried to sit up, but there was this stabbing pain up and down my back. I fell back down on

the hospital bed.

"Whoa!" Irvine's voice, he musta been there too. "Take it easy."

I put a hand up to my poundin' head. It was all wrapped up. "What the heck happened to me?"

"You had quite a trip." Rinoa giggled.

I heard Squall groan like he always would when he rolled his eyes.

I was gettin' a super-potion through a needle in my hand. It was slowly workin' on me, and the knives in my back dulled. I sat up. Everyone was standin' around me, revived by the 'magic of modern medicine.' Squall too.

"When I went up to join the others," he said, gesturin' slightly, "I found everyone there but you. We finally found you down at the Quad."

"What about the-"

"Rebellion?" Selphie asked. "As soon as he was done with you, he took off, swearing that he was invincible, and promising to return to reclaim garden and all of that junk." She shrugged. "At least he's gone, that's all I say."

I stared down at my lap. The enemy'd gotten away? Was it my fault?

"Look, guys, I'm sorry I couldn't - I mean." I threw up my hands, it was hard to explain. "It was my fault that he got away! I thought I could take 'im!"

They all smiled. I didn't see why they were smiling at me. I felt like trash.

Quistis looked down at me. "It's okay, Zell, you tried. We didn't know what we were up against. Perhaps we underestimated our opponent. We all tried our hardest."

Irvine stepped back and motioned to himself. "Hey, you did better than me! I didn't even get a hit in before he killed me!"

"And at least you put up a good fight!" Selphie offered. "I just stood there and let him hit me! I didn't want him to hit me, but you know, I couldn't stop him. I didn't even get a chance to load a GF."

"And Zell figured out that the Rebellion was really a moomba, too." Rinoa said.

"Yeah! That's right!" Quistis agreed.

"Wait a second!" Squall said. "He was a moomba!?!"

"Yeah, Squall! Where were you?"

"I was right here, practically bleeding to death! Remember?"

I felt a lot better. My pals were okay with me. They didn't care that I didn't come out on top, as long as I tried. And, now, they'd already forgotten about the fight, and who won and who lost. My head felt a lot better, and so did my self-confidence. Just goes to show that I have the best buds in the world! And that they are always behind me, no matter what. When I'm fallin' with them, they'll always help me fly!

That's just the way it is, man. ^_^3