Chasing the Red Moon

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Chasing the Red Moon

by Scribbleness

Summary

After a SeeD mission to eliminate all the sorceresses at a small town in Timber failed, an injured Squall woke up under the care of one sorceress herself. Enemy of the other, they were beginning to question the reasons behind the war, and if there was any chance for peace. There was only one problem: they spoke in different tongues. (more possible fandoms/pairings to be added in future posts)

Notes

Disclaimer: Anything that is not mine, is not mine. The game, the characters, they are not mine. The concept of the story is mine, but the elements added that were not originally mine, are definitely not mine. I hope that's enough disclaimer!

This is a challenge that I gave myself years ago. What if Rinoa and Squall didn't understand each other? Like literally didn't understand each other? How would they settle their differences? But then, I figured that since I'm feeling a little mean, why not make them enemies who try to understand each other?
"Good evening, Zell."

Zell gave the receptionist a quick nod for a reply while keeping his papers together in his arms. His sprint slowed into a walk and he took a deep breath to calm his sharp ones when he reached the door and gently opened it. Peeking, he saw only one of the female attendees of the meeting turn her head to his direction, her blue eyes widening in warning to be quiet and careful while their Commander in front was still looking the other way. Said Commander was answering a question brought up by one of the attendees who refused to either cut his brown ponytail short or remove his cowboy hat indoors. Taking advantage of his chance (and luck), Zell tiptoed to an empty seat and mustered all his strength to be as quiet as possible in settling himself on the swivel chair. He could feel the cold building up under his pits, while, this time, two sets of eyes were watching him in anticipation whether or not his chair will betray him and distract the Commander. Once his thighs touched the chair and his weight was fully rested without any problem, he relaxed and his comrades let out a quiet sigh of relief.

Until the chair creaked.

The Commander's eyes immediately shifted to Zell and he frowned. Zell tensed and could only smile in compensation for his tardiness.

"We've been waiting for your files." said the Commander while extending his hand for the papers Zell brought with him.

Zell scratched the back of his head. "Sorry Squall. I had to make some last minute changes." he replied while handing the documents over. Squall's eyes scanned through them, undistracted from the snickering by one of the female attendees with brown hair and green eyes.

"Water transportation was only approved thirty minutes ago?" Squall asked tonelessly while his eyes were still on one of the pages.

"Yeah." Zell replied. "They argued that land transpo was enough and cheaper than water. But I told them what you told me– we're saving time, not money."

"It has Kramer as the approver." Squall replied, finally looking up to Zell. "Captain Hewley didn't approve?"

"He did, but since the Norg was having second thoughts about it… you know, budget and all… he advised to have Kramer sign the approval it so it'll be final."

Deadpan, Squall nodded and handed the papers to the female blond with blue eyes, who quickly took them. "Please, Quistis. Thanks." he mumbled. She nodded as she kept the files in a white binder.

The door opened again, this time, more loudly. In came a taller, bulkier blonde man with blue eyes and clad in a white trench-coat. He smugly walked to an empty chair and threw himself on it, propping his feet on the table. Squall was glaring at him while Quistis pointed a pen at him.

"Seifer, take your feet off the table." said Quistis.

"Say 'please.'" Seifer replied. He turned to Squall and lifted his shoulders. "So, what's up Commander?"
"We're not repeating anything you missed." Squall replied.

"Did I miss anything? Basically we're going to attack the sorceress' town at Timber, right?"

"Do you know when?" the girl with brown hair challenged.

"Of course I do, Selphie." Seifer replied, stressing her name. "Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow night." The one with brown ponytail clarified.

Seifer narrowed his eyes. "Aren't hats not allowed indoors? Why is Irvine still wearing that stupid hat?"

Irvine shrugged. "You have your trench-coat. Would appreciate it if you leave my hat alone."

"Children, children, please." said Quistis, massaging her temple. "The sooner we finish this, the better. We have a long day tomorrow and I want to sleep in early."

"Do you guys want to hear my opinion?" Seifer said, standing up and taking slow steps forward.

"Nope." Zell replied for the whole group.

Seifer narrowed his blue eyes at the Commander. "An unexpected attack."

"So," Squall leaned on the table. "an ambush."

"Honestly, how many times should we go through this proposal of yours, Seifer." Quistis said. "You said it before, and I'm just going to repeat myself. We can't go against the SeeDs' code. Nobody shall harm any sorceress, dangerous or not, when they are docile as they celebrate the red moon festival."

"But we're going to kill them anyway!" Seifer asserted. "What's the point? Attacking them when they least expect it will save more SeeD lives and SeeD time."

"And money." Zell added.

"Yes, thank you Zell!" Seifer waved a hand at Zell in recognition. "And SeeD money!"

Quistis sighed and lifted her chin at Seifer. "We're not barbarians, Seifer. Even if they are sorceresses, we will not attack them in their most defenseless state. No, Seifer, it will not happen."

Seifer scoffed and rolled his eyes. "Right. So, tell me, why are we choosing the day after the red moon to attack when we could have attacked them months ago when we got our SeeD titles? Why did we wait until the red moon?" His eyes shifted to the Commander. "Squall?"

Everyone turned to look at Squall.
"Good question, Seifer. Why, Squall?" Irvine pressed.

Squall looked at them, his steely blue eyes scanning the assembly before him. "If we can't attack on a red moon, then the night after is the next best thing. Not once in the history of the Garden did SeeDs attack the day before or after the red moon festival. They feared the coven will anticipate it, like a calm before the storm. The coven knows about this for sure. Their senses will be down, they will never anticipate it."

A grin grew on Seifer's face. "Like a thief in the night."

"You sure they will never anticipate it?" Selphie asked.

"Yes." Seifer and Squall replied in unison.

"We've never been in a coven. This is our first mission of this kind. Do you have a basis for this?" Quistis asked.

Seifer's eyes met Squall's. "You got your hands on those Adel Files, didn't you?" When Squall didn't respond, Seifer's smile widened. "You sneaky son of a gun."

"Wha- really? The one Cid had been trying to get his hands on?" Quistis asked.

"From Dr. Odine?" Zell inquired with widened eyes.

"Why not? Squall's dad is the President of Esthar!" said Selphie. "He could get anything from Esthar with a flick of his fingers!"

"Do you still have the papers?" Irvine asked.

Squall shook his head. "No. Not anymore. I returned them as soon as I finished reading."

"What about Cid? He wanted those."

"Odine only agreed to let me read it under the condition that only my eyes will see them."

Zell whistled and leaned back with his hands behind his head. "Sounds like it's confidential for a reason."

"Does it matter?" said Quistis. "Thanks to his research, we have a bigger chance to pull this mission off. We now know our enemies better."

Seifer pointed at Quistis before placing his hand back against his chin. "For once I agree with you."

"Even when we have the advantage, the coven is not to be underestimated. Sorceresses are powerful creatures who can and will kill you in every way possible with their magic, so we have to strategize carefully." said Squall. "Timber will not be the last coven we'll be visiting. There are many more out there which remain undiscovered. Remember that the Garden needs you—it needs its SeeDs to kill every single sorceress."

"Aww Squall." said Selphie, raising the pitch of her voice. "Just tell us you care about us!"

Squall's furrowed brows deepened. "Whatever."

"So what's the plan, Squall?" Irvine asked.

Squall pointed a small remote control to the black screen behind, which revealed a digital blueprint
He faced the group. "The plan is simple."

She played with the wisp of green and white light dancing around her fingers as she laid on the rooftop of her neighbor's home in the forests of Timber. She stared at the crimson orb among the bright stars in the distant sky, its color illuminating the black of the night. She had always liked the red moon, it made her feel calm, safe, and happy. It was the only day where no one, not even the SeeDs, attack them or their town, as if the moon was protecting them from harm.

It was definitely worth the festivities below her.

She sat up and looked upon her sorceress sisters who were playing music and their different-colored dresses dancing with them. Some of them chatted, played games, and ate like there was no tomorrow. The lights from their small houses irradiated their little town, and the colors of their banquet that lined the streets made the scenery look like a painted masterpiece. When a group of them started throwing sparks of magic that garnered laughs from others was also the time when she decided to jump down. She landed with a soft thud.

"Rinoa!" one with a bright pink hair tied in curly pigtails called for her in between her laughter. She waved at her with a smile and giggled when she received an embrace in greeting. "You were just there the whole time?" her friend asked, pointing at the surface where she had been resting.

Rinoa shrugged. "We don't always see the red moon, do we Vanille?" she said, locking arms with her friend. "And I have a lot to thank it for. I will miss it after tonight."

The other sorceress tugged her by the arm and pulled her closer to the open lawn where more of their kind were gathered. "Well, we'll also miss the fireworks display! It's starting in a few!"

Rinoa ran with Vanille and as she did, the sweet smell of cranberry and bread stole her attention and she grabbed one from an opened basket along the lengthy banquet. Once they have stopped, she took a bite and all her nostalgia came back to her. It was the first treat she was given when she first arrived in the town, the first comfort she felt. And at that moment, she knew she was home.

Soon after, the lawn was getting more crowded with other sorceresses who tried to get as much view of the show as possible. Another sorceress with emerald hair that matched her dress stepped forward and stood a few good meters from them. She twirled in a perfect circle, leaving a trail of green, glowing encryption behind her as she did. She raised her arms, and the symbol below her rose through her, above her, and flew up to the sky. It shattered in a blast of colorful dancing wisps that shaped like carbuncles, each of which flew back down to them. One hopped around Rinoa and she reached for it with her hand. It sat on her palm and looked at her and Vanille curiously with its glowing green eyes. A few seconds later, it hopped out and back to the green-haired sorceress. Smiling, she bowed before the crowd, who gave her due applause.

She was then replaced by another, a shorter one with short brown hair and yellow overalls over her long white sleeves whom Rinoa remembered as Garnet. She closed her eyes until her audience
grew silent and rolled her arms over each other again and again until she drew a ball of fire. She gently threw it above her and a large, dog-like figure in bright flames formed from her fire spell, which shot colorful sparks as it ran around midair.

Rinoa gaped in awe as she watched her fellow sorceress' talent in magic turn to life. She felt Vanille's hands tighten around her arm and she patted them with her free one.

"That's so cute!" Vanille exclaimed pointing at the dog while bouncing.

"I know!" Rinoa replied, her eyes following the glowing canine. "I shall call it Angelo."

"Angelo? I like it!"

As Angelo glided in front of her cheering audience, she left trails of sparks that turned into small floating clover-shaped lights, bouncing at the slightest touch.

Rinoa smiled. Garnet, being one of the youngest, had to really make everything cute and child-like for everyone. She looked around and noticed that they had grown in numbers in their gathering, recalling how there were fewer of them during the last year's festival. Their small town flourished in some way, saving more lives of sorceresses that ran to them for sanctuary.

"I'm happy. I feel so happy right now." Rinoa said as she gazed upon the gathering. "There are more of us. Our family is getting bigger. Nobody is alone anymore."

Vanille gazed at Rinoa and gave a slight nod. "Everyone's happy and worry-free. I wish we're always like this."

Rinoa smiled and nodded back. "I wish the red moon lasts forever."
The Ambush

What could've been twelve hours of travel from Balamb to Timber by land had been significantly reduced to five, thanks to Zell's tireless lobbying for the approval of water transportation at their disposal. They arrived at the shore just before sundown, giving them ample time to do their last minute preparations for the battle. When the right hour arrived, the army of 224 disembarked from their ship and marched to the forest behind the mountains. The trees concealed the only light nature endowed them with for the night, which wasn't a problem to them because of the headpieces that allowed them to see in the dark. If anything, it was the perfect setting for them—no camouflage was more ideal than the absence of light.

Squall lead the group up until to the foot of a hill and halted on his tracks. He raised an arm on his right and the moment he waved it down, half of the SeeDs rushed silently away to his east. He raised his left arm next to signal the rest of them, and swayed it forward before running towards the middle part of the hill. Crouching behind the thick trunk of a mold-covered tree, he pressed a button on his headpiece that zoomed into their targeted town.

The horizon was clear of the witches who were asleep in their homes of gray brick walls and brown rusty roofs. Not one house had the faintest glint of light, and the silence was only filled by the sounds of crickets and owls in the distance.

"Ready the bombs." he addressed to Selphie quietly through his communicator.

"*Time to kabloowskis the witches to smithereens.*" Selphie replied.

Squall slightly shifted his head over his shoulder at the sound of soft footsteps behind him. He turned his attention back to the town when he realized it was only Seifer squatting by his side.

"Irvine, ready the snipers." Squall said through his communicator.

"*Locked and loaded.*" Irvine replied.

"Quistis, how is the East doing?"

It took a few seconds before Quistis responded from the other end. "*Got it covered and done.*"

Squall scanned the area behind him and established that everyone in his team was also in position, weapons in hand, and promptly anticipating his next command. He pressed the communicator once more.

"Zell, ready your positions."

"*Just waiting for your orders, Squall.*" Zell replied more loudly than the others.

"Voice down, chickenwuss." Seifer scolded.

"*Shut it Seifer.*" Zell spat back.
"Selphie." Squall called.

"Squall?" Selphie called back.

"Fire."

On his left, he heard the muffled blow of Selphie's bazookas and cannons, launching fira-infused ammunition directly towards the town, shaking the ground at the explosion. As expected, an invisible dome stopped the missiles from entering the town, but was not able to repel the fira that easily bypassed the shield. Blaze engulfed the small houses and reaped high-pitched screams and cries from sorceresses who emerged one by one. Their white, lacy sleeping garments did not provide the protection they needed and fire easily made its way to their skin. They threw themselves on the ground and rolled in their desperate attempts to take the flames out. Squall observed one sorceress who was spared from the fire quickly cast blizzard spells on the burning witches around her, and those who were not affected followed suit in their panicked state. Some were wriggling silently, some of them drowned their pains in their screams, and some charred bodies laid motionless on the ground. More sorceresses emerged from their homes, extinguishing the fire from the houses and helping their fallen sisters, but their attempts seemed futile as the fira spell could not be easily taken out. Selphie made sure of that.

One of the unusual looking ones, distinct by the triangular markings on her tanned face, large feline-like ears that protruded on the top of her head, and her white pigtails, looked around beyond the forests and the hills for their unseen attacker and seemed to have spotted the hill where Squall's team was hidden. The commander caught her light-colored eyes and she snarled at him, changing her soft features into demonic ones and exposing her fangs.

"Irvine, aim for the frontline." said Squall, referring to the most visible sorceresses.

"Roger." Irvine replied. A split second later, bullets covered in white orbs whizzed from around the town and right through the now damaged dome, leaving white linings of smoke in the air. Some penetrated the chests and heads of the witches, while some, including the one that snarled at Squall, were able to deflect them with a wave of their hands. Irvine's team reloaded their weapons and fired once more, but the sorceresses kept up with the bullets and more than half were able to ricochet them back to the SeeDs, injuring half of Irvine's squad.

"Shit!" Squall heard Irvine say on the communicator.

"Irvine!" Selphie cried.

"What happened?!" Quistis' panicked voice asked.

"I'm okay! But my squad— shit, hold on Nida!" Irvine stammered. Seifer stood up, his hand on the communicator. Save for a "tch!" no other word was able to come out of his mouth.

Squall tensed on his spot at the sound of Irvine's terrified voice. They knew the chances that the bullets would be deflected by the sorceresses, but they didn't foresee how they could turn the bullets against them. "Selphie, attend to Irvine's medical attention. Zell, move the first wave."

Already running, Zell breathlessly replied "Copy that!" Seifer zoomed into his viewer and saw the SeeDs from Zell's team coming out of the trees closest to the town. Relying heavily on physical attacks, they were able to knock down the weakest ones more easily. The stronger of the enemies used their powerful arms and swift magic against the SeeDs, but the latter countered also with magic. The witches proved themselves to be more rapid and sharp, making them deadly in their attacks, but the SeeDs were stronger and trained to be strategists who planned their attacks more
"Quistis, be ready." Squall removed his night-vision goggles and gestured his team forward. "Let's move!" He and Seifer unsheathed their gunblades as they ran to the chaos below them. One sorceress charged towards their group, hurling a pain spell at them. Squall blocked the devastating orb and swung it away from him. Taking his turn, he dashed closer to his enemy and struck her with his blade, which she avoided by simply gliding to her side. One of the squad members behind him engaged with her, allowing Squall to run forward while Seifer ran farther away from him to take care of another sorceress who was about to strike one SeeD from Zell's team. Zell threw a thundering punch at another sorceress and barely avoided a bite on his forearm before casting a whirling aero spell.

Squall blocked another attack from another sorceress, the shortest he had seen but none the weaker. She kept shooting countless pointed ice shards at him, all of which he repelled with his gunblade. Ignoring her young features and reminding himself that she was an enemy, he pushed her away with a stinging thundara spell, knocking her unconscious. He was about to thrust his sword into her chest when another sorceress casted a float spell that pulled him away. She dashed to him, exposing her fangs as she did when Squall pointed his gunblade at her and fired a blizzaga spell that stunned her and froze her into place. When the ice exploded two seconds later, she was freed but incapacitated by the immense pain from the burning blisters the spell inflicted upon her exposed skin.

"GET… OFF… FREAKS!"

Squall turned around at the sound of Seifer's struggling voice and saw him on the ground, holding up his gunblade in front of him to shield himself from the two sorceresses reaching for his head. Squall was sure they were trying to literally rip his head off, but they were only successful at slashing a line on his forehead between his eyebrows. Squall ran to his direction and threw another thundara spell at his enemies, distracting them from Seifer who stood up limping from another wound on his leg. Squall promptly threw a potion at him before turning his attention back to the ferocious pair.

"I have potions too, idiot!" Seifer yelled back when he caught the bottle in his hands. Even after healing himself from the pricking spell a sorceress attacked him with, it took him a significant effort to straighten up before falling on his knee again and supporting himself against his blade.

The sorceresses were joined by two more, and Squall found themselves surrounded. With Seifer weak and defenseless, he needed a plan to divert them away, and fast. His eyes fell on one sorceress opposite Seifer's and pointed his gunblade at her. She was going to be his lure.

The chosen sorceress hissed at him, her pupils turning into thin, black slits. Squall pulled his trigger, firing a small glowing red orb. The sorceress and the two beside her watched in horror as the orb flew closer to them, realizing a little too late that it was actually a fire spell more powerful than a firaga compressed in one small sphere that exploded at a touch. One sorceress died on the spot, while the other two wailed in agony. The one left standing ran after Squall as he sped farther away from Seifer.

His path to his escape was showing him no sign of advantage on their side. Each SeeD dealt with at least three sorceresses in one fight. And even if they were well-equipped for this battle, there was no doubt the sorceresses were more powerful albeit having no tactical sense. Squall shouted over his communicator. "Quistis! Forward!"

"On our way!"
When he was sure he were at a considerable distance, Squall turned around to see the sorceress about to leap at him, her body glowing red. He rolled away to dodged her pain spell that left a small crater on the ground when it bursted. She then cast an aero spell so thin it was almost invisible to Squall, who barely avoided it with a sidestep. It brushed against Squall's forehead, leaving a long gash similar to Seifer's.

Realizing that the witches really loved aiming for the SeeD's heads, Squall aimed for hers too, swinging his blade to her neck. But she was too quick and strong that she was able to stop his gunblade with her bare hands, and he could swear she smirked at him. Still gripping his gunblade, Squall cast a thundara spell that crept through the metal blade and to the sorceress' hands, electrifying her and made her lose her hold. She was still convulsing when she fell down with a loud thud on the ground, and Squall was more than happy to put her out of her misery. He was about to strike her when she, in her dire state, cast another of her aero-blades to a nearby tree, cutting it swiftly somewhere close to its roots. Squall looked up just as the tree's heavy trunk was only a few feet away from his head when he felt something pulled him back away from his spot. He was glided midair by an unseen magic, and he did not feel the powerful shake on his feet when the tree met the ground that grew smaller before him the farther he flew. What he did feel next was a strong, hard surface hitting his back and his head.

And then, nothing.

Rinoa woke up at the first sound of explosion outside. She quickly slid from her bed and looked out of her window, seeing balls of fire falling through their town's domed shell and to their houses. Breathing heavily against her numbing chest, she turned around and ran outside of her room.

"Vanille!" She called frantically when smoke was beginning to fill their house. "Vanille!"

"Rinoa!" Vanille called back, running down the stairs and to Rinoa. She held Rinoa's arms. "My room is on fire! My blizzard spells wouldn't work!"

"We have to get out of here!" cried Rinoa.

"But our home!" Vanille sobbed. "This is our home!"

"We have to, Vanille!" Rinoa replied pleadingly. "We're going to die if we don't!"

Still in their nightgowns, Rinoa lead Vanille to the front door and out of their house. She was shocked at the sight of their neighbors, friends, and familiar faces desperately spraying blizzard spells to their homes and to the others who were burning from the fire spells. Rinoa saw from afar the young but powerful Y'shtola gazing at the hill and snarling at something.

"DAMN YOU SEEDS! LEAVE US ALONE!" Rinoa heard her scream.

SeeDs?

She could feel her blood rising to her head.

SeeDs have found them?
"Why are they doing this?" Vanille wept.

Rinoa looked around and saw a glint of the moonlight reflected against a small glassed surface behind a tree far away from them. Knowing what it was, she widened her eyes.

"EVERYONE! DUCK!" she cried out.

But it was too late.

Bullets immune to the magic of their dome pierced through the shield, one buzzing straight to her. Quickly, she deflected it with her hand while she shielded Vanille behind her. She pulled her friend up and they ran at the opposite direction where many of them were heading. She was familiar with the area, as was everyone else—it was where an old underground tunnel was located. No one knew where it lead to, but it was their only chance of escaping.

Running on their way into the forest, Rinoa caught a glimpse of a familiar figure shooting ice shards at a male SeeD who bore brown hair and wielding a sword with a revolver attached on its handle. She immediately realized it was Garnet fighting, and the SeeD was quickly gaining the upper hand with his thundara spell. When Garnet was thrown unconscious to the ground, Rinoa began to run to Garnet's aid until one of the older sorceresses pulled the SeeD away with her float spell.

Vanille ran past her to check on Garnet and Rinoa followed. She scanned Garnet quickly for any fatal injuries, and she was thankful to see none.

"Vanille, help me carry her." said Rinoa, already short of breath.

Vanille nodded vigorously in reply, evidently repressing the intense panic in her.

Taking each of Garnet's arm and lifting her up, they ran as fast as they could to join the other fleeing sorceresses. When the SeeDs came for them, they easily drove them away with spells using their free hands.

Reaching the entrance of the forest, another group of SeeDs being lead by a young-looking woman with blond hair and carrying a whip appeared and was charging closer to them. Rinoa and Vanille stopped, their widened eyes at the army.

The older one turned to Vanille. "Vanille, Garnet needs healing. You have to go bring her with you."

Grasping what Rinoa was implying, Vanille shook her head. "No! You're coming with us!"

"Please, Vanille." Rinoa replied pleadingly when the SeeDs were getting closer. "Bring Garnet with you. I'll follow, I promise."

Sobbing, Vanille nodded. "Please, find us."

Rinoa unwrapped her arm from Garnet. "Keep yourselves safe okay?"

Vanille's sobs grew louder as she shifted Garnet's arm against her shoulders and walked away from Rinoa.

Rinoa never intended to fight. In fact, she didn't ever want for a war to break out. It was bad enough that lives were being lost from both sides, and if she fought, it meant she was supporting the position to fight and inflict more harm for no good reason. After taking a deep breath, Rinoa
turned around and glided swiftly to the other side. The slicing sound of the wind seemed to have
distracted the female leader whose head quickly turned to Rinoa's direction while her squad kept
running forward. Rinoa hurled a pain spell at her from the top of a tree which exploded, shocking
her opponent. The SeeD swung her whip at Rinoa, who blocked it with a protect spell, repelling it
back to its owner. She looked at the distance where Vanille was running with Garnet and was
relieved that no one was following them. She then jumped out of the tree and tossed another pain
spell towards the SeeD, who began saying something in an agitated voice and Rinoa immediately
felt a pang of guilt in her chest. If she wasn't a SeeD, she would think she was harmless and didn't
deserve what she did. But the blond woman was part of the army attacking her home and she
needed to do something to defend themselves.

"I'm sorry, this is only temporary." Rinoa said apologetically to the SeeD and hesitantly casted a
confuse spell to her. The SeeD yelped and covered her face with her hands while swaying
aimlessly. This stole the attention of a male SeeD, distinguishable by the black tattoo on his face.
He ran towards the female SeeD, shouting worriedly at his fellow soldier. Rinoa dashed upwards
and hid herself on top of a tree, watching the chaos below her. She thought about running after
Vanille, but with all the SeeDs around, she didn't want to betray the location of the underground
tunnel.

Until she heard the hissing of another sorceress.

Turning around, she saw the male SeeD who attacked Garnet facing another sorceress who was
glowing red. She was familiar to Rinoa— she was one of the better singers among them. If she
remembered correctly, her name was Rosa.

Rinoa leapt from her tree to another until she was closer to the sword-revolver wielder's fight,
intending to rescue her sorceress sister. But when Rosa was electrified by the SeeD and fell of the
ground, Rinoa paused and gasped.

"Oh no…" she whispered.

The SeeD loomed over her and was about to strike, but the ever quick-thinking Rosa chopped a
nearby tree with her air spell as her one last move to rescue herself before collapsing. The tree,
which was slightly shorter than the hill nearby, was toppling over the oblivious SeeD.

He was going to die.

Without thinking, Rinoa dashed closer to the SeeD and threw whatever spell she could think of,
resulting into a combination of demi and float. When the tree was only a few feet away from him,
his spell was able to push him out of the way. That was good and all, she was able to save his life.
Only that she might have not seen the other tree that clashed with his head and back.

Rinoa widened her eyes. She didn't kill him, did she? Gliding quickly to his side, she examined him
and checked for his pulse.

A sigh of relief escaped her. "Thank Hyne you're alive."

She did observe a wound on one of his thighs, and one bloody gash across his forehead down to the
bridge of his nose.

Rinoa held up her hands and cast a Cure spell. When she saw his chest inhale a good amount of air,
she stood up and walked away.

But something was stopping her.
She paused on her steps. Was she going to just leave him there? She looked over her shoulders to see him still on the ground, unconscious and vulnerable to the harsh possibilities of the havoc around them and, worse, the forest.

Rinoa looked around for any sign of his comrades, but saw none. She figured that even his comrades were having a hard time dealing with the likes of her, too engaged in killing or surviving that they failed to even make sure he was okay.

She hung her head and glided back to his side. She examined him once more and noticed how peaceful he looked when he was sleeping. For a SeeD, he looked so different that way, as compared to when he faced the sorceresses he tried to kill.

Rinoa debated whether or not she was doing the right thing. Even when he tried to kill them, why was she helping him?

*It's unfair to leave him like this, Rinoa,* she told herself. There were also people who cared about him who would hope he was safe and alive. If, Hyne forbid, something similar happened to Vanille, she would also hope someone, even the SeeDs, would help her and ensure her safety.

Besides, it was her fault he was in such a bad state in the first place. So *that* would make his life her responsibility, right?

*Right?*
He felt the pinching sensation in his chest when he inhaled his first air after waking at his last memories of a glowing sorceress and a tree that was about to crash his head.

Despite all that, he was alive.

Squall winced as he slowly turned his head against a soft surface beneath him. He gradually opened his eyes and saw blurry visions of his gunblade resting against a wall just a few feet away from him, a pair of chairs, a table, dark wooden walls, a candlelight, and what seemed like a female figure with long black hair in a blue dress filling a basin with water from the faucet.

He gasped and widened his eyes when he realized that he was at the presence of a sorceress. He jolted up, grabbed his gunblade and aimed for her, but she proved to be just as quick as he was and pointed her arms back at him, her palms facing forward and her fiery brown eyes glaring at his. Squall glowered at her, his grip on his weapon tightening by the second. He warily treaded forward, and she responded by taking one step toward him, her arms were still up and ready for attack.

He stretched his index finger to the trigger of his gunblade— if she tried anything, he would not hesitate to pull it. He almost did just that when her eyes suddenly travelled down to his lower extremities and widened. Shock seemed to have petrified his reflexes when she abruptly sprinted closer and knelt on the floor by his legs.

"Get away!" he growled at her while stepping backward, but he seemed to have forgotten the wooden bed behind him and his popliteals hit its edge, causing him to fall on his back.

She said something worriedly as she reached her hands to one of his thighs. He violently shuffled himself away from her while she continued to shout at him as if pleading for something, but he wouldn't have it— whatever it was, he would never trust his chances to a sorceress.

Then, in his struggle, he felt an excruciating ripping pain on his right thigh. A long, loud groan escaped his throat while both his hands closed in tight fists to withstand the agony.

Her unfamiliar words flowed with a mix of annoyance and apprehension, as if she was scolding him. Panting heavily as the pain subsided, he looked at her as she gently unwrapped the bloodstained makeshift bandage on his thigh, revealing a deep, bloody gash. She stood up again to retrieve the basin she was filling with water earlier and placed it on the table beside her. She dipped a clean cloth and carefully patted it on his wound. Squall inhaled sharply through his gritted teeth, his eyes closing tightly at the pricking sting when the wet cloth brushed against his tender skin. He looked at it again when he felt the contact stop and was replaced by a warm tingle.

She was now holding her hand above the wound, a bluish light emitting from her palm. The bleeding had stopped as the laceration slowly closed, the reddish-purple from the swelling began
fading away. The throbbing pain gradually became just a slight sore, and Squall's rapid breaths were slowing down at her healing.

When she removed her hand and the light from her spell went out, she took out another long clean cloth and wrapped it around his thigh, he assumed, stop the cut from opening again. He held himself up against the bed with his elbows as he watched her tie the tourniquet before gathering the basin with the bloodstained pieces of fabrics she used on him. With the basin still in her hands, she gave him an exasperated look and nagged at him once more, as if he actually cared what she wanted from him. He carefully sat up, watching her as she turned around and placed the basin on the sink.

Groaning, he pushed himself up once more and leaned his back against an adjacent wall as he caught his breath. He inspected himself, wondering what else the sorceress had done on him and noticed that he was no longer in his uniform— he was only wearing his white undershirt and his black boxers.

_The sorceress must've undressed me to see my wound_, he told himself, annoyed at his admission that he was under her care.

He ran his hand against his head and felt another shot of pain on his forehead. Cautiously, his fingers brushed against another bandage just across the area between his eyebrows. It was where the last sorceress he fought in Timber cut him with a slicing aero magic, which also possibly gave him that damned lesion on his thigh.

His nurse and only companion turned around with a plate of overcooked steak and what seemed to be mixed vegetables on a tray with a glass of water. She approached him and sat on a nearby chair, placing the tray on the table and looked at him with a kind smile. She stated something in her own language and gestured at the food, possibly asking him to eat.

He only stole a glance of the dish and glared at her warily, observing her pale skin that almost glowed in the otherwise dim room. Her brown eyes were amiable, her pinkish lips shaped in a kind smile, and the caramel strip of her hair contrasted her ebony locks. There was no doubt in her beauty that she was a sorceress, a wicked creature of the earth.

Her eyes shifted down when he didn't respond to her and she transferred the plate on her lap. She sliced the steak with a knife, struggling and whining as she did. When she successfully took a piece, she handed the fork to him. Squall only looked at the steak before glaring back at her, not moving a bit of his muscle. The food could be laced with a spell or poison for all he knew. He was a SeeD commander, the same person who lead the army that attacked her town. She could be pretending to be the only survivor, concealing the other sorceresses behind the walls of the cabin or house or whatever it was they were staying at. He could be surrounded and she was using her angelic countenance to seduce him and gain his trust before they strike and kill him.

Then again, he thought, at his extremely vulnerable state, if they, or _she_ wanted to kill him, he should have been dead by now.

More importantly, if that was indeed the case, why was she helping him?

The sorceress sighed despondently and put the fork down on the plate, which she placed back on the tray. Finally giving up on him, she stood up and told him something again in her soft voice before turning around and leaving him alone in the room.

For a sorceress who received little to no response from him, she was very talkative.
Rinoa tied the last knot of the bandage on the unconscious SeeD's thigh for the second time that day. His wound was deep, but nothing a cure spell and careful nursing couldn't fix. She took a deep breath as she studied her work and decided that as long as he didn't move too much for one or two more days, his thigh would be better in no time.

Carrying him was no easy task, and they were lucky to even find a cabin outside of town where they could hide and rest for a while. She was right to bring him with her— none of the other SeeDs went back to look for him as they were driven away by the other sorceresses. Ensuring that no SeeD would follow them as they escaped to the underground tunnel was a top priority, even if it meant killing every SeeD on sight.

If she wanted to save this brown-haired SeeD, she needed to keep him away from the sorceresses. And if she wanted to stay alive, she needed to find a good place to hide from the SeeDs.

Rinoa gathered his uniform and hoped he didn't mind being out of his clothes. Of course, she left his white shirt and black shorts on him— all she needed to do was make sure he had enough room to breathe and his wounds taken care of. She carried his garments to the sink and began to wash the dirt and blood off them. She then flicked a wisp of fire off her fingers to the wooden scraps in the fireplace and hung his garments by it to dry. Taking a smaller basin with her, she headed back to the sink and began filling it with water when she heard a gasp and a scuffle behind her.

The SeeD was awake.

Quickly, she turned around and held her arms up just as he pointed his weird sword at her, his hard blue eyes eager to slice her piece by piece. She instinctively slid her feet slightly forward when he advanced closer, the weapon in his steady hands still pointed at her direction. Perhaps she made the mistake of forgetting to move his sword farther away from him.

Rinoa began to run through the spells she could use inside her head: fire was too harsh, water was too messy, and thunder could kill him. Blizzard, however, would hurt but could also help subside the swelling on his thigh.

Which reminded her— he shouldn't be standing up, should he?

She looked at his thigh and to her horror, the dressing was beginning to soak with his blood. How could he not feel that?

Frantic that his wound had reopened, Rinoa rushed to examine his thigh. He screamed something at her— the first time she had ever heard his deep, low voice. In what seemed to be his panic, he retreated and lost his grip of his weapon which clanked on the floor before falling down on his bed.

"Stop that, you're hurting yourself!" she told him as she attempted to hold his injured thigh steadily, but he simply. Wouldn't. Cooperate. "I'm trying to fix your cut here!"

Then, when he seemed to have finally felt the pain, he groaned loudly and his body tensed.

"Do you feel it now?" she chided. "Good. Because I just fixed your gash and your bandage, and now I have to do it all over again. Clean cloths don't just grow on trees!" She sighed. "I'm not going
When Rinoa was sure he was no longer moving, she carefully removed the dressing on his thigh. Needing water to clean the wound (again), she went to take the basin of water with her from the sink, and brought two more clean strips of fabric that she cut from the clothes she found in one of the cabinets. She returned to his side and drenched one of the cloths with water before patting it on his wound. He flinched but thankfully didn't move too much, making it easier for her to finish her task. When she cleared the lesion of blood, she placed her hand above it and cast her cure spell. She could tell he was beginning to calm down at this point.

When she was done, she wrapped the other cloth on the wound, tied it in a knot, then collected the basin with the bandages. She stood up and carried the basin to be cleaned at the sink, but not before giving him a tired look.

"Please stop moving too much, and please stop trying to kill me. Just focus all your energy into getting better so we can both leave this place. You're not the only one here who can't wait to go home."

Rinoa left him again to clean up the bandages and throw away the bloody water from the basin. After washing her hands, she took a slab of meat she found in a blizzard-powered storage and placed it on a metal pan. She flicked another fire spell on it and the flames faded from its edges down to the middle, leaving some of its parts slightly charred. Rinoa sheepishly looked over her shoulder, hoping he didn't see her little mishap. Thankfully, he was busy observing the bandage on his forehead with his hand after seemingly realizing that he had another wound. That one wasn't as bad, it healed quickly on her first try of cure spell. But Rinoa was sure it was going to leave a scar, which was a shame considering that his scary hardened face was almost perfect.

She tossed some blanched vegetables into the plate and placed it on the tray with a glass of water. She delivered it to the SeeD and sat again on her chair. Rinoa smiled at him, nodding at the plate.

"You need to eat. Here, I made this for you."

He dubiously looked at the food like he'd rather shoot himself than eat it. He looked up again and gave her a piercing look with his blue eyes beneath his unruly bloodstained hair.

Rinoa sighed. Even Vanille wasn't this stubborn. Were SeeDs really trained to be unresponsive to help even when their lives depended on it?

Then the answer to her question hit her.

Oh.

That was right, she was still an enemy. That explained why he wouldn't take anything she offered him no matter how hard she tried to give him everything he needed. He simply didn't trust her.

Or maybe… maybe he was too weak and shocked to even eat his food? Or to even slice it?

Rinoa took the plate again and placed it on her lap. With the knife in her hand and her fork on the other, she sliced through the leathery meat, realizing that she may have cooked it way too much.

And then, finally, she was able to take a piece. Mission accomplished.

She stabbed the fork into the meat and handed it to the man who remained unflinching on his spot. His eyes travelled briefly on the steak then back to her.

Rinoa could tell he must have many questions for her. She did, too. Too bad they could only speak
the language they knew and not the other's, lest everything they were going through would have been easier to deal with.

She sighed at the thought. She barely had enough sleep, and she was getting tired. She placed the fork down and stood up.

"You're not an enemy to me," she told him, but was only met with distrust in his eyes. "I may be an enemy to you, but you are not mine. And I'm going to take care of you, whether you like it or not."

Rinoa turned around and left him with his food, heading to another room that she claimed for herself. It was a small, dark one with nothing more than a single bed covered with dirty white sheets, a window, and a small circular table in the corner. She sat on her bed, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath. She risked everything, even her chance to join Vanille and the other sorceresses in the underground tunnel, just for doing what she thought was right. She saved his life, and the most she received for a gratitude was a pinch of hesitation from killing her when he pointed that sword. And that was before he figured out that she was actually taking care of him.

*But did he even?* Rinoa thought. Did he even know what she was trying to do for him? Was it all even worth it? She wouldn't know. And it seemed like even if they spoke the same language, he would just stare at her and she would keep guessing what he thought or felt by looking into his eyes. His silent expressions weren't very reliable, though she could tell there was something more to him.

For a SeeD who seemed to have a lot to say, he was too quiet.

Chapter End Notes

I have FINALLY found a way to import this story from my FFnet account! Yay!
Captain Hewley pushed the hospital bed that carried a young SeeD being held alive by a blood-soaked bandage pressed on her left eye. The resident nurse who was pulling the bed from the other end hurriedly guided it to an empty spot in the Garden's plaza which was converted into a giant infirmary filled with the wounded who came back from the mission in Timber.

One of the resident doctors rushed to the Captain's side and assessed the young mercenary. She barked panicked orders at the nurse, who quickly retrieved surgery tools Captain Hewley could not identify save for the scissors, the needle, and the black thread.

The wounded SeeD's hand suddenly shot up and grabbed the Captain's wrist, her grip firm and trembling. She fought for air with quick, shaky gasps, her wide bloodshot eye looking straight beyond him to the white ceiling. The doctor lifted the bandage on her injured eye, revealing a deep gash across her swelling eyelid. When the doctor began piercing her skin to close the deep laceration, her clutch grew tighter. Captain Hewley looked away and closed his eyes at the sound of the SeeD's suppressed whimpers.

When he opened them, he turned to the surgeon. "Don't you have anesthetics?"

"We just ran out." The doctor replied, her voice muffled behind her blue facemask. "We have more coming, but this one can't wait."

The Captain switched back to the SeeD. "Fujin, right? That's your name?"

Engulfed in nothing but pain, the SeeD stiffened at the doctor's careful sewing but managed a nod. "YSS." she replied through gritted teeth.

With Fujin's full attention finally on him, the Captain gave her a firm nod. "It's going to be over soon, Fujin." He stole a glance of the doctor's work and realized she was only halfway done on the cut that spurted blood, staining Fujin's silver hair. "It's almost finished. Doc's just wrapping it up."

"DYING?"

He shook his head. "No Fujin. You're not. It's fine, you'll be fine."

"Fujin!" Zell called from behind as he rushed to her side. The Captain looked at him and noticed that his arms were covered in bruises and his hands were wrapped in white cloths. His usually pushed-up hair was grubby and its tips solidified by blood that didn't belong to him.

Fujin's eyes shifted to the tattooed SeeD. "ZELL."

"Don't worry buddy, you're going to be okay!" Zell said, faking a laugh. He looked up to the doctor. "She looks like she lost too much blood. She can have some of mine."

"We'll have to run a few tests first to see if yours will match hers." The doctor replied without tearing her eyes away from her patient.

"Will she make it then? If we wait that long?" Zell pressed. "Don't you have blood bags reserved for cases like his?"

"Zell." The Captain intervened. "We'll discuss this later. Let the doctor finish her work."
Zell stared at him, his eyes perturbed in the lack of assurance. After blinking a few times that brought him back to his senses, he replied. "Yes, Captain."

"It's done." The doctor said a few minutes later. The nurse rushed to wrap a clean bandage around Fujin's head and stapled it in place with a flat silver pin. The doctor left briefly after for another newly-arrived patient who was suffering multiple scratches on his torso.

Fujin's grip on the Captain loosened and fell on her side. She looked at Zell and then at Captain Hewley. "SQUALL."

Zell hung his head.

"WHERE?"

Captain Hewley straightened up and crossed his arms against his chest. "We're still looking for him."

"MISSING?"

Zell took a quick sideway glance at Captain Hewley, who was looking away from the two SeeDs. He overestimated his confidence for his SeeDs that he immediately approved the mission. The intel said it was only a small town that housed no more than 100 sorceresses. 100 powerful sorceresses.

He didn't anticipate that risk. His first mission involved one hundred SeeDs against two hundred sorceresses, and they came back with very little casualties and a successful operation. But this time, 224 against 100? With Squall's careful strategy, it should have been a breeze. Instead, it cost him endangered SeeD lives and a missing Commander. It was enough for a miracle that everybody managed not to die.

Have the sorceresses found a way to improve their attacks and defense against the SeeDs?

Fujin began taking quick, deep breaths. "SEARCH."

"The search is ongoing." the Captain replied.

Fujin shook her head and shakily tried to sit up. "NOW."

"Fujin, take it easy!" Zell said, gently pushing Fujin back to her bed. But the latter swatted his hand away and gave him an annoyed look.

"DEAD?" she challenged. "ALIVE?"

"We don't know, but he's probably alive. This is Squall we're talking about, give him some credit!"

"If you don't let yourself get better, you'll have less chances of finding him, Fujin." Captain Hewley reproved.

"SEIFER."

Captain Hewley raised his eyebrows and gave Zell a questioning look, who was still focused on Fujin.

"HELP."
Alarmed, the Captain shifted to face Zell. "Seifer? What happened to Seifer?"

Zell shook his head. "No. She wants to help Seifer look for Squall." he clarified. "He wanted to go back as soon as we realized Squall wasn't with us on the ship."

"Where is he?"

Zell sighed. "He's right there." he pointed at the other end of the plaza where Seifer was bickering with another staff beside a wounded Quistis. "Injured leg, scratch on his head, but still very much alive."

Captain Hewley frowned. "What happened to Quistis?"

"Confuse spell made her vulnerable to attacks." Zell raised his sleeve on his right shoulder, revealing a bloodied bandage. "Ran to her rescue, but those fingernails were really sharp."

"SEARCH." Fujin interrupted with more demand in her voice. Both men looked at her.

"SQUALL."

The morning sunlight glistened on her closed eyes, beckoning her to rise and welcome another day. Rinoa slowly opened them, squinting and blinking a few times as she took a deep breath. She shifted on her bed and laid on her back, turning her head to look around her new room. The last sleep she had was back at the house she shared with Vanille in Timber before it caught fire from the attack. It was bigger, familiar, and it felt less muggy. But it was not somewhere she could go back to for now, thanks to the SeeDs. The cabin was only a temporary home until she could find her way to the other sorceresses.

Her shoulders dropped lazily. Not until that guy gets better.

She patted her dress in her sluggish attempt to iron it down and headed for the door. When she stepped out, the SeeD was thankfully still on his bed. She gave him a smile for a good morning greeting, and he responded with a glare. Embarrassed for even bothering, Rinoa awkwardly turned around to the sink and started with the kettle to boil water. She would need it to sponge-bathe the SeeD with, which she planned to do after she washes herself with a water spell. She then took out the flour she found from the supplies and applied her water and fire combo to transform it into a bread. She fried some eggs too, placed all of them on a plate, and arranged it on a tray with a glass of water.

She walked to the SeeD with plans to replace his dinner plates, but the sight of the stale beef and dried out vegetables made her stop. It didn't surprise her that he didn't touch his dinner, and frankly, she began not to care if he wouldn't eat his breakfast either. As she picked the dinner tray up and put down the one with breakfast, she deliberated if she should fix him some lunch later, or should she let him starve as he wished.

Rinoa sat on the wooden stool in front of him and began her ritual replacement of his bandage, noting it's improvement— the gash had gotten significantly shallower, and the bleeding had stopped completely. She eyed him observingly, spying how he was watching her. It made her very
conscious about how she looked like with her bed hair, oily face, and crumpled dress, literally fresh from the war the likes of him started. But, even though they were enemies, they only had each other in the meantime, so they were bound to know their names at least, shouldn't they? Besides, all the time they had left could be the present. His wound was getting better everyday and they would part ways soon, so they might as well make the most out what little time was left.

Rinoa sat up straight and waited until his eyes met hers. She placed a hand on her chest and said her name.

"Rinoa."

It only made him even more confused. So, she repeated herself.

"Rinoa."

Stretching her arm to him, she waited for his turn to tell her his name. But he wouldn't.

Wordlessly, she stood up and gazed at the door. Maybe it was time to leave him alone so that she could take her bath instead. Besides, he seemed to be the type who wanted to be left alone all the time. She pointed at the front door and looked at him.

"I'm going to wash myself outside for a while. I'll be back soon to clean you up next, so make sure you don't hurt yourself 'til then."

She returned to her room and retrieved some fresh clothes she found, unraveling some details about the past residents of the cabin. She could tell they were a couple of sorceresses, a young one and an even younger one. The smaller dresses became her source of clean cloths for the SeeD's bandage, so it was fortunate that she—

A loud stamp on the floor.

Now alert, Rinoa tore away from her thoughts and bolted outside. She gasped at the SeeD sitting on the floor by the collapsed table and dashed to him.

"Are you okay?" Rinoa asked, distressed at the sound of his groan. He was probably in great pain, and his thigh… she hoped it didn't open up. Checking, she saw no sign of blood on his bandage and she sighed in relief. "What were you trying to do this time?"

She swept her head for the bed and deduced she would have to carry him herself. Slipping her arm under his and around his back, she began hoisting him up. But instead of standing and help her through, he rammed his arms against her and pushed her away. Losing her balance, she stumbled backwards and fell on the floor.

Her eyes widened from shock and her heart beat furiously at what just happened. She sat up, fighting the tears that threatened to dropped from her eyes. She hid her face from him under her dark locks, trying to hold it all in before shooting him a black look.

"Why did you do that?!" Rinoa yelled at him, demanding answers, and then the waterworks commenced. "You're mean! No wonder your friends didn't come back to get you! You're a very mean person!"

That might've have been too much to say, but did it matter? He wouldn't understand anyway, and even if he did, it didn't concern her anymore.

Mustering all her strength, she stood up and fixed the table back in its place. Her nonstop tears left
dark marks on the wooden surface, and it was then she only realized she was wasting too many for someone like him. She swiped her arm across her face and sat on the chair. No matter how hard she tried to tell herself he wasn't worth it, she couldn't stop crying.

It wasn't until he said something apologetically that she realized he was also sitting on a chair opposite hers. How he got up, she didn't care.

Then, he called her name.

Squall couldn't sleep.

For hours, he watched as the sunlight stealthily crept through the window by the sink and bouncing against the metal blade of his weapon sitting several feet away from him on the floor. He could hear the birds chirping with the trees against the morning wind, and felt the warmth gradually replacing the cold of the evening. And no matter how many times he closed his eyes to lose himself in slumber, he would be haunted by the thought of his fellow SeeDs he left in Timber: Seifer, Quistis, Irvine, Selphie, Zell… He was the Commander of the squad and he failed them. He didn't know how many of them survived considering how bad they had it back in the mission, but it wasn't their fault. They were just following his orders.

He failed the Captain who trusted his capabilities, his talent, and his skills in battle.

He failed the Garden that raised him, trained him, and appointed him leader.

He couldn't help but blame himself for everything that transpired in the mission. He miscalculated and didn't anticipate the growing powers of the sorceresses that caused his strategies to backfire. Now, he was no better than a fugitive who ran away from the consequences of his remissness, hiding against his will because he couldn't even do the dying-for-his-comrades-with-honor right.

He heard thumping sounds from the other room, presuming that the sorceress had woken up. A few seconds later, she stepped out of the room, still wearing the same blue dress from the previous night. She gave him a smile and when he didn't respond kindly, she quickly turned around and filled a kettle with water instead. She placed the kettle to the fireplace to boil, and went back to the kitchen counter to arrange some bread with eggs. Where she got them, he didn't know, but she was pretty resourceful, he'd give her that. She then approached him with a tray of breakfast and was about to place it on the bedside table, but she paused after looking at his untouched dinner. With one hand, she moved it to the floor and replaced it with the new meal. She sat in front of him and touched his bandage again. Squall didn't fight back this time, it was pointless. It would cause him more hassle than leaving all the healing work to her. She seemed to know what she was doing, anyway.

After casting cure to the improving wound and wrapping a fresh new bandage over it, she smiled at him once more. For some reason, she looked at him directly in his eyes and placed a hand over her chest. She said a word that sounded like it danced around her tongue.

His brows slightly met. He was sure she was telling him something.

Seemingly reading through his confusion, she repeated.
"Rinoa." she said. She then pointed her hand at him, waiting for his response.

Did she just give her name to a SeeD? She sure had serious trust issues, in a stupid way. But he didn't, so he kept his mouth shut.

It was the second time he saw her eyes fell in her lack of success, and she silently stood up. She pointed towards the door and said something as if she was telling him she would be out for a while. If she could only understand him, he'd love to tell her to never come back.

She returned to her room, leaving him alone once again. Squall re-assessed his situation: he was still injured, stuck with a sorceress, and he couldn't walk. People in the Garden must think he was already dead, but whether or not he was still alive, which he was, they would set out a rescue mission for him. And when they did, he'd better be out of the cabin before any more sorceress finds him. Supposing he got lucky with Rinoa, he might not be with the next ones to find him—and he wanted to go back to the Garden in one piece. He was still a SeeD, an enemy to them. And they are as well to him.

He needed to leave as soon as he could.

Supporting himself against his arms, he carefully slid from his bed, sensitive to the pain of his injured thigh. Squall paused and heaved before pressing his good leg on the floor and stood up, limping and maintaining his balance as he tried to put as little pressure on his other limb as possible. He looked around and saw the front door that would lead him outside and away from the sorceress. But first, he needed his uniform and his gunblade.

But most importantly, his gunblade.

Squall hobbled his way towards his weapon and stopped by the wooden dining table, pausing to catch his breath. Supporting himself against the table, he carefully crouched, stretching his bad leg sideways to avoid any grisly ripping incidents again. He stretched one arm against the table, and the other one reaching the gunblade on the floor, but it still wasn't close enough. Damn thigh. Damn sorceress.

Deducing that the table couldn't get him close enough, he decided to stand up and move it. Squall pulled himself up to the furniture, but he proved himself to be heavier than expected. The table toppled over, and he fell sitting on the floor, his thigh stinging once more.

Damn them all to hell.

Rinoa hurriedly emerged from the room and ran to his side.

He groaned. Not you again.

But it only made her even more alarmed about his thigh. Strings of words slipped from her mouth and Squall didn't even bother comprehend what she probably meant, but he hoped that the look he gave her would drive her away. Instead, she placed his arm around her shoulders and strained to pull him up to his feet. But he instinctively shoved her away in response. She yelped and stumbled as she fell sitting on the floor across him.

That snapped him out of his thoughts. He just pushed a powerful, capable sorceress who tried to nurse him for the past 24 hours, putting up with his childish antics while she tirelessly persisted to save his ass.

And there he was, sitting on the floor with a useless leg like a useless moron.
When she shot him a glare beneath her hair that fell on her face, he suddenly realized that his gunblade was still out of his reach and he was unarmed, prone to any outburst of sorceress anger.

He was beginning to fear for the worst, and he somehow knew he deserved it.

She began talking again, yelling at him in a reproving manner to be exact, possibly chanting a spell that would explode him alive. Squall held his breath and prepared himself at what was about to come next, but only heard more sobs from her. His eyes followed Rinoa as she stood up, wiping her tears away with her arm, and propped the overturned table up again.

Now it was clear to him— she was really just trying to help him, care for him, working night and day to make sure he was in the best of conditions she could provide, given the situation. She meant no harm.

He was the jerk for misjudging her. At least that much he knew.

She sat on a chair opposite from him, sniveling still, but evidently fighting the imminent tears. Breaking from his fluster, Squall struggled to stand up, still careful with his thigh. He reached once more for the table and slowly pulled himself up to maintain its stability. He limped towards another chair facing the sorceress and sat on it. He was getting better at it.

Letting out a deep exhale, his eyes fell on his lap. He stole a glance of Rinoa, and hoped she would stop crying.

Squall sighed. "Sorry."

She looked up, wiping her arm against her puffy eyes. Her eyes seemed trying to make out his apology, but he would put his money on no, she didn't understand what he was trying to say. Squall nervously rubbed his palm against his good thigh and repeated his word but unexpectedly received no response from Rinoa.

A moment was let to pass, and the occasional sniffles would break the silence in between. When he turned to her, she would respond by looking back with her soft, sad eyes. For the first time in a long one, guilt kicked pride out and proceeded to merrily squeeze Squall's chest.

She did her share of effort to make it all easier for the both of them, and all he gave her was his nasty attitude she didn't deserve. Leaning carefully against the side of the table, he stretched his hand to her.

"Rinoa." he called, heedful of her delicate state. "I'm Squall."

Rinoa paused and curiously gazed up at him.

Squall shifted on his chair and pointed a hand at her. "Rinoa," and then to himself. "Squall."
"Squall."

His name echoed in her mind as she folded the clothes she scavenged from the cabinets of their temporary shelter. After she was finished with the last one, Rinoa perched on the edge of her bed and recalled his sudden change of mood yesterday morning. Following her breakdown, she retreated to her room to give herself time away from the SeeD, and didn't bother heading back outside to check on him nor did proceed with the bath she scheduled for herself and for Squall. Why would she? Helping him further was become pointless by the day, and he didn't seem to need her anyway. If he wanted to do everything by himself, then so be it. She didn't even know why she cared and stayed in the first place. She should've been with Vanille and the others by now, safe and happy in their presence.

But she was no uncaring black-heart who dragged him into the cabin without his full consent and then leave him to his own devices. She brought him with her to be cared for, and despite being the mean, uncooperative person that he was, Squall was her responsibility and she intended to see his recovery through. Morning was setting in and if she wanted this to be over soon, she needed to move on.

"You're doing the right thing, Rinoa." She whispered to herself. "Saving him was the right thing to do."

She sniffled at the remainder of her tears and rubbed the back of her hand against her nose to compose herself again. She then stood up and collected the fresh set of clothes in her arms she fixed before she was distracted from the SeeD's table accident. She faced the door and took a good deep breath, conditioning herself to face him once more.

He did give her his name, and that accounted for something, didn't it?

Rinoa stepped out of her room, briefly glancing Squall's way who was supporting himself against a wall, his eyes on her. Paying no further attention to his curiously indecipherable expression, she proceeded to the door and left the cabin for the river nearby. As opposed to the water spell she planned to use to clean herself and save more time, she decided that she deserved a more relaxing and longer bath in the river.

From the other side of the room, Squall wanted to stop relying on Rinoa for everything and make himself useful.

After the incomprehensible yet understandable confrontation they had before she locked herself in her room for the whole day, he was finally able to stand up and reach for his gunblade. His thigh still stung with pressure but did not pop open or bleed like it used to, which was the kind of improvement he needed. Squall laid his gunblade by the foot of his bed before walking toward a wall and leaned his back on it. Sitting for one whole day made him feel all cooped up, and his limbs needed a good stretch to allow the blood to flow more freely through his system. Finally relaxing after hours and hours of stress crumpling in his stomach, the SeeD Commander conceded to the fact that was in dire need of sustenance. He looked around and his eyes fell on the plate of breakfast Rinoa prepared for him. It wasn't spoiled yet, and he was pretty sure she didn't put any poison in it. So he grabbed it, ate it, and very soon realized that it was the first meal he had in a while. The bread was a little bland, but it made its fill in his appetite– it would have to do. He couldn't complain either, he wasn't the one who came up with the idea of getting food in the first place. It was all Rinoa and her resourceful ways of knowing what they need and how to get it.
With his hunger taken care of, he tried to walk around, sliding his injured limb carefully against the wooden floor to test its degree of pain. He could walk, but not without limping to tolerate the sting. To give himself some good exercise, he walked around the interior of the house, crossing to the kitchen and back to his bed several times until he was used to the uncomfortable sensation. The sun began to slowly disappear from the windows when Squall decided to fix some supper both for him and Rinoa. Opening one cabinet after the other, it dawned to him that only Rinoa knew where the supplies were kept. Groaning, he reached for one of the glasses, filled it with water, drank it, and limped himself to bed.

The morning after was no better, but at least he could walk. Feeling the undesirable protest in his stomach, he used the morning light to look for the food available in the cabin.

*Where did you put them?*

Feeling the pain on his thigh once more, Squall straightened up and leaned himself against a wall to give it a rest.

When Rinoa finally opened her door and stepped out of her room minutes later, he followed her with his gaze, aching to know if she was still mad, or sad, or both. Somehow, he was expecting her to approach him and say something like she always did.

Instead, she silently stole him a look and stepped outside.

Even when they couldn't understand each other, Rinoa wasn't too complicated. She wouldn't hesitate to show him a piece of her mind, which was why it wasn't hard to make out what she was trying to tell him. At present, he knew she was still mad at him, and for good reason. He was an ungrateful git after all. He did his part, he told her his name. A little delayed, but he reached out, and that counted as an apology as it was.

Forgiven or not, there was nothing more important at the present circumstances than surviving in the middle of the woods with more uncertainty than supplies. He didn't know what kind of sorceress magic she did to make it all possible, but he had his weapon and he *could* hunt for more.

Squall limped his way to his uniform hanging dry by the fireplace and eased himself into his trousers. He grunted in frustration when he pulled them on and almost fell midway, but was able to regain his balance while withstanding the pain and the restrictions of the bandage. He grabbed his gunblade and opened the front door leading to the forest.

The melodic laps of the water against the current stole all her senses and brought her back right where she wanted to be. Rinoa knelt by the bank and dipped her fingertips through the surface to test if she was ready for its cold touch, surprised at the lukewarm sensation it actually brought for her. After placing her fresh clothes farther from the wet edges of the bank, she stripped away off her garment and submitted herself into the tranquil flow.

Nevermind the big meanie SeeD who persistently saw an enemy in her when she cared for him as a friend. He was nothing more than just a responsibility anyway, and he didn't hold the right to make her so restless. How dare he rob her of peaceful nights when she should be resting instead of crying for being such a fool. How dare *she* allow it to distress her when all she wanted was some simple, quiet time in the cabin. She was a sorceress! She was born tough and powerful to do things her way, and no one can-

She paused at the sound of a deep growl behind her.
Stiffly and slowly as not not make any sudden movements, Rinoa turned around. Her eyes searched through the dark shades underneath Timber's bulk of trees for her intruder, but saw no shadow nor form. Carefully, she moved closer to the bank, ready to grab her clothes and bolt far away from the danger zone. She gasped and held back at the heavy footsteps that followed the closer she got to her things. She stretched her arms to the unseen monster, ready to cast her spell of choice even at the absence of cover. Another growl vibrated the place and it was only then Rinoa detected at dark orange fur with caramel spots stealthily moving beneath the dark shadows of the trees. Dried leaves and twigs crunched under the steps of paws the size of a moogle's head, revealing a torama which eyes were glowering right back at her. Rinoa's arms began shaking both from the cold moisture and the chilling threat of having a monster bite her head off at any given moment.

The torama took more steps forward, its head tilting as it examined her curiously. Its long purple whiskers wobbled against the windless air, and it's carnivorous eyes stuck on the shivering sorceress. Rinoa's hands began to glow with a bluish green magic, ready to launch at the beast if it got too close.

Her pounding heart blocked all the noise save for her short trembling breaths. When the torama paused at the edge of the bank, Rinoa prepared for the worst.

When it roared and leapt for her, she released her flare spell.

The cockatrice didn't know what was coming to it. It kept on poking something under its wing with its beak, unaware of the gunblade pointing behind its head. Squall didn't hesitate and pulled the trigger, releasing a blizzard spell that covered the animal's body with thick, cold ice. With a last cluck, the flightless bird solidified and fell on the ground with a thunk. Squall lowered his gunblade and limped toward the frozen dinner to survey it, deliberating what kind of dishes they could make out of its meat. He didn't know how to cook gourmet, but at the very least he knew how to barbecue if Rinoa didn't mind it. He lifted the cockatrice by its foot and dragged it behind him back to the cabin.

He was almost there when he heard a feline-like roar by the river. He paused on his way and looked around, discerning the direction where it came from.

Then, a yelp of a familiar voice.

Squall dropped the cockatrice and ran to his west, completely desensitized of his pricking thigh by the sound of Rinoa's urgency. He reached the river where a mostly-submerged Rinoa was holding out her arms to a collapsed torama by the banks. The creature scrambled back up on the ground and roared at her direction once more.

Squall threw a blizzard spell, diverting the torama's attention from Rinoa, also causing the latter to notice him in relief. The beast turned around and exposed his fangs at him as Squall held his gunblade in front and ready for attack. Its hind legs pushed itself from the ground and swiftly leapt for him, but Squall was faster when he took a sidestep and swung his gunblade to the creature's side, slicing it's skin open. It cried with a loud, angry roar as it fell on the ground and limped its way back up, snarling at the sword-wielding SeeD.

It was pissed.

Squall positioned his gunblade again for another attack, blocking the torama's series of angry clawings aimed at him. Squall pressed his good leg against the trunk of a nearby tree and briskly dashed towards the creature, gashing its body on the other side and drawing dangerous amount of blood. He skidded on his landing behind the creature, wincing and groaning at the returning pain
from his wound. Dying on its side, the torama gave him another loud roar and whipped its thick whiskers at him, hauling a huge ball of ruin. Squall narrowed his eyes and dashed once more through the ball of burning magic and pointed his gunblade straight for the monster. Squall howled one last roar before puncturing the torama's neck with his blade, heaving as he held on his weapon tightly at the carcass of his enemy as the ruin spell faded behind him. When his strength finally caught up, he swiftly pulled his gunblade free with a wet sound against the monster's flesh and took a final look at his attacker. He fell into the large shadow of the trees' shade, his back hitting something hard. With the enemy defeated and the area cleared of threats, all that mattered to him now was her safety. He looked at her through his bangs clumped from the sweats of his battle and sighed quietly at her worried sight.

From the river, Rinoa watched as the worn-out Squall slumped on the ground and leaned his back against the trunk of one of Timber's thick trees. Her sharp breaths calmed to deep, slower ones as she gazed at him blistered from the ruin spell. He hung his head and his eyes were downcast, taking in deep silent breaths and his grip loosening around his weapon.

Rinoa swam to her clothes and reached for her towel. Quickly, as she emerged from the covers of the water, she wrapped it around herself and tucked one side in. She slowly approached her savior, bending forward to survey the severity of the creature's attack and puffed out in relief when she found nothing too serious. With one hand holding the towel securely around her chest, she cupped the other on one side of Squall's face and allowed a cura to flow from her touch to his wholeness. Feeling the warm tingle that took the pain away from his shallow wounds and instantly rejuvenated everything inside of him, Squall looked up to see her face against the sunlight only inches from his. She smiled at him warmly when his eyes met hers and he took his chance to study the gentle features of his healer. Her dampened skin glinted under the afternoon sun almost emitting an orange glow, and her eyes were far from the anger he thought she still held against him—they were now of tenderness. Rinoa released her touch from his skin and he followed her with his gaze as she picked her clothes and hid under the shadows of the trees.

Making out what she was doing, he looked away. She came back to him in a shorter white dress and he admired the simplicity of her vision. His short breath escaped him when she touched his hands and pulled him up. She guided him to the river banks and, under his quizzical eyes, she gently tugged his shirt upwards.

When he gave her a look of question and protest, she sighed and said "You need your long overdue bath. Really badly."

As if understanding what she meant, he pulled away from her grasp and started freeing himself from his shirt.

Rinoa held her breath at the sight of his flexing rocky torso which was just what she expected from the trainings he had as a SeeD. His hands began working on his belt and paused there, giving Rinoa a defensive look. Grasping his need for privacy, she quickly turned around and shut her eyes tightly, unheeding of the small smirk he made behind her as he pulled the rest of his clothing down. She waited until she heard the sound of his body against the rippling waters and turned around to see him concealed under the surface of the river. He emerged soaked and mostly cleansed of blood and dirt, his eyes closed as he ran his hand down his face. Rinoa fought to urge to take off her clothes again and join him... just for the fun of it and because it made perfect sense.

His palm felt the white cloth covering his forehead and proceeded to unwrap it revealing a reddish brown scar, just as what Rinoa had anticipated from that wound. Squall turned around and tossed the bandage on the banks before submerging again, enjoying the refreshing coldness of the water.
on his skin.

Rinoa waited until he was done and closed her eyes again when he climbed out of the water and slid back into his clothes. She knew he was ready when she felt his warmth by her side and she gave him a shy sideway look.

He was looking right back at her with his steely blue eyes, waiting to be prompted back to the cabin.

Rinoa swiftly turned back around and walked ahead of Squall, keeping a considerably safe distance as to not allow him to read the unease in her face.

Puzzled by her actions, Squall blinked before swinging up his gunblade and propped it on his shoulders. He followed behind silently, curious and a little worried at her insistence to stay away from him.

The sun was preparing the burning purple sky for the moon by the time they arrived at the cabin. Rinoa started working on Squall's hunted cockatrice and allowed him to take his well-earned rest by the fireplace. She started plucking its feather by hovering her hand across its body with a gravity spell, washed it clean with water, and grilled it with fire after seasoning it with oregano and thyme leaves, filling the room with the biting scent of spices that she could only describe as succulent. She carried it on a plate and settled it in front of Squall on the floor who smiled at her appealing arrangement. Rinoa sat on his right and began slicing through the juicy meat of their dinner, excited to taste her work.

"Let me do it." Squall offered, taking the steak knife and fork from Rinoa's hands. He paused to study them, ignoring Rinoa's perplexed gaze at his suddenly furrowed brows. Even under the yellow illumination of the fire, her hands were paler than he remembered.

"Rinoa."

He looked up at her blinking brown orbs.

"Squall?" she called back a little weakly.

"Your hands…" he pointed at them with his eyes before turning back at her. He stared for a moment to search for any clues to his question and only then did he realize the lack of pinkish color in her cheeks and lips.

Thinking that there was something on her face, Rinoa patted and stroke the sides of her features then examined her palms and fingers, but found no reason for him to be staring and saying something about it. She peered back at Squall to discern as best as she could what he was trying to tell her.

Instead, he instantaneously shook his head and began slicing her a piece of the roasted cockatrice.

*She looks fine*, he convinced himself.

After all that happened in the past few days, maybe she was only tired. Maybe she lacked sleep. Maybe she will get better with rest and right amount of food.

Maybe it was his turn to watch out for her needs as she did with his.
"Captain please, Mr. Kramer doesn't want to be disturbed!"

Captain Hewley ignored the Headmaster's secretary as he passed by her table and banged the door open into his office. Cid swiveled his chair to face the Captain, a phone in one hand and a paper in the other. He shot Captain Hewley a surprising look.

"Angeal," he greeted. "I don't remember Xu scheduling an appointment with you."

The Captain threw a folder on his desk, glaring at Cid as he did. "Expound."

Cid's eyes went to the files then raised his brows at Angeal. "Are you talking like Fujin now?"

"That's not even funny, Kramer."

Cid grimaced and opened the folder, scanning the first page of the contract he signed that morning. "Which part do you think needs more explanation?"

"The date of the mission." Angeal replied gravely. "My Commander has been missing for four days since the Timber incident. And you want us to wait a week to launch the rescue mission?"

"My SeeDs are still wounded, Captain." Cid replied. "Sending them to another mission is not ideal for their recovery. Not when most of the sorceresses survived the attack."

"Retrieving Leonhart is our only objective, not killing more sorceresses." Angeal said. "We don't need that many for a search and extract."

"We?"


Cid's head jerked back in surprise. "Weren't they admitted in the infirmary too?"

"They did sustain minor injuries but a cure spell made their recovery faster. They too are furious to see the delay in the contract."

Cid frowned and shook his head. "I've endangered too many lives on the Timber mission, Captain."

"So you'd rather leave Leonhart for dead in Timber?"

"We don't even know if he's alive."

Angeal's fist tightened on his sides. "And what if he's alive? I refuse to take any chances."

"And you've gambled enough." Cid said. "We both have. Squall was the Commander of the mission and he knew the risks of failing."

"He failed because we failed him!" Angeal raised his voice. "The intel didn't say anything about the height of power of the sorceresses, and we didn't verify. We failed because of our overconfidence, and that wasn't Squall's fault!"

"No, it's not. It is ours." Cid admitted. "We became too confident with Squall's skills. He is, after all, one of our best. But as the Commander, Squall also held authority over the mission yet he didn't say anything."

"That's still not an excuse for us take his safety for granted." Angeal said through gritted teeth. "His mistake, ours, whoever is to be held responsible for anything knew better than to be deserted..."
by the Garden."

Cid sighed and shook his head, giving Angeal's insistence some introspection. Launching rescue missions was optional, but it was their unwritten protocol not to leave anyone behind, dead or alive. Squall would be able to manage himself if he was indeed alive, but if the SeeD's welfare was his concern, it involved Squall's too. Finally relenting, he slammed an elbow on his desk and pointed a finger at the Captain. "If anything happens to your squad, you are being held responsible. The safety of the SeeDs is my priority."

"So is mine."

Cid leaned back on his chair. "When do you plan on commencing this mission?"

"As soon as possible."

"Tomorrow then."

"Fair enough."

The Headmaster took a deep breath and returned his eyes to the folder on his desk. He opened it and scribbled over the date of the mission and signed it in confirmation of the change. He closed it back and handed it over to Angeal. "Give this to Xu and ask her to print a new one. Return this to me for my signature."

Angeal smirked. "Be right back."

Just when Angeal reached for the folder, Cid pulled it back. The Captain gave him a questioning look.

"I almost forgot," Cid said. "if you find any sorceress, I want you to bring her back here alive."

Angeal raised his brows. "I thought you said-"

"I know that I'm raising the stakes on this mission with my request." Cid interrupted. "My condition still stands, the SeeD's safety will be your top priority. But you also knew the risks of encountering a sorceress. Better if you didn't but, if you did, I want her here."

Angeal frowned and contemplated at the Headmaster's bizarre demand to bring home a deadly creature to the Garden. Why would he want to keep one alive at the safe confines of their home? Then again, that would be one against hundreds of trained mercenaries if she tried anything unacceptable. Brushing the thought off his mind, he decided not to question it any further and curtly nodded. "Understood."

Cid nodded back. "Bring them back safely, Angeal." he said in warning. "And goodluck."
Warmth of the Storm

The terse howls of the wind blowing through the trees and against the brick walls outside of the cabin opened Squall's eyes. Through the window, he couldn't see the stars nor the moon, but the leaves that fought against the blows of an impending storm and the downpour drumming against the ground. He languidly sat up and slid his palm over his face, flinching at the sting of his scar on his forehead. Carefully, he pressed his feet on the floor and stood up. Thank Hyne his thigh didn't hurt anymore.

He jolted up at the sound of heavy wood against the hard wall and realized that Rinoa was scrambling with a large scrap of wood to cover a hole where rain relentlessly blew in. He hurriedly ran to her side and pushed the wood up to secure it into place, locking the other side of it behind the counter.

As soon as they took care of the hole, Rinoa sat down and tried to catch her breath. Squall let go of his grip on the wood and surveyed the sorceress. Her pale skin glowed in the darkness like the absent lunar light, and Squall wondered if he correctly suspected her fading color.

Rinoa looked up at him with a curious but tired gaze, wondering why he was staring at her again. She parted her lips to ask him why when the sudden roar of wind froze her.

Startled by her soft gasp, Squall locked his eyes on her, silently searching for any more signs that should concern him. When another gale blew outside, Rinoa's hand shot up and grabbed his shirt. Squall's eyes travelled down at her grip before looking back up at her.

"You're afraid of the storm." he said.

His soothing voice made her look up, her brown orbs seeking to understand what he said. When she realized her hand was desperately grabbing his shirt, she immediately released her hold and tore her eyes away from him. She stood up and silently went to her room.

Squall's puzzled eyes followed her until she closed the door behind. She wrapped herself under the thin sheets of her bed and squeezed into a corner.

Outside, Squall's attention was stolen by another sound of thunder outside. He stared at the flash of lighting through the window. With one shallow sigh, he stood up and began to work, patching up the remaining holes and wondering what made the gods so angry.

And why were they scaring Rinoa away.

It had been hours later when she went out of her room again. The moody cloud was finally spared from the wind and lightning. Rain, however, was still blocking the safety of the sun's warmth and glow, prompting him to keep the flames on their fireplace burning. He mused that sooner or later, he would have to head outside and brave the storm to gather more wood, soaked or not. He carefully sat in front of their only source of heat and rubbed his palms together, stealing glances of Rinoa's door.

He saw it open slightly and Rinoa's worried orbs peeking through. She caught his eyes and tore from it almost immediately before stepping out. Squall watched her as she went to the kitchen before turning back to the fireplace. A few moments and rummaging later, she came to his side with two cups of warm liquid. She almost called for his name, but he pre-emptively looked up at her seemingly waiting for his permission to sit by him. His eyes fell on her spot and pushed the
pillow a little too far away to show her that he didn't mind. Immediately, however, he mentally kicked himself for pushing away the only cushion that could be provided to her.

She smiled a little too much and quickly sat by him, almost spilling the hot chocolate she made for the both of them. She handed one to Squall who peered at it curiously before taking it in his palms and examined the cup's content. Rinoa wanted to tell him it's a good drink for a cold weather, and that it was made with her secret recipe. She watched as Squall took a gulp, giving no reaction after he did. She only took the delight of assuming that he somehow liked it when he took another careful sip as he stared at the burning fireplace, deep in his thoughts. She tore her eyes away from him, smiling only slightly before she drank from her cup, wondering why he wasn't looking at her to at least express some sort of, well, gratitude.

Meanwhile, he still wished he could apologize for pushing that damn pillow away.

The storm was still looming over the next dawn they woke up to. Maintaining a routine he picked up from the previous day, he went to work on patching more cracks and holes in the ceiling to stop the perpetual dripping of rainwater in their dilapidated abode. Rinoa on the other hand, started her work on cleaning the place and making it look (and feel) like home again. She made sure that they had their three meals with enough fill to last them the whole day. It still puzzled and concerned him, however, how she had gotten a little paler over the course of one night yet she moved around as if it wasn't something that should bother her. He did notice how often she would sit to catch her breath.

She muttered to herself most of the time, and then giggle as if embarrassed with her antics. She would smile when she caught him looking at her, as if recognizing his company, or trying to make a wordless conversation, or brightening his day like she would. He would return with a smaller smile or slight nods. He wasn't much of a talker, and he never understood her anyway.

When night fell, they relaxed at the feet of the couch in front of the fireplace, wrapped around their own blankets and sitting a few feet away from each other. Rinoa thought it felt nice, being somewhere within his range, his safe zone. The storm didn't feel so scary anymore, and neither did he.

Squall could feel his eyelids dropping to a close. Before he indulged himself into slumber, he took a sideway glance of Rinoa who was finally having her well-earned rest. He turned back to the fireplace that blazed smaller flames than it did the day before. Funny, he thought, how that night felt a lot warmer.

The storm was still around the next morning, much to Squall's dismay. Rinoa was preparing breakfast when he checked on the logs left for the fireplace. As he had expected and feared, there were only a few left to last them another day.

Rinoa looked over her shoulder and noticed the worried face Squall was wearing. She placed the bread and her knife down, and walked to his side. He was holding the logs, looking at them before looking back at the fireplace. She called his name and he looked up at her tilting her head, as if asking him what's wrong.

"We're out of logs." he said, even if he knew she understood the situation well. So he was right. He would have to head out to keep the fire burning and keep themselves from freezing to death. He stood up, grabbed his jacket and his gunblade, and started to head for the door.

"Squall, wait!" Rinoa called after him again. He turned around at the sound of his name and watched as Rinoa stood by side side, looking at him. "I'm coming with you."
Squall blinked his eyes and frowned at her. Is she trying to tag along?

He shook his head at her.

She stomped her foot, crossed her arms against her chest, and pouted.

He sighed and looked away, opening the door before them. "Whatever."

As he did, Rinoa cast a large bubble of shell spell around them as a shield from the rain. Squall observed that the droplets slid down with soft the transparent surface that kept them dry, and their feet spared from the muddy soil. He glanced at Rinoa who gave him a proud smile.

They spotted a large fallen tree not too far from the river, and Squall thought he could cut out the branches and the twigs for fuel. With Rinoa following behind, he knelt by it to observe, tugging the branches to assess its durability.

Rinoa caught the white puff Squall exhaled after releasing his hold from one particularly stubborn branch. Despite her protective shell spell, the chilly air made its way inside. And though it did not bother her as much, it was obvious that Squall was feeling a little too cold, no matter how much he tried to mask it. She knelt beside him, prompting him to look at her over his shoulder. Slowly and gently, she cupped his face in her hands where a warm, yellow light glowed.

He blinked curiously at her sudden act of kindness and discerned that she was omitting a soft fire spell to keep him warm. Aside from it, he felt an unexplainable heat building inside him and creeping up to his cheeks. He could have easily blamed it to the sorceress, but he knew that this time, it was a strange, involuntary reaction from his end. And he knew he must allow everything to transpire by itself.

When she finally let go, he swiftly looked away and gulped a stubborn quaff. Back to the logs, he told himself. It was what they were here for in the first place, not to test their tolerance in cold temperatures. He cracked his neck slightly to the side to regain his composure and cleared his throat.

"No need for that, you know." he said. "I'm doing fine, I'm used to these kinds of condition. You should warm yourself too."

Rinoa smiled at him. Was he thanking her, finally? She knew that one small act of benevolence will be repaid by another, even in the form of simple gratitude. She may not understand him, but he seemed to have responded kindly to her gesture, which was a first from any SeeD ever. She gave him a slight nod.

"You're very welcome."

Squall glanced up and gave her a small but unsure smile. He was far from certain of what she said, but she was talking to him and she was smiling. He guessed, whatever it was she said, that was good enough for him.

Squall observed that the storm was slowing to a calm as they made their way back to the cabin. He shaved the outer layers of the branches to expose the dryer parts before tossing them into the fireplace. Rinoa prepared their supper and joined him at the feet of the couch where they ate in silence.

Rinoa was growing fond of her usual spot, no matter how hard the surface was to sit on or rough the carpet felt. It was her zone, one place where she felt safe and at peace. She coddled herself by
taking small glances of Squall after taking a bite from whatever kind of chicken dish she had made. It was far from her usual recipe, but it tasted decent. At least Squall's plate was almost finished, and that was a good sign all the same.

He caught her glancing at his plate before looking up at him. She smiled again, possibly waiting for him to smile back. But he found himself trapped in the moment where everything else stood still, and he needed to do something for time to move again. It was one of the rarest times when he wished Zell or Selphie, or maybe Irvine was around to make any noise.

Squall was getting frigid, and Rinoa knew that the silence was beginning to unnerve him. She could talk, and maybe regale him with her rambles, but she knew he knew that both of them could only rely on body language to know what was going on. She scooted closer to him, the sound of her sheet grazing the wooden floor stealing his attention. She maintained her smile, shifting her eyes to the floor.

He watched as she summoned three light blue human-shaped wisps, one smaller than the other two. The taller ones began moving closer to the tiny one, motioning an embrace around it. Squall smirked at the notion of showing him a family in her animated magic. Until one of the taller ones, which he presumed to be the mother, began to fade with Rinoa's smile. The remaining of the taller two, the father, swept the child in his thin arms and ran. It then left the child on the ground before running away again, fading into the distance. The lone wisp sat down and hung its head.

He feared that her story finished there until Rinoa began summoning eight red wisp figures. One of them approached the little wisp, held its hand and lead it to the other red wisps dancing around in a circle. The blue hue of the child slowly turned to red as it joined the others.

Squall winced at the painful prick in his chest which he couldn't decide whence it came. Was it because he figured it was Rinoa's way of sharing her story and everything she went through? Was it the hurt she felt from being abandoned? Was it guilt for destroying the only family that accepted her? For destroying her only home? Or was it because he knew it was too late for sorry?

Reluctantly, he looked up, curious as to how she would look at him now that he knew what it all meant for her. And the smile of anticipation that she was wearing was the last thing he expected from her. She was looking at him, half of her face illuminated by the orange color of the flames, her eyes blinking a few times awaiting his reaction.

For the first time in Squall Leonhart's life, he never wished to say so many things this badly. He wanted to thank her, to apologize, to assure her that he would keep her safe this time, to not be afraid anymore. To not be sad anymore. He wanted to say so many things, but he didn't want to look like a moron. But he had to do something, anything. She was trying to strike a conversation, and the most he could do was to keep the ball rolling.

So he took one of the twigs that he scraped off. Against the thick dirt from the litter of the fireplace, he drew stick figures of his father, his mother, and his sister, chuckling at himself as he did. Rinoa smiled a little wider, amused at his attempt to demonstrate his artistic tendencies. He then drew a little boy, himself, a little farther from the family, and drew an X on his mother. He drew a circle around his stick self before letting the twig go.

"So there." he whispered. "There's my family."

Rinoa could read in his eyes and detect from his tone that his story did not fare any better than hers. They both lost their mothers, their fathers left them, and they found home someplace else. She reached for his arm and squeezed him gently, giving him a comforting smile when he looked at her to let him know that she knew what it was like, too. She then took the twig and drew a stick figure
of herself inside the circle, right beside his.

"We only have each other now." she said before shrugging. "Well, for now anyway. Hopefully."

He didn't know what that meant, but the way she drew herself said a lot. She smiled at him one last time before yawning and leaning against the edge of the couch. Once she closed her eyes, Squall tore his gaze from her and watched the dancing flames in front of them, pulling the blanket around him tighter.

He found himself waking up a few hours later to what fewer flames was left in the fireplace, realizing that he unintentionally dozed off. He slowly sat up, brushing his hair back and taking a deep breath. He crawled closer to the fireplace, tossed more wood and poked them for a warmer blaze. He leaned back to his spot and took a sideways glance at Rinoa. She was bent unceremoniously to her side, her mouth slightly opened, and her head missing the cushion behind her by a foot. How could she stay asleep in such uncomfortable position?

He stood up and carefully lifted her from the floor. Slowly, as not to wake her up, he placed her on the couch. He draped his much thicker blanket over her, taking hers for himself before settling on his spot again on the floor. He blinked a few times at the fireplace, musing that they would need to plan their next steps. The storm was bound to end sooner or later, and they needed to retreat to their own bases- her with wherever the sorceresses are, and he to Balamb Garden. But would he really have to leave her alone to find her way back? Should he consider seeing her through safely before going back to Balamb?

And then what?, he thought.

Now that was a question he was afraid of keeping him up all night. He knew everything must come to an end, even the good things. Even the momentary bliss of peace.

It was a rocky ride on waters, thanks to the perpetual storm that diverted their way too many times. A day's travel stretched to three days, and they were grateful it did not demand more. The SeeD ship stopped ashore, its Captain emerging from the deck to survey the weather and the soil of of the now soulless Timber. He thought it was about time the rain had mellowed, and the sun should rise soon. The land was getting muddy, and the hostile elements more active the wetter it got. Elements his young Commander may be exposed to the whole time.

Quistis walked closer behind him, holding up a black umbrella. "Captain, we have reached Timber. Orders?"

Angeal nodded. "Is everyone still up?"

"Yes Sir. And eagerly waiting."

"The storm hasn't passed yet." he said, looking up the starless sky. "Rain and wind will not cooperate, and we'll raise the stakes if we leave now. We'll move at first light."

"Yes, Captain." Quistis replied. She was about to turn back around when she faced Angeal again. "Sir, may I ask you something? We've been curious for a while now."

"Go ahead, Trepe."

"Is it true that we need to bring back a sorceress?"

"Yes."
"Then, there must be a good reason why?"

"Yes. There must be."

"Was it elaborated?" she pressed.

"No. I'm afraid the Headmaster did not say more."

"We could be bringing danger with us."

"Perhaps." Angeal admitted. "But I trust your skills to subdue her by any means necessary."

"Understood."

"Regardless, finding Squall is our top priority, so is the safety of the squad. We'll be bringing the sorceress only if possible."

Quistis was not comfortable over things that she simply could not rationalize. Often, it meant bad things will happen. More loopholes, less assurance. And the Captain knew that too. But those were the conditions to grant them permit to retrieve Squall. Orders were orders.

It took her a few moment's time before giving Angeal a firm salute. "Yes, Captain."
Seifer jerked at pillow that punched his face. He swiftly sat up and groaned when his head collided against the upper frame of the bunkbed, hitting the scar on his forehead that he earned from the battle in Timber.

"DAMN IT!" he yelled, crouching forward and clutching his head. He looked up to see Fujin standing erect before him.

"UP." she said.

"Did you really need to do that?!"

"QUIT."

"Don't tell me to quit it! It BURNS!"

"CRYBABY."

"Cyclops!"

Fujin abruptly pulled the covers of Seifer's bed, sliding him down with it. His back plowed with the floor and his groan grew louder as he rolled from the pain.

Irvine approached the pair and leaned against the doorframe of the room. "We tried waking you up a dozen times before. Well, what do ya know, it only takes a Fujin to make that happen."

His palm still on his forehead, Seifer staggered to stand up. "Screw you too, asshole."

"IRRESPONSIBLE." Fujin said, still glaring at Seifer.

"Me?! Irresponsible?!"

She pointed at her injured eye concealed beneath a black eyepatch. "CYCLOPS?!"

Irvine erupted into laughter. "Cyclops?! That's a good one!"

Fujin shot Irvine a glare, prompting him to stop.

"I was up all night trying to wait for the storm to end. FYI."

"Well then, this is your lucky day. The storm has ceased, and we are marching to victory." Irvine replied, imitating a punctilious tone.

Seifer straightened up, locking daggers with Fujin. He stretched backwards before scratching his unruly hair. "Everyone up and ready?"

"Yep. Quistis is already calling the rounds, FYI." Irvine replied.

"DRESS."

"Yeah, yeah, if it shuts you up." Seifer retorted sluggishly. He reached for his SeeD uniform and slid into his trousers. "And while you two are watching me, might as well brief me on this mission. Where do we start?"
"At the battlezone, the village." Irvine fished his phone from his pocket and scanned through a file. "We start looking for Squall there, since it was where we last saw him."

"Do you still remember where that is? 'Cause I sure don't."

"FASTER." Fujin pressed.

"ALRIGHT, ALRIGHT!" Seifer yelled back.

"That's what GPS is for." Irvine smirked. "Well, if it's still working. After the storm."

"I have a tracker." Seifer said, pulling his collar up. "Well, used to have. Lost it somewhere, either here in Timber or in Balamb."

"OUT."

"Just hold on, alright?! I just need to get my boots and-" Seifer looked up and saw Fujin stomping out of the room. "Oh. Okay, see you out. Finally."

Irvine followed Fujin with his gaze before turning back to Seifer. "I better head out. Captain is joining Quisty in..." he glanced on his watch. "Two minutes."

Seifer grunted in reply.

"C'mon man, Squall's safety doesn't wait."

"Yeah, be there in a sec."

It was Rinoa who woke up first. Slowly, she blinked her eyes open and stared at the morning light peeking through the window for a moment. They have survived the storm, and the sun was finally back.

She smiled to herself and shifted her attention to the fireplace. Wasn't she supposed to be on the floor? Realizing that she was on a softer surface, Rinoa propped her elbow and lifted herself. She scanned the room, trying to determine how she got up on the couch. Until her eyes fell on Squall, deep in his sleep against the foot of their only lounge. He was covered with her blanket, spurring her to look at her own. She smiled to herself again, realizing that he had switched their covers for some reason she didn't understand, but she didn't mind. Slowly and bashfully, as if there were any eyes watching her, she lifted the sheet to her nose and sniffed it.

It *even smelled like him*, she thought, her smile growing wider at her guilty pleasure.

She held it close to her chest and laid back down. She bent her head back to take a good look at Squall, watching as he rhythmically took slow breaths. There was no frown, no evident struggle whatsoever. He was still lost somewhere yet still with her for the moment. She shifted to lay on her stomach to get a better look at him before reaching down to his hand resting on the floor. Rinoa stared at it and noticed the silver ring her was wearing. A lion's head was beautifully engraved on it, forming dark ridges that shaped its mane. Very lightly, she brushed a finger on its fierce face, roaring at an imaginary adversary.

When her fingers went out of bounds from the ring and touched his skin, she saw his hand flinch slightly and hers retreated. Cautiously, she looked up to check on him and saw half-lidded cerulean eyes staring at her. He didn't look irked for being woken up, nor was he smiling. He was simply calm as they lost themselves in tranquility of the moment. He opened his eyes and blinked a few times.
times, his orbs still fixed on hers and held them there.

Her gaze travelled to another silverpiece on his ear glinting against the sunlight. She lifted a hand to touch it, but stopped midway when he stiffened at her unwarranted gesture. She smiled apologetically at him. Of course, not everyone would approve of being held by someone else. Even though she remembered touching his face the day before in the forest to give him warmth from the cold air and he didn't recoil from it. Nor when she squeezed his arm later that night. She supposed it was different when touching served a purpose as compared to touching to answer her curiosity or allow her a simple delight. Which, she admitted, was a little selfish, but harmless.

Maybe she ought to take it slow.

Rinoa pulled her hand back and peered at his with the lion ring. She reached for it again and grazed the back of her fingers against it. She glanced back up to him to read his reaction, but he remained still, gazing at her. When she felt his fingers brush against hers, she gave him a soft smile. She allowed him to entwine his fingers around hers and brush his thumb gently at the back of her hand. She let out a giggle and he smirked, another first she saw from him.

She wanted it to last longer, until a high-toned beep came out from somewhere. His features turned stern, and his eyebrows met. He broke himself from her as he wordlessly jolted up and sprinted to his jacket hanging on one of the dining chairs. He hurriedly rummaged inside one of the pockets and took out a small, black device that constantly blinked red light.

Squall looked at the tracker in his hand and cursed. He looked out to the lit grounds beyond the window before turning back to Rinoa, who was wearing an anxious expression.

"They're here." He said under his breath, running to Rinoa's side. "SeeDs."

Rinoa gasped at the sound of SeeD's name.

With panic boiling inside him, Squall held the tracker up. "SeeDs are here." He said, his voice growing louder and frustrating. He pointed at the window. "SeeDs!"

She turned to the window and back to Squall before standing up, her breaths becoming sharp and shallow. "I have to go. I have to get to the tunnel!"

She began running to the front door when Squall pulled her back.

"Not there." he said, his voice shaking as he tried to compose himself. "The shore is that way. We have to go back around."

Rinoa saw him point at the backdoor.

"AHA!" Irvine clamored as he held his tracker up in his hand. "I KNEW this bad boy's still working!"

"You have a tracker the whole time?" Seifer asked, catching his breath after reaching the top of a hill. Irvine insisted that they reach higher grounds to oversee the whole place as a start to look for Squall's location. Behind him were Fujin, Zell, and Selphie.

"Well, yeah."

"Why didn't you use it before we went back to Balamb!?"
"Oh, believe me, I tried using it, but the signal seemed to be blocked by something."

"EXCUSES." Fujin said, waving her harm to her side to emphasize her point.

"Hey! Take it easy on him! It was probably blocked by sorceress magic!" Selphie said in Irvine's defense. She took out a bigger device that worked with basic radar interface and tried to sync it with Irvine's tracker.

"Uh huh," Zell said with a hint of doubt. "Then why didn't you use it when we got to Balamb?"

"It wouldn't work in Balamb either, we were too far!"

Zell turned to Seifer. "Didn't you have your own tracker? Why didn't you try using yours?"

"I lost mine, so shut it, Chickenwuss." Seifer retorted.

"You shut it!"

"All of you shut it." Angeal said, approaching Selphie to her side and staring at the screen of her gadget. "What do we have?"

"It's not detecting anything yet." Selphie replied.

"Mine's beeping, so it must've spotted Squall." Irvine said.

"We will have to move closer into the forest." Angeal said. He took out his radio and held it close to his mouth. "Trepe."

"Captain."

"We have to move further in. Irvine's tracker found Squall, but the radar's not giving us anything. We have to move closer, maybe to the village. We should be back by nightfall. You're in charge of the ship and make sure it stays there."

"Roger that. Biggs and Wedge are on it, Sir."

"Copy that." Angeal replied, placing his communicator back into one of his pockets. "Let's roll."

"So where do we start?" Zell asked.

"The village is that way." Seifer pointed east of the hill. However, it was riddled with thick trees and fallen leaves.

"You meant there." Irvine said, pointing at the other direction where ruined shelters stood empty.

"Now that looks more promising." Zell said.

Fujin turned around to face Seifer. "FAIL."

Ignoring the banter of the young SeeDs behind him, Angeal surveyed the distance that would get them to the town. It would take them an hour's travel by foot, maybe less. If they were lucky enough, they should be able to track Squall once they get there. If not, then they would have to survey further to the other end of Timber, just in case he found refuge there. He highly doubted it, as the eastern side seemed more dangerous and unlivable. He wouldn't manage to stay alive that long.
Then again, how sure was he that Squall survived at the townside?

He turned back around to the squad. They stopped talking and stood straight the moment he did.

"Once we determine that Squall is in the village, we will need to split up." Angeal said. "Irvine, Selphie and I are team Alpha, since we have the radar. Zell, Seifer, and Fujin are team Beta. Alpha will look into the houses. Beta will look around the town, in case Squall separated from his tracking device. We rendezvous back to the ship at 18:00 and regroup, regardless if we find him."

"UNDERSTOOD." Fujin replied for the group.

"And the sorceress?" Irvine asked.

"Stick to the plan." Angeal said.

Irvine tipped his hat down. "Okay, Sir."

They were running. Again.

Squall was pulling her by the arm as they ran through the trees that concealed the sunlit sky. He left his jacket with the tracker in the cabin, estimating that his fellow SeeDs would arrive in an hour. He discerned that he could only give Rinoa a thirty-minute headstart before he could find his way back to the cabin.

He was much faster than she, and Rinoa tried to glide mid air to catch up. The moment she summoned her spell, however, she immediately felt lightheaded and tripped.

He stopped to pull her back up, looking around to check if anyone has found them yet. Then they ran again, until they reached a fork road that was all too familiar to Rinoa. She lead the way this time, taking the left path, knowing that the tunnel was just ahead.

She stumbled for the second time, catching her breath as she did. She was getting weaker, and she indeed felt more frail.

"What's wrong?" Squall asked under his breath when he knelt by her side.

Rinoa was clutching her chest as she inhaled more deeply. What was happening to her?

"C'mon, we have to get moving." Squall said, sweeping her up in his arms before running forward. They were already twenty-five minutes in at this point.

Squall stopped for a moment when the path disappeared under thick tall grass. He glanced at Rinoa for instructions first, but upon seeing her perplexed eyes as they looked around, he realized that she lost their way too.

"Where to now?"

Rinoa motioned him to let her down, which he gently did. She turned to him and saw how he anxiously looked around, hastily trying to find a way that would lead her to safety. She knew he was running out of time before SeeDs could reach the cabin.

"Squall."

He stopped his frantic search to look at her.
Rinoa pointed a path on her right. "I'll see where this one leads to." She then nodded at him and smiled. "Thank you, Squall. For everything. But you should go."

Squall frowned at her calm voice and her sad countenance when she gave him one last smile before sprinting away towards the path she pointed to. He watched as she disappeared through the trees. He didn't know why she insisted on that path, but she knew Timber more than he did.

*That settles it, then,* he thought. Squall turned around and traced his way back to the cabin.

He only had fifteen minutes left.

He quickly found the shelter and entered it, searching for any proof of Rinoa's existence. He threw them away or kept them inside the cabinet in her room. He placed their dinner wares in the sink and slipped into his beeping jacket.

A few moments later, he could hear familiar voices approaching. He took deep breaths to pull himself together as they got closer.

He thought about opening the door and showing himself just so they could get it over and done with. But he thought about the chance Rinoa had if they missed them. He could go find Rinoa again and help her escape and stay away from the SeeDs. Unless they were surrounded. And if they were caught, it might mean bigger chaos.

"The radar's leading us in here!" Squall heard Selphie say beyond the door. It was loud enough to wake him up in his sleep, and it might provoke suspicions if he didn't react to it.

Squall didn't wait for the knob to turn and opened the front door for them.

"It moved!" Selphie said, her eyes still on the radar device in her hands. She looked up and her green eyes instantly widened. "SQUALL!"

A few meters behind her were Irvine and their Captain, Angeal. They both turned around, evidently surprised and relieved to see him in one piece.

"Squall! Hey, man!" Irvine called, sprinting toward him. Squall was happy to see them too, but he could be happier.

"Hey guys." Squall greeted and reciprocated a salute from Angeal. Irvine was storming at his with arms extended forward to a hug. The Commander sidestepped and Irvine tumbled as soon as he got to him. That didn't stop Selphie from jumping onto him and giving him a tight hug.

"SQUALLY! It's so nice to see you alive!"

Not knowing how to react, Squall slowly patted Selphie's back until she let go.

"You have NO idea what it took for us to get here!"

"Huh, can't imagine." Squall said nonchalantly.

Angeal approached them and extended an arm. "Glad to see you are well, Squall."

Squall gave him another salute. "Thank you, Sir. I'm glad to see you all here too."

Angeal cocked his head on Squall's bandaged thigh. "What happened?"

Squall looked at his limb, almost forgetting about his wound. It didn't hurt anymore, nor was it
bleeding, but Rinoa insisted that they bandaged it possibly for safety purposes. "Sorceress attack, Sir."

"Was it recent?"

"No, Sir."

Irvine gave him a brunt pat on the back. "Man, how did you survive? What happened to you?"

"What did you eat? Where did you sleep?"

"How did you live through the storm?"

"And you have a scar on your face too! Just like Seifer!"

Overwhelmed with too many question, Squall chose to stay silent. Angeal, however, detected the young SeeD's fatigue. "Save Squall's galant story of survival for later. Let's head back to the ship first, we'll have lots of time there."

Squall nodded as Selphie slipped an arm through his, while Irvine insisted to walk by his side.

"We have fresh clothes for you on the ship! Because we just knew you'd still be alive!" Selphie cheered.

"How's the squad?" Squall asked.

"Most took a number from the sorceresses, but hey, they're alive!" Irvine said.

Squall glanced at Irvine. "Really?"

"Yeah, I know, I was surprised too. We're just thankful we didn't lose anyone."

Following from a good distance behind the trio, Angeal took out his communicator.

"Dincht."

"Captain!"

"We found Squall."

"Really? Hey guys!" Zell called to his comrades, his voice becoming less audible through the radio. "They found Squall!"

"GREAT!" Angeal heard Fujin say.

"Alright guys, let's pack it up." Seifer said.

"Zell." Angeal called.

"Sir!"

"Time to head back now and regroup. Meet us at the ship."

"Yessir!"

Zell placed his communicator back into his pocket and faced the other members of team Beta.
"Okay guys, you heard the Captain. Which way is back?"

Fujin pointed toward a sloping ground to her west. "THERE."

"We trekked all the way up here for nothing." Seifer said sardonically. "And I was just getting started!"

"WUSS."

Zell snorted. Seifer grunted.

"At least it didn't take us the whole day to track him down. Now that would be worse, trekking for hours for nothing," Zell said.

"Oh, here's an idea. Why don't we just use our four-wheel ride to go back through the rocky road of Timber?"

"But we don't have a four-wheeler."

"Exactly." Seifer replied.

"QUIET."

The two male SeeDs paused and turned to Fujin. She was holding up an arm at them, her head tilting to a side and the other listening to the trees.

"Why?" Zell asked.

"SHHH." Fujin hissed, her eye wandering up the sky. She lowered her arm when nothing else came up, until they heard cracking sound of leave and twigs not too far from the bottom of the slope. They all looked at each other and ran to the trees.

"What the hell is it?" Seifer asked under shaky breath.

Fujin pointed the area in front of her. "MOVEMENT."

Leading the way, Fujin stopped on her tracks and gestured at the other two to do the same, listening for any other sound. As soon as they heard it, they saw a glimpse of blue cloth belonging to a feminine figure passing behind one of the trees. Fujin turned around to face them once the footsteps faded away.

"SORCERESS."

Seifer stepped forward. "Okay, then let's go get her!"

Zell squinted to look over the distance and search for the apparent sorceress. "I dunno guys, I think we just lost her."

"If we keep moving forward, we might still find her."

"Okay. But the Captain said…"

"We'll get back when we have the sorceress!"

Zell scratched the back of his head. "I'm not sure about this. Maybe we're better off letting her go."
"Then you can go back and tell them back in the Garden that you were too scared of a little sorceress."

"I'm not scared! I'm just…"

Fujin faced Seifer. "LEAD."

Seifer smirked. "That's the spirit!" He then faced Zell. "Sorry, Chickenwuss. Majority wins."

Zell grunted when the two began running again. "Fine. It's not like I have a choice anyway. 'Hey Zell, I think you're right! We should head back and join the others where it is safe, just like what the Captain said! Because your opinion matters to us!''Really? Thank you guys, really appreciate it!''' he muttered to himself.

"Quit mumbling, Dincht." Seifer hissed.

Fujin placed a finger on her lips as she crouched through the tall grassy field, and the two followed suit. Beyond them was a pale sorceress donning a long, blue dress, running (and stumbling) toward the river.

"I thought you were supposed to be leading us." Zell whispered at Seifer.

"Quiet, or we lose the prey." Seifer hissed back.

They crept closer to her, careful as to not make the slightest sound. She seemed to be looking for something from all directions, save for the area behind her. Seifer slowly took his jacket off, while Fujin unsheathed her chakram. Seifer faced Zell and the latter nodded at him, ready at his cue.

When Seifer made the gesture to go forward, Zell jumped behind the sorceress and locked her tightly in his arms. Before she could react, Seifer quickly covered her head with his jacket, earning him a sharp and loud hiss from her. She threw some spells, but Fujin successfully deflected them with her weapon.

They have successfully captured and overpowered a sorceress.

The white ship was dancing afloat the waters when they arrived. Quistis was standing on the shore, greeting them with a smile.

"It's great to see you, Squall."

Squall nodded at her in response.

Quistis turned to face Angeal. "Seifer and the others?"

"We split up." Angeal said. "But we gave them updates. They should be here any moment now."

"Then we should get you sorted out first." Quistis said, turning to Squall.

"Right." Squall nodded again.

He was assigned his own bunker where fresh clothes were waiting on his bed. After giving himself some washing and changing, he unwrapped the bandage on his thigh and examined the scar the wound left. It looked definitely better, which was quick for something so deep. And he owed Rinoa's magic for it. Squall's tossed the bandage to his side. It was over. His time in Timber was over, and they would be nothing now to him but memories. Rinoa would be a memory. She saved
his life, and he wished he could ensure that she was safe too. But he was a SeeD, and she a sorceress. They were bound to be separated, one way or another. He could do more by ensuring that no SeeD would come after her, or what survived from her coven. The big question was, how would he do it?

He leaned his back against the wall by his bed, uneased by the thought of what was happening to Rinoa at that very moment. Did she find the path she was looking for? Would she be able to join the other sorceresses soon? Would she make it there?

Deciding that the solitude was not helping him from worrying about things that were not certain yet, he went out of his bunker and took a leisurely walk along the hallway. The ship was unusually empty for a SeeD ship, and he began to wonder how many the Captain was able to gather for this particular mission. They mentioned that most were wounded, so they were probably recuperating in the Garden. Figures, he thought, that the only ones able to make it here were the usual suspects.

The muffled voice of Seifer from another room broke Squall away from his thoughts. He paused to get a better sense of what was happening, and why did he sound so urgent. Quickly, he walked to the direction of his voice, sprinting to a run the closer he got. He opened the door to the deck and saw Zell restraining someone firmly in his arms, her head covered in SeeD jacket.

Blue dress.

Long black hair.

"What's going on?"

Everyone in the room turned to look at Squall.

"Hey, man" Seifer greeted, extending an open arm to him. Squall placidly pushed him away and glared at the other people in the room. "Hey, chill out, we just got here!"

"SORCERESS." Fujin replied.

Squall's eyes narrowed and faced Angeal.

"Kramer wants us to capture a sorceress for him if we found one." the Captain said, massaging his forehead. He dropped his hand and stared at Squall. "It was part of the deal to approve our request for this mission."

"A rescue mission is now conditional?" Squall asked in disbelief.

"Apparently." Quistis replied, shrugging.

Rinoa was hissing beneath the jacket, coughing under Zell's hold.

"What does he need a sorceress for?" Squall asked, keeping his cool in control.

"We don't know yet." Angeal replied.

"Bringing one with us is as good as bringing death to the Garden. Full of inexperienced cadets."

"Don't argue with this, Squall, it was the Headmaster's order. Besides, three SeeDs were able to overcome her, what more with hundreds back in the Garden?"

"You know what, let's just get this over with and contain her already." Zell said in strained voice. "My arms are getting tired, and this is no weak sorceress."
In her struggle, the jacket slipped off Rinoa's head.

"Oh no, she's gonna see us!" Selphie cried.

Once free from the concealment, Rinoa hissed at everyone, kicking midair and resisting Zell's strength. Everyone in the room stepped back, except for Squall.

"Whoah, whoah!" Seifer lifted her legs and supressed her there.

Rinoa glanced at Squall's direction and saw him looking at her, wearing that stern face. The same one when she first saw him.

Squall held his breath when she stopped hissing the moment her eyes locked with his. She might be good at hiding it, but he knew she thought he was betraying her. And if only she knew how he wished he could tell them the truth. That she was innocent. That she saved his life. How he wished he could use force on them to set her free. And this time, if they turned against both of them, he'd fight and escape with her. But he couldn't let emotions get to him. It would be too risky, to give both of them away. He had to think.

When they found him, he was alone. He removed all traces of the sorceress and showed them that he survived on his own. He had nothing to do with the sorceress' escape. The truth would compromise them, and he would be branded a traitor. He might be confined too, with her. And he wouldn't be able to do anything to help her from behind the bars.

Lying would compromise only her. That weighed as much as the other, but at least he would have more control over the situation. He could give Rinoa a better chance.

"Huh," Irvine huffed with amusement in his tone, looking at Squall. "You were able to shut her up with one of your signature looks."

Squall glared at him before turning away, no longer wanting to see her so helpless as they carried her along the hallway. "Luckily, she didn't encounter me. Or else Cid wouldn't have a sorceress to look forward to."

When they threw her in a room and locked her in, Rinoa began to sob. The way he looked at her, it was as if nothing of it mattered to him.

As if she was nothing.

She gave up her chances to reunite with the other sorceresses do what she thought was right, while they took what little was left for her. They destroyed the only home she knew, hurt several members of her family, robbed her a peaceful life... And now they took away her freedom. And though she remained strong and forgiving, it was more than she could bear.

What more could they want from her?

She grew up believing it pays to be kind. Now she knew it was all just some fairytale to keep her behaviour in check.

She cooped herself onto a corner and buried her head on her folded legs, the sound of her weep bouncing against the transparent walls.

Why wouldn't anyone help her? Why wouldn't he help her?
There was so much to celebrate that night.

They survived the sail through the storm to the town of Timber, Squall was safe and sound, and the Headmaster would be happy to know that they have captured a sorceress just like he asked.

Missions accomplished.

The tides should be turning to his favor. He should be relieved, relaxed. Happy.

Squall peeked at Rinoa through the narrow glass window of her cell door. He could make out her silhouette amidst the dim light, crouching against one of the farthest corners of the room.

He tried everything. Hyne knew he did. He studied the lock of the door to see if it had any faulty parts, tried talking Zell out to give him the key and using his authority as the rightful keeper of the keys only to discover that the Captain already had them. He even thought of just smashing through the glass window and reach for the knob from the other side. If only that was possible.

Then he wondered, why didn't she try freeing herself instead? She had all the power to do it if she started something. A spell, a curse – anything. He wouldn't even try to get in her way. He'd cover for her, give her an opening, a chance.

A chance to escape... to the open waters.

Maybe they could sneak into one of the lifeboats the ship had. He knew where to find them, and the nearest one was hidden well enough to avoid any suspicion from the crew and everyone else. He estimated that at this point, they would be floating in the middle of nowhere in a span of 15 days at best. Considering the meager supplies each boat had, they would both die before they could reach land. And if they, for argument's sake, did make it to any shore, they could find other ways to survive for a few more days to recover before setting out.

And then... and then what?

Squall pressed his lips in a thin line as he took one last look at Rinoa. He made his way to his room and slammed the door behind him. He slumped on his bed, took in a deep breath, and exhaled with a loud groan, a hand on his scar.

Rinoa.

Once they reach Balamb, he could move freely and they could have their chance. It didn't matter how they would do it. He could pull some strings, break a few rules and protocols.

But the Headmaster...

He ran his hand down to his chin and rubbed his mouth as he stared blankly at the wall in front of him. The Headmaster would know. SeeDs were trained to be loyal to the Garden and to despise sorceresses and traitors. If they catch them, they would report them to the Headmaster before they could have a chance to fight back, and they would fall back down to zero.

But if he didn't do something, only Hyne knew what would happen to Rinoa. He wouldn't even dare think of the possibilities. She was a sorceress heading to her own deathtrap.
What did the Headmaster want from her anyway?

He needed his long-overdue dose of silence, he needed it to think and calm his nerves. The sounds of the water hitting the sturdy surface of the ship provided some comfort even for just a little much. He glanced at his wall clock and realized that it was way past 2:00 in the morning. Balamb Garden was only going to be hours away. Squall tried in his might to sleep, to regain his energy. To avoid any suspicion that something was bothering him. He had to appear grateful to be back.

She could feel her back aching the longer she stayed in her position at the same corner of the room. So what?

She was caught by SeeDs. They kill the likes of her. There was a reason they kept her alive, and whatever pain they plan to inflict on her was something she did not ever dare imagine.

Rinoa lifted her head at the swaying room and stared at the small window on the door, half-hoping that someone was peering back. Half-hoping it was him.

She didn't like this thing building inside of her. Fear? Hatred? Mostly anger. It was all unfair, whatever situation she was in. She helped a SeeD. He tried to help her escape, but he could very well have done it to lead his comrades to her location.

Did he really betray her on purpose?

Sobs began escaping her again but were soon suppressed with a deep breath. She had been crying for far too long and she was tired. She told herself over and over again that crying would not help change her impending fate with the SeeDs. It always had been that way from the start. When she arrived at the village years ago, she thought she was finally safe, until SeeDs arrived and destroyed everything she had learned to love. She tried doing the opposite by saving one of them, hoping that it would bring some sign of peace. Change something. She even made him a friend.

Big mistake.

She had better stopped hoping. She tried, at least. But she quit.

When the door finally opened, the tattooed SeeD trudged warily her way, a female with a black eyepatch standing guard behind him. He was holding a white canvas this time, presumably in replacement of the jacket that they covered her head with during her last altercation with him. She could read the daze in his eyes for her lack of reaction as he got closer. He said something in a soft, shaky voice before hovering the cloth on her head. Just a second later, she heard Squall's voice from the corridor, and the female SeeD looked over her shoulder. Squall appeared by the door, still wearing that cold look when he glanced at her then to the other male SeeD. He said something in hard, pressing voice. When the other protested weakly, Squall asserted his order until the cloth was taken away. The tattooed SeeD gave her an unsure look then at Squall before cuffing her hands with metal constraints. He gently pulled her up in a standing position and lead her out of her cell. In as much as she avoided them, she could feel Squall's eyes following her as they stepped out of the corridor, to the shores of an unknown territory, and finally into a truck.

She leaned her head against the cold metal of the vehicle that staggered with the rocky road, staring blankly at the empty bench across hers. She took another deep breath, feeling tears threatening to pour out but her eyes were too dry at this point. There was so much she still wanted to do in her life, so much to explore and enjoy. She dreamed too much of peace for sorceress and made a fool out of herself. This was all her fault.
She tried thinking of the other sorceress and hoped that they made their way safely into the tunnels and to wherever it lead. It could give her solace if she knew at the very least that they were somewhere safe. She tried thinking of Vanille and Garnet. Maybe her life had proven its purpose of saving their lives and it was time for her to go.

Was this going to be her way of conceding to death?

"Welcome home, Squall."

The Headmaster painted a warm smile as Squall exited the ship. He forced a nod.

"I'm really glad to see you alive and well."

"I'm glad as well. Thank you."

"I hope the trip back was not too shaky for your liking. You look like you need more rest."

"There's nothing more that I want than an undisrupted sleep, Sir."

"I'm sure." Cid patted Squall's back as he pulled the car door open. "Can't wait to hear your story in a few day's time. Perhaps when you're ready."

Squall gave him another nod and a salute before stepping into the car, allowing Cid to shake Angeal's hand and commend him for the success of his rescue operation. And while he waited for his driver, he watched from the window as Zell and Fujin lead Rinoa into the back of a truck.

When Zell went for her, he ordered against covering her head because it was the only freedom he could give her. He didn't mean to see how much she had surrendered herself to her captors' hands.

I didn't want this. I didn't want this for you.

Just as Zell locked the truck's door, Squall's car began to move. As soon as he arrived in the Garden, he went straight to his dormitory, threw his duffel bag on the floor, landed his gunblade beside his bed, and changed into something more comfortable. He made his way to his office and if anyone else asked him, he planned to use his reports as an excuse. He needed to see updates on whatever the Headmaster is planning on Rinoa, and he expected to be on the loop.

"Hey Squall!"

Squall's head jerked up at Irvine's booming voice.

"Made it here sooner that I thought!" Irvine said, punching Squall's side lightly. "Are you on your way for dinner too?"

"Dinner?" Squall glanced at his watch and realized it was almost 6:00 in the evening.

"Yeah, care to join me? There's a lot of catching up to do. Let's hear what you gotta say. Or at least, hear what I gotta say. So much has happened since you've been gone!"

Squall stared at Irvine. Catching up, huh?

"Sure."

Irvine looked genuinely surprised. "Whoah, for real?"
"Yeah."

"Awesome, man!"

Squall followed Irvine to the cafeteria and allowed him to drone on how everyone thought he was dead except Angeal's team.

"We refused to give up on you, dude. Like, everyone thought this was going to be a wasted mission. Well, at the very least. They thought we were going to die trying to find your body. Seriously man, how did you survive?"

"Scavenged survival necessities around the area." Squall said as he took his tray of fresh hotdog sandwich. He thought of Rinoa. The last he saw of her, she was too weak to run even for her life. Would they give her something to eat?

"There was barely anything in the area. We were there."

"The cabin had some supplies of its own."

"That's what you call a miracle, then." Irvine placed his own tray down on their table. Squall sat across from him.

"Maybe." Squall replied, tightening his grip on his fork. *It was a miracle Rinoa was around.*

Irvine took a bite of his dinner. "So how did you survive the storm?"

"Patched things up in the cabin, gathered dry wood. Hunted for food before the storm started." *Killing a torama along the way…*

"You knew there would be a storm before it came?"

"I was just lucky. I thought of hunting to store more food." In all honesty, it was all Rinoa who produced their food from raw ingredients that even he couldn't manage to do.

"And gathering more wood?"

"I made do with the damped ones I could get."

Irvine nodded at his scarred thigh. "While you were wounded."

Squall fought to maintain a straight face. "Yes."

Irvine's silence made Squall look up from his plate. He was looking rather apprehensive.

"Huh." Irvine said. After a few seconds, his face relaxed and he returned to his food. "It's pure damn luck that you even made it. Can't wait 'til the others hear about this."

This was his cue.

"Where are they?" Squall asked.

"Quistis was busy doing financing stuff on the mission, Seifer and Fujin are with the Captain, Zell's dealing with the sorceress, and I don't know where Selphie is."

*Zell, huh. Where are they keeping her?"*
"Who?"

"The sorceress." Who else?

"Research Center. With the NORG. Gotta make sure she's far away from the cadets."

"Then why did Cid order her capture if she's so dangerous?"

"Don't know. He didn't tell."

"No files on this request?"

"No man, not even a memo. I heard it was a verbal agreement made with the Captain."

"She shouldn't be here. We should've left her in Timber." Squall said, his voice lowered in a growl.

"Look man, I know you don't want us bringing her here as much as I do, but we were only doing as we're told. Whatever it is, I know Sir Kramer has a good reason."

Squall narrowed his eyes. He snatched his tray up and left the table.

Confused, Irvine looked up at Squall walking further away. He scratched the back of his head, chewing dumbly on his food.

"Why so worked up about the sorceress?"

Rinoa was lead into another white room, bigger than the one on the ship and brighter. It had a white bed at the middle, a toilet bowl in a corner, and a metal sink thoughtlessly placed at the other side of the room. The tattooed SeeD who escorted her relieved her wrists from the heavy handcuffs. She rubbed them gently, her head looking down on the torn hem of her dress exposing her bare feet. She turned around when she heard the door close behind her and instinctively, but carefully, tried turning the knob.

Of course it was locked.

She rubbed her forearms as she looked around her cage. No other color than the blue dress she was wearing. No other life but hers.

The door opened again and this time, two women in white coat entered with five SeeDs— one of them older than the other. Without saying anything, they lead her to sit on the bed. Surrendering herself to what they wanted, she complied without any intent to fight. She was too weak for spells, and she was heavily outnumbered.

The older one stretched her arm firmly and by her order, as it would appear, the younger one pierced a needle with a tube on her forearm. Rinoa's gasp stiffened the SeeDs, their eyes on high alert. So she bit her lip and held her breath. When they finished taking a tube-full sample of her blood, they gently pulled the needle out, pressed a wet, stinging cotton on the spot and taped it into place. The older woman then nodded at one of the SeeDs who took out neatly folded white clothes and a towel and placed them at the edge of her bed.

Rinoa watched as they, without even taking one last look at her, wordlessly left and sealed the door shut. After another moment, she reached for the fresh clothes, brushing her fingers against them before locking them in her grasp. She wrapped her arms around them as she closed her eyes tightly and felt her chest shaking with each breath that echoed against the empty walls.
She was going to die alone.

The Headmaster ordered them to capture a sorceress but didn't say why?

Squall replayed his conversation he had with Irvine. He couldn't understand why none of them questioned Kramer's motivation to ask them do something so dangerous. What did he want?

He entered the elevator and pushed the button that would take him to the basement level. He stood straight, took a deep breath, and tried to remain composed. He barely visited the area, NORG didn't take kindly to surprise visits. But why would that matter now?

He tapped his ID at one of the doors that opened to a dark room and saw a number of SeeDs with Dr. Kadowaki and Xu gathered around a metal table. Before them was a glassed wall that stretched from both ends of the room, displaying anatomy status of their subject along with other texts and controls. Inside its illuminating confinement was Rinoa, sitting on her bed with her back on them, embracing her prescribed white clothes. Her skin was paler than he remembered, almost blending with the walls of her cell.

"SQUALL."

Squall tore his eyes away from Rinoa to see an approaching Fujin. She waved an arm to her side.

"EXPLAIN."

"I'm here to see what's going on."

"TESTS."

Squall's turned at the red tube with thick red liquid. "Where's Zell?"

"I'm here." Zell replied, stopping beside Fujin.

Squall jerked his head towards Rinoa. "Any reports on this?"

"None as of yet. We just started running on some tests."

"Any defined purpose?"

"None that we're aware of. The Headmaster only ordered--""

"To bring her here." Cid cut in. The three SeeDs faced him and gave him a salute.

"At ease." Cid nodded. "I know you have a lot of questions, and I'll answer them in due time. Don't worry."

"Sir, I'm only concerned about--"

"The safety of the cadets, yes." Cid replied, his voice calm yet firm. "Your Captain had the same concerns, but I assured him that it is nothing the SeeDs couldn't handle. Absolutely nothing to worry about. Besides, didn't you just tell me you wanted 'undisrupted sleep'?"

"I went to look for any updates on the Garden."

"Look around as much as you'd like, but no need to push yourself too hard, Squall."
Squall nodded. "I wish to make another request, Sir."

"Go on."

"I'd like to be a part of this project."

Cid raised an eyebrow. "Shouldn't you concern yourself more with your wounded comrades?"

"I'll manage to do both."

Cid chuckled. "Confident, are we?"

"Ensuring that the sorceress will not cause any disorder in the Garden is included in my current priorities as Commander."

"As it should. But you barely have enough rest, and and you still have a lot on your plate. Are you sure?"

"I'm positive, Sir."

Cid stared at him for a moment before finally nodding. "Okay. Permission granted."

Squall gave him another salute.

Cid turned to Zell. "Progress?"

"The sorceress is docile since our arrival in Balamb. She seemed, well, confused."

Understandably so.

"Has she taken anything since?"

"None yet. We are trying to determine the right nutrients including her diet through her blood sample."

"Just give her anything that the rest of us eats. She will need her strength."

"Yes, Sir. And if she refuses to touch it?"

"Then put that on your report and don't give her the same thing again."

"Copy that, Sir."

Cid turned around and approached Dr. Kadowaki's group.

Once the Headmaster's attention was taken from them, Zell playfully pushed Squall's shoulder to face him. "How's it going, man? You look out of it!"

Fujin elbowed Zell's side. "INSSENSITIVE."

"Ow! It's the truth!"

Squall's eyes diverted to the quiet conversation Cid was having the Dr. Kadowaki's team. Xu was nodding with her while Cid was enumerating something with his fingers.

He then glanced up at Rinoa who slowly laid down on her bed, still clutching her clothes in her arms.
"Squall?"

Squall snapped out of his trance and gave Zell a confused look.

"You here with us buddy?"

"Did you say something?"

"Hey, welcome back!"

Squall rolled his eyes. "What?"

"We were asking if you had your dinner yet."

*Why are people so interested in my appetite.*

"Yeah. With Irvine."

"Would you happen to know if they still have hotdogs left?"

"They still had plenty when we bought ours."

"Great! You hear that Fujin?"

"FANTASTIC."

Cid approached them again. "I better get going now. So much arrangements to be made with NORG for this research."

*Research?*

Zell made a salute. "Goodnight Headmaster."

"See you tomorrow." Cid nodded at them before leaving.

"So I'm hitting the cafeteria in fifteen minutes." Zell announced.

"NOW." Fujin said.

"Gonna wait just in case there are results." Zell shrugged.

"I can wait." Squall said.

"Really?" Zell replied and gave it a thought. "Naw man, I can wait a little longer."

"Whatever." Squall turned back around to Rinoa and watched her body shaking from what he presumed to be sobs. He glanced at her stats on the glass window. Stable, but her heart rate was a little slower than normal. He took a deep breath and locked his hands on his back.

"Wow, that's fast." Zell said behind him. Squall looked over his shoulder at Xu showing a tablet to the pair.

"CONFUSED."

"Her DNA traces us to one sorceress origin, which is yet to be determined if paternal or maternal. Her mother, though, was identified as Julia Heartily."
'The singer?'

'Yes.'

'You mean the singer who…'

Xu gave a stiffer nod. 'Yes. Same person.'

'If Julia Heartilly is in our records, then she must've been involved with someone in the Garden. Which brings us the question of…'

'FATHER?'

'Now this is where it gets interesting. We were also able to identify her father based on our records. His details are still subject for updating and, oh, what do you know, he was a SeeD.'

Squall turned around. 'Who?'

'Aha! So you've been listening.' Zell remarked.

'Fury Caraway.' Xu replied, handing the tablet to Squall. 'Former Galbadian SeeD.'

'Like Irvine?'

'Only he was a General before he became SeeD.' Squall said, reading the report. His profile was short of details, but revealed just enough about his status. 'He was transferred to Balamb before he went MIA after a mission at Tear's Point. Has never been seen since.'

Fujin faced Squall. 'IRONIC.'

Squall nodded and handed the tablet back to Xu. 'Thank you. And the other results?'

'Still in process. I'll have to come back to you on that tomorrow.'

'Then it's dinner time!' Zell swiveled on his heel and began his march to the exit. Fujin trailed behind, but paused at Squall still staring at Rinoa. She waited until his eyes darted back to her.

'COME.'

'Go ahead. I'll try to catch up. Please bring the sorceress something to eat while you're at it.'

Fujin nodded before following Zell to the exit. Squall allowed a few minutes to pass until he was somewhat sure they made it back up through the elevator before making his leave, the records section of the library in his mind.

Nida greeted him from the front desk of the library, which turned out to be only temporary until the library girl finished her dinner (most possibly enjoying it with Zell). After conferring on his recovery as evidenced by a small bandage on his forehead, Squall walked further inside until he reached a small room suffused with metal cabinets, each drawer labeled with letters. If only technology back then was as advanced as the present, there wouldn't be a problem searching for records with a few seconds of typing on the computer. But he was dealing with possibly one of the first SeeDs in the Garden's history, and he would have to work on it old-school style.

He looked for the cabinet with "C", pulled it open and ran through the brown-stained manila folders until he spotted what he was there for—two folders labeled with "Caraway".
He opened the first one. Fury Caraway, file stamped with "M.I.A" in red over his monochrome photo.

Birth date unknown. Spouse was Julia Caraway. Home was in Galbadia. One unnamed daughter. Occupation, SeeD. Formerly a General of the Galbadian army. Missing in action since 12 years ago during the great sorceress war. Last seen at Tear's Point with his unit. Criminal records, none. Medical records, none. Personal effects included his uniform and a spare gun.

He then switched his attention to the other one. As soon as he opened the folder, his eyes caught a silver object fall and clatter on the floor. He quickly picked it up and examined what appeared to be a silver ring enclosed in a chain.

Was this Julia's?

He returned to her file.

Julia Heartilly-Caraway, stamped with "Deceased" over her photo. Squall couldn't shake off the fact that she bore a heavy resemblance with Rinoa. Her birth date was unknown, spouse was Fury Caraway, occupation was singer. Died in a mobile accident 13 years ago. One unnamed daughter. Personal effect was the silver ring and necklace enclosed with the folder.

Squall took another look at the ring. Julia's only memento to her daughter, a proof that she once lived among them. He placed it inside his pocket. Rinoa was the rightful owner, not the library. And certainly not the Garden. He would keep it for her, just until she goes free.

He looked around the cramped, silent room. How would he do it? How would he free her on his own?
Quistis stopped scribbling numbers midway on her log when she heard soft knocks on her door. She looked up from her papers through the illumination of her lamp.

"Yes?" she said wearily.

"It's me." Irvine called back behind the door.

Quistis sighed. "Come in."

Irvine slowly pushed the door and let himself in, wearing a smile he wished would be acceptable as an apology for his intrusion. Quistis smiled back, albeit tightly, and gestured at the only chair free of papers.

"Sorry if there's little room for any more." Quistis said, her eyes not leaving Irvine. "Financial statements are piling up for two missions."

Irvine looked around her office. "How do you even breathe in here."

Quistis pointed a thumb behind her. "All offices have windows like that. Just so you know."

Irvine chuckled and nodded.

"What brings you here, Irvine?"

"Oh nothing. Just, you know, checking out how you've been cooping yourself up in your cave."

"Surviving just until I've reached the end of these financial request forms." Quistis replied, stamping on another document and signing on it with a few strokes.

Irvine sat down on the offered chair. "It's getting late. Any plans on calling it a day?"

Quistis shrugged. "Maybe in an hour."

Irvine nodded. "Okay."

Quistis took a deep breath and raised her eyebrows. "So, how's the Commander?"

"Good. He seems good. A little grumpy."

"Thank Hyne for that, then. If he isn't, then that's a problem."

Irvine chuckled. "Yeah." He then followed with a thoughtful look. "Although, I did notice something weird."

That got Quistis' attention. She paused on her log and looked at Irvine. "What's that?"

Irvine shrugged. "I just noticed that... well, you see, when we saw Squall back in Timber, he had a
thigh in bandages."
"Yeah. I remember that."
"Didn't it look bad to you?"
"It did, but it looks like it healed well. What about it?"
"Exactly. It healed too well. In fact, he can walk as if nothing happened on it."

Quistis raised an eyebrow. "And that's a bad thing?"

"No, of course it isn't." Irvine said. "But, don't you think it's weird how it healed too quickly and well? Not even our best curaga can manage to close deep cuts. I mean, yes it can, but it would take a week, tops."

Quistis almost rolled her eyes. "Irvine, it took us almost a week before we rescued him."

"You're right, maybe if we got there sooner, we might have seen how it all went down for him. But get this, remember how there was a storm in Timber?"

Quistis frowned, not understanding what the storm had anything to do with Squall. "Uh huh…"

"Over dinner, I asked him how he survived it. And he said he was able to hunt for food before the storm hit Timber."

"... okay?"

"And he was able to bring back logs for fire and work on patching up the cabin."

Quistis paused for a moment, slowly understanding where Irvine was getting at but afraid to confirm it herself. "What are you trying to say?"

"Well, I mean," Irvine shrugged again uneasily. "Do you think Squall had, you know… help?"

"You mean Squall wasn't alone in Timber?"

"Yeah."

Quistis' eyes narrowed at her friend. "What did he tell you?"

"When we found him, he said he was alone. Like seriously alone. But if, and we're saying if here, if he really found help, it makes no sense because there was no one else who would help him in that island, right?"

"But it turned out that he wasn't alone. Because we found…" Quistis' eyes moved away from Irvine.

Irvine began laughing nervously. "Yeah. We found the sorceress."

Quistis' eyes widened at Irvine. "So he received help from the sorceress?"

Irvine pressed his lips downwards and lifted his eyebrows up. "No one ever said anything, but it is safe to assume that."

"But…” But, if she, indeed, helped Squall, why did Squall allow her capture, and…
Quistis shook her head. "No. It can't be."

Irvine slightly pulled his head back. "What do you mean?"

"We have no proof of this possibility. I mean, a sorceress helping a SeeD?"

"Why not? It makes more sense to me."

"Then why is she here? Why is Squall not helping her out?"

"I don't know. Why is he so interested in being part of the Headmaster's project with her?"

"Who said he is interested?"

"Zell." Irvine said, extending an arm to the door. "Zell told me. Squall requested to be part of the research on the sorceress."

Quistis' lips opened halfway and pushed them close again. Irvine knew as much as she did that Squall was not impulsive with his actions. When he wanted something done, he planned them carefully before moving. Even in the most fast-paced battles, he was a tactician, quick in thinking which attack and spells were best to take down any particular enemy. He always waited for the right moment to strike, no mistakes were tolerated. Of course, with the exception of Timber, but that had something to do with the unexpected surge of power among sorceresses that not even the Captain had anticipated. In this case, he involved himself with the sorceress project to open more options and make it easier to place himself at a more advantageous position. As he did, he made sure not to drop any hint that may spark suspicion on his involvement and true objective, even if it meant lying. He might not have been careful with Irvine, but try as he might, Irvine knew him just enough to see right through him.

"Was it granted?"

Irvine raised his eyebrows. "What do you think? He's a Commander, of course it was granted."

"Then you better not tell anyone about this."

"Not a soul. Don't want to lose our Commander again."

Quistis firmly nodded. She was not sure about the agreement she was making with Irvine. In fact, she didn't know if either of them understood what it meant at all. There would be consequences the Headmaster wouldn't like, but she trusted Squall's judgement over anyone else's, good or bad. If he wanted to help the sorceress, then so be it. They were innocent. They didn't know anything. They didn't see it coming.

"Great." Quistis shook her head. "Not a soul."

Irvine firmly nodded. "Yep." He said before standing up. He was about to head out when he turned around again. "Do you think there was more to it?"

"Like what?"

"Like he's under her spell?"

Quistis shook her head. "I wouldn't think it like that."

"Why?"
"If our suspicions are true that she, a sorceress, helped Squall survive Timber, then it is only natural that Squall would pay her back in kind. I know I would."

The white room came in blurry as she slowly opened her tired eyes from a dreamless sleep. Rinoa blinked a few times, hoping that her reality yesterday was no more. It was all a nightmare that was meant to pass. Her heart dropped when she recognized how real it all felt to her.

She curled herself tighter on her bed. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes again, only to open them to a clearer sight of her silent confinement. A few moments later, her contemplation was stolen by the sound of the door opening and of footsteps closing in. Rinoa slowly pulled herself up to sit and watched four female SeeDs enter. One of them, a petite one with short brown hair tweaked outward in a bouncy manner approached her. She gently took Rinoa's arm and motioned for her to stand.

Rinoa couldn't help but observe the young SeeD. The way she walked and moved reminded her so much of the lively and sweet Vanille that she smiled a little at the memory as she looked at her. They even both have round green eyes! The other girl gazed up and caught her smiling and smiled back.

The girl began talking in a high-pitched voice as she took Rinoa's spare clothes and lead her behind a short rail of white panels the two other SeeDs set up. She sounded friendly, almost nurturing. Wearing a look to encourage her, she held out the spare clothes at Rinoa.

Rinoa looked at them then at her. "What would you like me to do?"

The girl abruptly stood straight at her question, looking a little startled as she glanced around her comrades. It might have just occurred to her that Rinoa spoke and understood a different language, and whatever she had been saying the whole time may have fallen on deaf ears. Despite that, she looked determined to deliver her message to the sorceress.

She took the hospital gown and held it above her head. She then slowly pulled it down just over her chest.

"Oh." Rinoa said, nodding. "You wanted me to change." she added, mirroring the other girl's movements.

The girl finally smiled and nodded with a little more fervor before handing the clothes to Rinoa. She said something while twirling a finger around and turned on her back, prompting Rinoa to dress in private as she waited. She didn't know why she was complying to this girl's requests, but she had been asking her too nicely that she felt no other choice but to follow. Her smile was the first kind deed she had in a while, she didn't want to pay it back by making it any harder for her.

The grazing sound Rinoa's dress was making as she folded it in her arms prompted the perky SeeD to turn back around. Still smiling, she offered to take the blue dress from Rinoa before leading her out of the panel, revealing a large, cushioned chair in the middle of the room. Attached on its arms were leather straps, and on its headrest was a glass helmet. It looked intimidating at the very least, and her concerns were confirmed by the perky SeeD's audibly worried voice as she turned to one of her comrades, possibly asking what it was for. Rinoa wished she could understand the other SeeD's
reply so she would be at least aware if the chair was meant for her. After receiving an answer, the friendly SeeD nodded with a smile, seemingly satisfied with the other's response. However, it did not assure Rinoa enough to soothe the angry beating of her heart, nor the tremble in her breath. She might be friendly, but she was still a SeeD following orders. She gave her full trust to a SeeD before, and she learned not to commit the same mistake again.

The girl bit her lip as she approached Rinoa again. Her eyes were apologetic when she spoke as if she was asking her a huge favor. Rinoa merely looked at her, shaking her head.

"What is it?"

The girl huffed and gently pulled Rinoa closer to the chair before patting it. Rinoa tried to withdraw herself, declining to get anywhere near it. Her reaction alerted the SeeDs who were about to unsheathe their weapons, but the girl held out an arm, seemingly to reassure them and to drop whatever they were about to do, which they reluctantly did. She turned her attention back at Rinoa and to appease her apparent anxiety, the girl happily plopped on the questionable furniture, bouncing on it slightly. The other SeeDs around her didn't react on her playful behavior, as if it was something they dealt with everyday. The girl slid off the chair after she appeared to be clearly content and held out her arms toward it encouragingly for Rinoa. The latter looked around nervously before slowly approaching the chair and sat on it, defeated again under the command of her captors. The other SeeDs promptly placed each of her arm on a rest and strapped it in place.

By this time, the girl asked her fellow SeeDs something in slight despondence, but didn't receive any response. Her expression turned to worry when she looked back at Rinoa, her eyes starting to brim with tears. Looking at her certainly didn't help when all Rinoa was trying to do was assure herself that it was going to be okay. The girl didn't look okay, and she wasn't the one strapped on the chair.

The moment they fitted the helmet on her head, the older woman in white laboratory gown from the day before entered the room. She looked at Rinoa before asking the SeeDs a few questions. The friendly one barraged her with inquiries while pointing a hand at Rinoa. The older woman only shook her head and held up a hand, trying to calm her down and refusing to say anymore. The girl turned briefly at Rinoa then back to the woman before stomping out of the room. The moment she did, Rinoa felt a heavy drop at the pit of her stomach.

The older woman walked closer to her side, surveying her subject. Rinoa's breaths were sharp and shallow now, but it didn't seem to change the blank expression on the woman's face, nor the three remaining SeeDs'. She nodded at the younger ones around her before walking farther away and out the door.

Rinoa's eyes began darting around the room, counting seconds, waiting for something to happen. A minute passed, and still nothing. Her chest was beginning to relax.

And then, a sudden surge of electrical power coming from her helmet bit her endlessly all over her body. She shook violently against the chair and could not manage to make a sound from her silent scream. The burning pain ran through inside of her, but what magic left in her began to spark and take over to keep her breathing. Despite her defenses, it wasn't enough, and she lost herself to an agonizing sleep as soon as the electrocution stopped.
of the long table. They broke from their conversation and turned to Squall. He nodded at the two in
greeting and took the chair next to Angeal.

"Ready when you are, Squall." Angeal said.

Cid peered at the space in front of the Commander. "Where are you reports?"

"Squall never brings documents." Angeal pointed a finger on his head. "It's all in here."

Cid smirked, clearly impressed. "Okay." he nodded at Squall.

Squall nodded back. "We can start with Timber. 223 qualified SeeDs arrived with me in Timber,
223 came back. Casualties, none, but a total of 179 took damage. 100 outsourced doctors who were
recruited on standby before the mission arrived to help our resident medics accommodate all the
wounded. Medical duty was accomplished in two days' time. 415 reported damaged equipments
during the attack, mostly night vision pieces as sorceresses were observed to aim for the upper
extremities. They have failed insofar as mutilation attempt is concerned, but wounding most
recipients of their attacks, myself included."

"So sorceresses attempt to behead but never succeeded on it?" Cid asked.

"Yes."

Cid nodded. "Interesting."

"Though intel said we were to expect a rough total of 100 sorceresses in the coven of Timber, it is
believe that we dealt with more. The miscalculation that failed to follow the two is the one rule-of-
thumb ratio believed to have cause the failure of the mission. Estimated cost of damage is 9.3
million worth of Gil against our request of twenty-seven million."

"Okay." Cid said. "Let's hear your Timber survival story."

"After battling a sorceress, I woke up alone." Squall started. He knew he was called for this story,
and he had something practiced in his head.

"And the sorceress?"

"Nowhere to be seen after I regained my consciousness. I had a large lesion on one of my thighs,
but I managed to reach a cabin. I found a sturdy branch nearby and used it as a walking aid. I used
Curaga spells until the bleeding stopped."

"How many times have you used your Curaga?"

"I'm afraid I can't remember anymore. But by the time I was done, I had eight casts left. I was able
to find a bandage from abandoned clothes in the shelter—"

He caught Cid look at his phone and read a message. He typed something before glancing back up
at Squall. "I'm sorry, something came up at the Research Center."

Squall felt his muscles tense.

"Please, go on."

He searched for his voice before speaking again. "As I was saying," he cleared his throat. "I
managed to find bandages to tend to my thigh. By day three, when I was sure I could somewhat
walk, I left the cabin to hunt for food and logs."
"That's some incredible feat." Cid added. "Setting out to find food and logs, planning ahead of time."

Squall nodded. He wanted to cut this meeting short. "Luckily I did. Because a storm came and I was stranded for two more days. The supplies I hunted for and the ones I found inside the cabin kept me well sustained."

"So there was an evidence of residents in the cabin?"

"They most likely fled after the attack in Timber."

"That's good. Good that it was cleared of sorceresses for you."

_Not really. "Yes."

"And the rest is history, I presume?"

Squall nodded. "Yes."

"So what are your recommendations following this incident?"

"I would recommend a backup group on standby for the next mission. This can be achieved by requesting for the participation of Trabia and Galbadia Gardens. This will reduce damages and casualties, as well as chances of failure."

Cid nodded. "It would cost more, but it makes sense just as much."

The truth was, Squall didn't know why he was suggesting those things to make more effective and efficient missions against sorceresses– against Rinoa's kind– when all he wanted to demand was to forfeit all future attacks and delve deeper into the true nature of sorceresses. Were they really that hostile? Or did their hostility come with their defenses against the attacking SeeDs?

"Would you like to add anything else?" Angeal asked.

Squall shook his head. "None as of the moment, Sir."

"Good. This brief meeting is adjourned, then." Cid sounded to be in a hurry as well and taking quick glances at his phone. "I will bring your suggestion up the next time I meet with the other Headmasters."

"Okay." Angeal stood up and Squall followed.

"Squall," Cid called, pointing his phone at the Commander. "You still up for the sorceress project? Dr. Kadowaki got some results after a test."

"Yes, Sir."

"Angeal?"

"I'll pass on this one. Got things to do."

"Okay."

Squall followed Cid silently to the Research Center, gloved fists in his pockets. He caught a glance of Selphie just outside the door, crouching against a wall and crying. Cid appeared to have not noticed her before entering the room, but Squall decided to listen to what Selphie had possibly
witnessed. He knelt beside her.

"What are you doing here?"

Selphie looked up and rubbed the back of her hand over her puffy eyes. "They hurt her, Squall. They hurt the poor sorceress!"

Squall frowned. "How? What did they do?"

"I don't know! They made me dress her up, and then they brought in this chair! They told me it was going to just run some stats on her, and I thought it was all harmless. I mean, they wouldn't do anything bad on a sweet, harmless sorceress, right? So I even convinced her to sit on it. And then they began strapping her. I asked Dr. Kadowaki what they were going to do, but she declined to answer me. Then… then they hurt her! And then she wouldn't respond anymore and never opened her eyes again and—" she began sobbing hysterically. "I'm so sorry!"

Squall remained silent for a while, a groan almost escaped him. He glared up at the door before standing up. He had to see it for himself. He had to see Rinoa.

Selphie suddenly shot a hand up and gently tugged on Squall's trouser.

"Squall?"

Squall gaped down.

Selphie sobbed. "Do you think she did something to me? Like a mind controlling spell?" Her eyes fell on the floor. "Why do I feel so bad for her?"

"No, Selphie." Squall said softly. "Please don't think about it anymore."

After a few sniffles, she finally let go, slowly dropping her hand to her lap. He looked up from her and entered the room.

Cid was searching the busy place for Dr. Kadowaki while Squall walked closer to the transparent wall. Rinoa was in a short hospital gown, lying on her bed unconscious, a pale red light pulsating from her skin with every shallow breath. Inside with her were three people in hazmat suits pressing something on their tablets while examining her from a short distance.

Squall could feel himself seething, his jaws clenched, and his grips tightening. What the hell did they do to her?

He quickly turned around when he heard Dr. Kadowaki's voice and approached her and Cid.

"You better listen to this, Squall." Cid advised.

Dr. Kadowaki scrolled down at a chart on her tablet. "This morning, we performed a magic test on her, to see how much lightning energy can she tolerate."

The hell you wanted to see.

"The tests was cut short thirty seconds later when her magic evidently tried to counter the electricity. We couldn't identify what spell it was because she abruptly lost consciousness."

"Shouldn't a sorceress be able to handle it? Given how powerful they are." Cid prodded.

"That's the interesting thing, actually. Her body was fighting back, but she couldn't produce enough
magic energy to cast a spell to defend herself. We can safely say that sorceresses have limits in their powers. At least that's what we saw with this one."

Squall swiftly looked up at the doctor.

"We have observed from her physical development that she was growing paler and slower in her movements. She was weaker by the day, and her magic wavering. We had a hypothesis that magic is to sorceresses as metabolism is to non-magic humans. Magic is comparable to a battery for sorceresses, and with each use or movement they were drained of it. In this case, the sorceress shut herself down when her environment demanded more from her. It can be observed from the red energy emanating from her which could very well be her last spell."

"Will that spell kill her?"

"We don't know it yet, Sir."

"Then make another test."

Squall's head snapped at Cid, so did Dr. Kadowaki.

"Might I suggest against it."

"Sir, I'm taking Dr. Kadowaki's side on this matter." Squall added.

"We won't make any progress on our reports if we don't initiate something."

"But she's--"

"She's no more than an experiment subject." Cid assured with a smile.

"If there was any sudden outburst of power, she might burn everyone with this place..." Dr. Kadowaki warned.

"Isn't the shell magic of the room activated?"

Dr. Kadowaki blinked a few times. "It is, but--"

"Aren't we surrounded by SeeDs equipped with necessary spells to protect us?"

"Yes, indeed we are."

"So what else should we be worried about?" Cid challenged in a high tone, slowly facing her.

After a moment of disbelief, Dr. Kadowaki nodded. "Very well. We shall commence with the second session."

"Good." Cid turned back to face the white room.

Squall's breaths became shallower, pulling his hands out from his pockets just in case he needed to unsheathe his gunblade. Just up until that point, he didn't know the extent of Cid's ruthlessness when it came to sorceresses.

Dr. Kadowaki spoke through her communicator and the ones in hazmat suits looked up and turned around. Carefully, one of them carried Rinoa to the chair and strapped her again. Squall would be seeing for the first time what kind of test they did to her, and he wouldn't like it.
Should he just break through, grab her and run for it? But he had to knock down the three other people inside without killing them. That might take some of his time and lessen his chances to make his escape quicker, considering they were surrounded by abled SeeDs. He should be able to take the people in the room easily, but the other SeeDs in the Garden would be summoned to the room, guaranteed. Then again, he wasn't exactly alone, was he? Selphie was just outside the door, refusing to participate anymore. But he couldn't involve her, this was his business of extracting Rinoa to safety, no one else's.

"Activating simulation lightning in three, two..."

Squall gripped his gunblade.

"One."

He swung his sword, hitting the closest uniformed spectator on his back. Everyone was on high alert now, as expected, shooting bullets and casting spells towards him as he dashed swiftly from one wall unto the other, pushing any surface under his feet with all strength he could muster, successfully dodging each attack. Those almost hitting him were promptly deflected by his weapon back to their sources.

"Give me the radio! Get me the radio!" Cid yelled through the commotion. As soon as he had his hands on one, he looked around in panic, searching for Squall who was attacking everyone with unrelenting speed.

"Alert all SeeDs, Commander Squall Leonhart is attacking us in the Research Center! I repeat, Squall Leonhart is attacking us here at Research Center—" he said thru the receiver, but his announcement was cut off with a thunk of an ice block onto his head. Cid fell unconscious, his radio still in his hand.

With the Headmaster taken care of, Squall turned his attention on the other ones left standing.

Behind him Rinoa's eyes opened wide at the familiar pain that shot through her body again. It felt hotter and stingier, more excruciating than the last one. Her body began reacting again and this time, she screamed as loud as she could to draw whatever kind of power she began to feel from her core. It was painful, but she would do anything to free herself from the torture of the contraption.

With a shriek, she felt the flare magic flow right out of her skin and exploded everything around her.

Squall looked at the white room in horror as a glaring red light spread around Rinoa and blasted through the glass wall. He was thrown against a metal wall and fell front first. He pushed himself up on his elbows, coughing and squinting his eyes to survey the damage. Dust from the fallen debris darkened the now lightless room, save for the faint red light from Rinoa's figure. Squall stood up and staggered through the mess towards Rinoa, an arm covering his nose.

"Rinoa." He coughed, but he tried to call out louder. "Rinoa!"

Rinoa was on the floor, her arms supporting herself, her back on him. She was crying, almost wailing from what he could only assume pain. He bent over and placed his free hand on her shoulder.

"Rinoa. I'm here to—"

She rapidly turned around, hissed at him and pushed him away with a weaker flare spell. Squall halted his fall with his elbows on the ground. He looked at Rinoa with widened eyes, shocked at
what happened.

Her shoulders were drooped, her head slightly tilted to a side, and her once peaceful eyes full of sorrow. Squall was breathing heavily as he stared at her in absolute anguish, his thoughts blank of what more he could do. He was there to help, and she could not even understand that.

Why was she pushing him away?

Had she stopped trusting him too?

Squall's heart dropped at the thought, but there was no time for him to mull over his misgivings. He knew he should have escaped with her sooner, before they had the chance to hurt her this much. But it was all too late for that. He scrambled back up and ran again to her side. He had to try.

"C'mon." Squall said again when he heard the alarm blaring just outside the room. He placed an arm around her back and as soon as he slid another under her knees, she started to wiggle free.

"I can't let you hurt me anymore!" Rinoa screamed. "No more!"

Squall ignored her weak remonstration and held her firmly in his arms.

Rinoa's arm fell limply on her side. "Please… no more."

He looked around, stepped on one rubble over the other as he made his way to the exit. Squall almost tripped as he stepped down from an elevated ground just beyond the door and rest of the basement level. His eyes fell on Selphie who was standing right by where he left her, eyes widened as they locked with his. He was the first one to tear away when he heard Zell's voice and saw him approaching just behind Selphie with his arms shielding his head.

"Selphie! What's going on!" Zell called over.

Selphie watched as Squall sprinted away as fast as he could.

"W-wait! Was that—"

"No time to explain!" Selphie yelped back and smacked Zell's chin upward with the butt of her nunchaku, knocking him out cold.

They made it to the upper level with no encounter, and Squall persisted on his flee out of the Garden. The closer he got to the lobby, more SeeDs and cadets tried to bar his way with weapons and spells, which he retaliated with more forceful ones while holding Rinoa safely in one arm. He hid behind walls, struck, and cleared a path for the both of them with whatever it took until he could see the green fields of Balamb through the door. He began to run again and skidded to a stop when he saw Seifer plodding closer before him, his own gunblade resting on one shoulder.

He cocked his head at the motionless Rinoa. "What are you doing, Squall?"

"Let us go, Seifer." Squall said, trying not to sound pleading.

Seifer halted. "Why are you helping her?"

The jig was up. He needed to tell the truth. "She saved my life in Timber."

Seifer frowned.

"We gotta get out of here. Rinoa needs help."
"Who?"

"Rinoa." Squall dipped his head at the sorceress in his arms. "Her."

Seifer raised his gunblade at Rinoa. "That one has a name?"

Squall matched his glare and prepared himself to battle it out with him. He jerked and looked over his shoulder when Seifer shot a fira spell aimed at a male cadet behind him.

"Go."

Squall spun back at Seifer, who tipped his head at the exit. "Go. Now."

Squall spared no moment and ran past Seifer who marched further in and swung his gunblade at whoever dared pass through him. They didn't stand a chance, and he didn't expect anyone would.

"Sorry." he smirked as one female SeeD tumbled over one of his attacks. "I owed him one."

A/N: Next chapter, they receive help from cameo appearances! You can toss in your guesses at the reviews!
The sudden jerk forward as the train broke into a halt woke Squall up with a sharp gasp of air. Still squinting, he peered outside the open door of the train car, surveying the trees amidst the gray area under the nightsky. The trip might have been a little uncomfortable, but it was the best he could manage when he jumped into the train and out of sight from their pursuers. He glanced at Rinoa. Her eyes were fluttering slowly and weakly, her breaths were shallow, and her pale skin almost glowing in the moonlight. She fought to keep herself awake, but Squall knew better than to force it.

He slung her arms over his shoulders, lifted her on his back, and jumped out of the car, careful as not to fall forward. When he regained his balance, he sprinted into the trees, following the lights from post lamps just up ahead. He didn't know where they were, but if he would guess judging from the estimated length of their trip and the abundance of trees, they must be in Winhill.

"I see activity over there!"

He stopped when he heard one man call over another and quickly ducked behind a boulder. Still clutching Rinoa tightly on his back, his eyes narrowed at the distance. Luminous beams from flashlights scoured the roads with some moving away, and some drawing near. As they got closer to the train, Squall crouched and got a better look of the search party.

SeeDs.

"There's nothing here!"

"Keep searching the train!"

"They said to keep the sorceress alive!"

"We should get moving!"

The Garden closest to Winhill was Galbadia. And knowing the superiors in Balamb, they would immediately report the incident they daringly escaped from to the other institutions. It wouldn't come as a surprise to Squall if the news travelled fast enough for the other SeeDs to jump into action and begin their search for the fugitives under the orders of the Headmasters themselves. Quickly, he slid Rinoa off him and gathered leaves from around the area, planning to cover her for camouflage. He froze from his work when he felt a cold sharp metal come in contact with the side of his neck, gently pushing his jaw up.

"What are you SeeDs doing here?"

Squall stayed silent in response to the woman's demand for answers, his back still on her. She then pressed the edge of her blade a tad too close against his skin that his eye twitched.

"What did you do to her?" she prodded.

Was she talking about Rinoa?
Squall glared sideways. "It's none of your business."

"Unless I know what a SeeD is doing with a sorceress, I'll make it my business one way or another."

*Sorceress?* Squall thought. *How did she know?*

"Are you a SeeD too?"

"Is that supposed to be a joke? Because it sure isn't funny."

"I'll talk if you answer my question."

"I asked first, schoolboy," the woman was getting a little impatient. "What are you doing with a sorceress here?"

"Would you believe me if I tell you?"

"Try me."

Squall tilted his head up slightly when he heard voices getting closer. The beams of light were now brighter and bigger, and the woman must have noticed the threat too.

"She saved my life." Squall said hurriedly and more quietly. "Now I'm saving hers."

"Hmmm." the woman considered before withdrawing her sword. "Those your schoolmates?"

Now free from her blade, Squall looked over his shoulder to see a tall, pale female with pink curly hair accrued over one shoulder. Her face was fierce under the hood of her long brown cloak that blended with the darkness, and her light blue eyes glared at the approaching SeeDs before falling onto Squall. "Come with me."

That was too nice of an offer to be true. Was she trying to help him? Still crouching, Squall turned around and glared at the stranger, extending a protective arm at Rinoa.

"Come with me if you want what's good for the both of you. I know a place where you can stay temporarily. Just until this whole mess you got yourself into cools down."

He was good at formulating solutions in any given situation, but he knew when he found himself in a corner with weighty and limited choices. He didn't trust her, but between getting caught and trusting a possibly hostile person he just met, he'd choose whichever would get them out of deeper trouble as fast as possible.

Taking a deep breath, he carried Rinoa again on his back, stood up and followed the woman.

They moved through the forest, following the track of the road away from the moving lights. Squall tried to keep up with the fast pace of the woman who was even-tempered at waiting for them in every instance he slowed down.

"You still good?"

"Yeah."

"We're getting closer to the town. Just don't lose track of me."

Squall endured for at least another fifty minutes until they reached an idle, well-lit area of bars,
flower shops, and brick houses. She lead them into an alley, up a metal stairs, and into a medium apartment that looked unexpectedly a little too modern than he had anticipated. He heard another female speak in a language similar to Rinoa's as the woman locked the door behind her. A girl who bore a heavy likeness with the woman but with a smaller built peeked from another room and looked at him.

"Serah." the woman said. "My sister."

"SeeD?" The girl said, evidently anxious at the sight of him.

The woman shook her head. "No. Don't worry. Where's Snow?"

The other girl whirled her head back into the room, called for someone, and turned back at her guests. She stepped out just as heavy footsteps advanced closer to them. A tall, bulky man with blonde hair and neatly groomed stubble appeared, wearing a smile that soon vanished as soon as he saw Squall. He gave the woman a confused look, reaching out behind him for Serah. Squall adjusted Rinoa behind him, glaring at the man.

"What's a SeeD doing here, Sis?" he asked.

"He came with the sorceress who needs help." the woman replied. She eyed Squall when he turned and gave her a look. "That's Snow, Serah's husband."

"And that's Claire you want to thank for this." Snow said warily. He looked over his shoulder at Serah who gaped back at him. He turned back around at Claire.

"Snow, please give the sorceress a room to rest. She is nearly unconscious since I found them."

"Right." Snow said. "Right this way, kid."

"I'm not a kid." Squall said.

"Oh, okay. Would really appreciate to get your name, then."

Squall kept his silence as he followed Snow to a room.

"Don't be a rude guest, SeeD." Claire said sternly behind him.

Squall wasn't sure if he could trust these people. But there was some sensible guarantee in knowing that they were fearlessly harboring a sorceress. Claire was the sister, and Snow was the husband who worked on protecting Serah just as he was protecting Rinoa. Maybe some basic introductions wouldn't hurt.

"Squall." he finally said. "And this is Rinoa."

"You can understand sorceresses too?" Snow said, opening a small bedroom for them.

Too? Squall thought as he gently placed Rinoa on the bed. "Giving names is the only thing we've managed so far." he said and turned to Snow. "Do you?"

Snow shrugged. "It comes with becoming a knight."

"Knight?" Squall asked. Nobody ever said anything about a knight.

"Yeah. Well," Snow leaned a little closer to Squall and lowered his voice into a whisper. "You know Serah is a sorceress, right?"
Squall remained unresponsive.

"If a man swears to become a sorceress' knight, one of the perks is understanding their language. It's like a curse between sorceresses and humans. A language barrier prevents us common people from communicating with them. Being a knight of one breaks that barrier and makes you, well, a member of the club."

Serah entered the room with fresh towels and clothes for Rinoa. She faced both men and bowed at their guest.

"Howd'you do?" she stammered.

Squall was taken aback. "She can talk?"

Serah blushed. "Practice." she said in a harder tone.

Snow smiled and placed an arm around her. "Been trying to teach her how to talk like normal people. So, you know, she can blend outside and understand what's going on around her. It will come in handy."

"Claire and Snow." she said, struggling with every word. "They taught me."

It was a progress. At least that was how Squall saw it. A sorceress being able to connect with the world, grasping, albeit struggling, to learn their language. Maybe there was hope for Rinoa, too.

As if reading his mind, Snow chuckled. "Maybe Rinoa can start learning like Serah, but she has to get a knight first. Or else it's going to be very hard, even if she has Serah to help."

Squall folded his arms against his chest and looked away. *I didn't say anything yet.*

Serah glanced up at Snow and explained something fluidly in her language, gesturing at the fabric in her arms. Snow nodded, stated something that referred to Rinoa, and faced Squall.

"Now," Snow started, dropping his arm from Serah. "Seems like it's time for the gentlemen to take their leave and allow the ladies to bond over their similarities."

Squall frowned at him. "Huh?"

"Serah wants to see Rinoa without us around."

"Oh." Squall nodded.

"I prepared dinner while Claire was away." Snow said, opening the door. "You must be hungry. Join us."

Pain. Chaos.

Darkness.
And then, warmth.

Rinoa felt her chest regaining a slower and calmer rhythm at the light sensation of cure and another energy that was all too familiar. It felt like home.

She opened her eyes and they immediately met another pair that belonged to a pale girl with long rose-colored hair. The latter smiled at her with obvious relief without removing her hands over Rinoa's chest.

"You're a sorceress." Rinoa muttered weakly. Judging from the sensation she could register from the energy radiating from the girl's hands, she must be. "Are you?"

"Yes!" she said. "And I'm so glad to have you back with us!"

Rinoa's eyes wandered around the room. "Where am I?"

"Our house, in Winhill."

Rinoa squinted at her. "Who are you?"

"I'm Serah." she replied with a wider smile. "You lost too much magic energy I thought we were going to lose you."

"Really? Was it really that bad?" Rinoa placed a hand on her forehead to prove that she indeed was still alive. She released an audible breath. "Thank you."

"Don't mention it. Oh, you should also probably thank your friend, the SeeD."

"Squall?"

"You two were lucky my sister found you. SeeDs were all around searching for you two."

Oh no. Oh no no no …

Rinoa's breaths were getting shallower at the thought of SeeDs roaming not too far from where they were. She couldn't let herself be captured again, she had seen and experienced enough horrors to choose death over taking another step inside that forsaken place. She began to lift herself with her arms against the bed.

Serah gasped and quickly cupped a palm on Rinoa's head. "Rinoa, please, calm down."

"Did they find us?"

"No, don't worry. You're safe here."

It took a moment for Rinoa to cool her nerves until she finally nodded. She didn't lay back down, and Serah's hands were still flowing with bright light directed at her chest.

"I know I'm in no position to ask you, but I'm really curious at what happened." Serah said.

"It's…" Rinoa's gaze flew around the room and tried to shield herself from the frightening memories. "I…"

She trailed off as her healer waited intently for her response. Detecting the hesitation in her, Serah gave her a sad smile and firmly nodded. "Whatever it was, I'm sure Squall won't allow it to happen again."
"He did the first time." Rinoa shot back with a fiery look in her eyes. She looked away and fought her tears. "He let them put me in a cage and… hurt me."

Serah pressed her lips tightly together and gently rubbed Rinoa's arm. "Well, he's helping you now."

"That… meanie." Rinoa muttered.

Serah giggled a little. "And you're safe here with us. Nothing to worry about anymore, right?"

Rinoa faced her again. She thought for a few seconds before nodding.

"Right now, I'm just giving you enough energy to recover your strength. At least some of it."

"Won't it drain you? You might end up weak like me."

Serah shook her head. "Don't worry about it." she smiled. "I have a knight."

Squall stared at the bedroom door curiously, trying to listen at Rinoa's and Serah's voices inside. Beside him, Snow chuckled and shook his head as he twirled his fork on his pasta.

"Itching to get in there?"

Squall slowly broke away and went back to his own plate in silence.

Claire placed her fork down and carried her plate to the sink. "Snow, has Serah eaten yet?"

"Yeah." Snow replied while chewing. "She was getting a little hungry before you came, so I told her to go ahead."

Claire nodded. She looked over her shoulder at Squall. "You know how to clean your own dish?"

Snow nudged at Squall who looked up from his plate. "Yeah."

Claire smirked. "You don't talk much, do you."

Squall stayed silent.

"Doesn't matter to me. None of my business, right?" Claire turned around when she finished washing her plate and leaned her back against the counter. "I'm not going to even ask you why you're hiding from the Galbadian SeeDs out there, or why is Rinoa in the verge of dying when I found you. I brought you here because I want to help a sorceress, just as much as I want other people to help my sister if she finds herself in the same situation. She came in here with you, and you two are going to leave as soon as she gets better."

There was a hang-tough tone in her voice, stern and resolved. Squall understood that having a SeeD in her house risked her sister's safety, and though he meant no harm, he couldn't blame Claire's cautious position. She wanted to help, and that was all there was to it. She didn't want to get anymore involved, and he didn't want that either.

Squall nodded. "And I'm thankful."

Content with his answer, Claire nodded. "Good. And it goes without saying, you know what will happen if you try anything funny, right?"
"Understood."

Claire nodded and stayed silent for a moment. She pushed herself up. "I'm retiring early." She looked at Snow. "I'm leaving you with them. If there's anything you need, I'll be in my room."

Snow gave her a lazy salute. "Goodnight, Sis."

Squall took another bite of his dinner just as Claire disappeared into her room.

"So," Snow started, breaking the momentary silence. "You're really helping the sorceress, huh. Bet the other Gardens are after you too."

Squall placed his glass down after taking a gulp of water and watched the ripples inside settle. "That's also why we have to keep moving."

"Do you know where to go?"

"Timber is a good place to start. Rinoa knew where she was supposed to go before SeeDs got her."

"Ah, so you used your position as SeeD to help her escape then? That's pretty sneaky and neat."

Snow smirked. Squall peered at him. "But keeping her away from her coven was a really bad idea, you know?"

Squall gave him a questioning look.

Snow frowned and tilted his head slightly to a side. "Just how much do you know about sorceresses?"

Squall shifted on his chair to face Snow. "They are powerful, they have covens, and the will die if they run out of magic."

Snow nodded. "Okay, that's a good start. Do you know how they regain their magic?"

"No." Not that the Garden wanted to know, anyway.

"Well, you know how I told you that being a knight has perks, right?"

Squall silently waited for more.

"The real purpose of having a knight is to make sure that they never run out of powers."

Squall's brows furrowed deeper.

Snow shrugged. "I don't know how it works either, man." He trussed an arm on the table. "But when a sorceress has a knight, she doesn't run out of magic powers. It's like an endless cycle of energy between her and the knight. In turn, when things get bad, knights get to have a share of their powers too, some kind of giving me a way to protect my sorceress. Not that Serah and I ever have to use it though, I make sure we'd never have to come to that."

It was all too much to take in. Knights can understand sorceresses? The pact gives sorceresses indefinite powers? Knight gets a share of power from the sorceress? The arrangement was too good to be real, and there must be something more to it. "What's the catch?"

"What do you mean catch?"

"When she makes you a knight. Will the connection drain out all your life? Will you die when she
"Nah, there's no catch. If she dies, you don't get to lose anything. When you die though, she gets to lose her source of power, like how she was before the pact. I guess, when it comes down to it, it's just your duty to make sure she's well and safe for the rest of your lives. Of course, if you're ready to face the consequences of dedicating yourself to a sorceress. And sorceresses are not exactly welcome everywhere. You should know that better than anyone in this house."

*Like a willing slave, then.* Squall leaned in closer. "How do you make the pact?"

Snow waved a hand. "Simple. You offer yourself to become the knight, and she has to accept it."

"And if she doesn't?"

"Then she needs to go back to her coven. The sorceresses in a coven get to share each other's magic energy to keep themselves alive. Like a stream of life that flows just about everywhere to sustain each other. Serah is sharing hers with Rinoa right now, and with me as her knight, she doesn't have to worry about running out of her own magic."

"She can stay here, then? With Serah?"

"She can, but judging from how badly she had it before you came here, Serah will not be able to keep up with the amount of energy Rinoa's body would require to move around, cast magic... You know, sorceress stuff. Serah's just one sorceress, and Rinoa needs more help than that." Snow shrugged again when Squall gave him an insisting look. "I mean, It's doable, but it's going to be tough. Rinoa really needs to find a coven before she runs out of the energy Serah gave her."

"Then I'll be her knight."

Snow paused and stared at Squall's sudden surge of determination. He blinked a few times. "Okay. That was fast." he said. "But you do know it's a pact, right?"

"It's not like she has any other choice. We don't know how long it will take before we reach the nearest coven. If she wants to survive, she should."

"That's true. But once you go through this, you can never go back to being a SeeD. You know that too, don't you?"

"I don't have a Garden to go back to anyway."

"Alright." Snow replied. He glanced at the wall clock in front of him. "We'll sort this out in the morning. We'll ask Rinoa first thing, and see where it goes from there." He then stood up. "Let's get some rest."

The metal doors slid open and made way for Balamb Garden's resident traitor. He was stripped of his uniform, wearing plain white clothes in its place, his hands bound in heavy metal cuffs, and his gunblade was nowhere near his person. He was surrounded by seven SeeDs who walked with his pace towards the interrogation room where Quistis was waiting. They didn't leave his side until he
sat down opposite of her before finally leaving the room.

Seifer smirked at the sight of her plain stern face as she looked at him, but he could tell she was forced to do the honors of joining him under the scrutiny of the people beyond the room's two-way mirror.

"What are you smiling at?" Quistis asked.

Seifer began to chuckle. "They really sent you? You?"

Quistis frowned. "They found our close comradeship as an asset for this session. The Headmaster decided that the Captain is dealing with enough troubles regarding his Commander. So I'm the next best thing they have."

Seifer still didn't wipe that smirk off his face.

Quistis' face relaxed and folded her arms against her chest. "I know you wouldn't buy my style of running in circles, so let's cut to the chase. You attacked fifteen SeeDs and cadets who were ordered to capture Squall and the sorceress while passionately clearing a path for him. Five of them were knocked out while the rest were injured enough with burns and cuts that they were found writhing on the floor when help arrived." She paused. "Why did you let Squall go? More importantly, why did you help him escape?"

"What do you think?"

"Everyone's suspecting that Squall's under the spell of the sorceress." Quistis said. "That's what the Headmaster advised everyone. It's easy to conclude that you are under her control too."

Seifer bursted out laughing, leaning against the table as he roared louder. He threw his head up to catch his breath from his howling laughter, while Quistis sat unamused at his movement to ridicule the situation.

"This is serious, Seifer."

"Oh, is it? Because I'm having the time of my life here!" Seifer shouted in his guffaw, shaking his head. Quistis glanced nervously at the mirror and briefly smiled before turning back to Seifer.

She waited wordlessly until Seifer's outburst died down. He wiped the tears from his eyes, clamped his hands together on the table, sniffled with a loud groan, and sat up straight.

"You done?" Quistis asked.

"Yeah. Feels good to have a good laugh."

"Can we get back to my question?"

Seifer shrugged. "Okay. I'll bite. Squall saved my life back in Timber while my life was at the mercy of a sorceress. He stole her attention to get her away from me. He provided me with a potion to cure myself, even when I was equipped with a curaga."

"So you're just paying him back."

"Yeah. Well, I mean to me it's the right thing to do. I owe him my life." Seifer placed a hand on his chest, mocking sincerity. "I don't know about you. Wouldn't you save his life too?"

Quistis pursed her lips, propped her elbows on the table and leaned closer. "Squall has a capture
order from Cid."

"No shit."

"Dead or alive."

Seifer's face fell. He peered at Quistis with a dark look in his eyes.

"He also wants the sorceress. Alive."

"Good luck with that." Seifer said.

Quistis bent her head slightly to a side and narrowed her eyes at Seifer. "Since I'm on a roll, and I'm concerned about your wellbeing, I'll give you a friendly warning." She straightened up. "For your participation in assisting the sorceress' escape, they're going to transfer you to D-District Prison."

Seifer shot her a look. She fidgeted with her fingers as she allowed a silent moment to pass and let it all sink in him.

"I'm sorry." Quistis' tone turned serious. "The gravity of your actions comes with a hefty price."

Seifer's eyes dropped on his fist. He remained silent. Burning heat, sand everywhere in the middle of nowhere, guards beating inmates on a regular basis, and every atrocious scene expected from a maximum security prison. Both of them knew that place was hell on earth.

It just dawned to him why they sent Quistis. He would take his sentence with a grain of salt if it came from anyone else. It had to be someone from his squad, and Quistis had the strongest stomach to tell him what awaited in the next few days.

Seifer took a deep breath and lifted his chin. "Is that all?"

Quistis stayed still for a while before nodding. "Yeah. That's all."

"Can I go back to my cell now? Because I'm getting really sleepy."

Seifer stared at the cracked ceiling of his dank cell, his head relaxing on his hands in his bed, counting the holes and classifying the big ones from the small ones in his memory. Thank Hyne for administration's negligence in maintaining the Garden's cell, or else his industrious mind wouldn't be able to take another idle minute. At least, at that moment, he needed a distraction. He may not have showed Quistis or any of those snooty spectators in the interrogation room what effect it had on him to know where he was moving, and if he had to be honest with himself, it felt like an indiscriminating execution. A life for a life? Maybe. But Leonhart should make it worth it all.

Two pairs of footsteps echoed in the place and stopped in front of his cell.

"You have a visitor, Almasy."

Seifer looked over the metal rails and saw one of the cadets in duty standing beside Quistis. He turned back to the ceiling and listened as the door clanged open. Quistis asked the cadet to give them a moment alone before entering the cell and closing the gate behind her. Seifer waited until the cadet left for good.

"D-District prison, huh?" he asked.

He felt the uneasy silence between the two of them before hearing her respond.
"Garden rules."

"Will I at least get my own t.v. there? It can get a little lonely and boring."

"It's not funny, Seifer."

"And I hate visits and seeing your faces."

"Will you just shut up?"

Smirking, Seifer swiftly sat up and faced her. "You know what's funnier? C'mon, ask me what's funnier than D-District Prison."

Quistis sighed tiredly. "What's funnier than D-District Prison?"

"You not taking Squall's side on this."

Quistis rolled her eyes and looked away, shaking her head. "Oh please."

"Tell me, did you even have try to defend him? From the Cid's execution order? Did you try sparing Squall from that, Quistis?"

"We couldn't do anything."

"At least I did something." Seifer landed the edge of his palm on his chest.

"We know, Seifer." Quistis cut him sternly when he tried to say more. "We know. We're just..."

Quistis trailed off, swinging an arm towards the gate. "We're waiting for the right moment to prove something."

"Bullshit."

"We're not like you, alright?" Quistis pointed a finger on him, her other hand on her waist. "We're not brutes who just jump into action out of impulse."

Seifer shook his head. "You're missing the point."

"Just listen to me!"

She sounded frustrated. Seifer stared at her as if waiting for a long monologue.

"Irvine and I are suspecting something. Squall didn't survive in Timber alone. He was with the sorceress who helped him recover from his wounds, fed him, kept him warm from the storm. Those are not ordinary feats that can be accomplished by a SeeD, or any common human appropriately equipped with the basics of magic. We are positive they were by a sorceress. His sorceress."

Still not tearing his eyes from her, Seifer shook his head. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because you understand Squall better than any of us. He may not have said something, but you would know what is up with him. Irvine and I, we cannot be too sure. We're just guessing. But you, you would know. You always know."

Seifer's gaze shifted to the area over her shoulder, recalling his last encounter with the Commander. "That night, when he left, he told me the sorceress saved his life."
Quistis walked closer to him, surveying the space behind her if there was anyone else there with them. She faced Seifer and lowered her voice. "Did he say anything else?"

Seifer gazed at her for a few seconds and shook his head.

"If Squall is helping the sorceress, and you're helping Squall, how can we prove that you're not under a spell?"

"Are you still serious about that? I thought we got over that joke."

"I'm serious. Even the other Gardens believe that both of you were cast with a mind-controlling spell."

"Quistis, if she wanted to make us work for her with some telepathetic spell, she should have done it when we captured her in Timber. And if your and Irvine's guesses are correct, it adds up to Squall's claim. He helped her escape because she saved his life when he was left alone after the mission."

The way he said it to her was as if he flashed the obvious in her face.

"I think, the more important question is, what does the Headmaster want with the sorceress? Why does he want her alive and Squall dead? Was he really serious about killing Esthar President's only son?"

"He betrayed the rules of the Garden, and the rules of the world. Balamb Garden is one of Esthar's allies in this campaign against sorceresses. President Loire enrolled his son here knowing the conditions, and they were to be followed without bias."

"Okay, then what does he want the sorceress for?"

"That's what I'm going to find out."

Quistis turned around when they heard the cadet's voice call for her. Visitation time was over.

She gave Seifer a knowing look before leaving, feeling his eyes follow her as she walked away. She wasn't wrong in her assumptions, then. Squall had a reason for helping the sorceress.

When Quistis reached her room, she went straight to her small shelf and pulled out her history book in which she highlighted the major points of one particular war.

The great sorceress war.

She flipped the pages, found the part, and read it again, trying to look for what she could possibly be missing in the sequence of events. She ran her fingers over the text.

"Ten years ago... Ultimecia... Adel... apocalyptic repercussions."

Then her eyes landed on one paragraph.

_The war lasted from April 6 until November 28, concluding in the province now more commonly referred to as the Centra Ruins... After the cataclysmic battle between the two sorceresses under unknown circumstances, Adel 's body was found in Esthar with undisclosed details about her burial... Ultimecia was last seen in Balamb without any reported traces. However, it was widely believed that she had passed... and the peace across the lands was kept ever since... This also gave birth to the Treaty of Dollet where the three Gardens from Trabia, Balamb, and Galbadia_
sealed their collaboration with all the military forces from all countries to keep the world safe from the sorceresses under tighter rules and harsher enforcement …

Quistis closed the book and slid a hand up her forehead. Ultimecia was last seen in Balamb, but no one got to see her body to prove her death. This little fact bothered her ever since the year she attended the World History class. She was last seen at the very grounds where she was at that moment, yet no one, not even the Headmaster, said anything about it. The students might have chosen to overlook, or they were simply paying less attention than they should, but there was something about it that badgered her.

Maybe it wouldn't hurt to sneak into the Headmaster's office and take a look at some of the official records there.
Quistis waited until after curfew the next day when she was sure Cid would lock his office before retiring to his room. She weighed the chances that the files she was looking for might not be in the office and even considered the records section of the library, but it was the most obvious place to keep his documents, especially the confidential ones.

Besides, who would ever go to the Headmaster's office uninvited? Even the most notorious SeeDs such as Seifer never dared to make the mistake of attempting. But here she was, glancing nervously around the dark, empty corridor, praying to all gods up and below for aid in her mischief with purpose.

She took a deep breath, carried her shoes in one hand, and strode soundlessly towards the main elevator. It was one of the mechanisms in the Garden that remained operational at all hours of the day for safety reasons, and was the least monitored because nobody wanted to mess with curfew.

She was about to press the upward arrow button when the digital screen beside it suddenly flashed from "2" to "1". Quistis stepped back, looked around in panic and spotted the pots of tall indoor plants a few feet away. She sprinted and quickly hid herself behind the bush of thick leaves, stopping any trace of movement with her hands.

Ding!

Two female SeeDs came out, laughing and giggling in between their chatter as they made their way to the dormitories. Quistis should be apprehending them for not strictly observing the curfew before they get caught by the higher ups, but she was off-duty and was trying to avoid trouble herself.

When they were far enough, she peeked around and stepped out. Giving the elevator a few seconds of assurance that nobody was using it, she finally pressed the button, entered, and pressed the third level for Cid's office.

It was eerily dark and quiet when she arrived. Bringing a flashlight and a long, metal pin with her, she began to work on the door, her flashlight held by her mouth. After several seconds of trying to jimmy the lock, the door finally opened with a low creak. She slipped in, slowly pushed the door closed, placed her shoes down, and flashed her torch around to look for a good place to start.

She glanced on her wristwatch for timecheck and knelt in front of the cabinets below the shelves. She scanned through the labels of the white binders, one after the other, finding nothing more useful than the "Official Records of Graduates." She closed the cabinet and went for the next one.

Still no folders about sorceresses.

She then went on the third shelf which was considerably smaller than the rest. She lit her flashlight over the labels until the thickest of them caught her attention for getting misplaced among folders on faculty members.

Edea Project

Quistis quickly and carefully pulled it out, needing two hands to carry it and placed it on the floor. She held her flashlight over the first page of a newspaper clipping glued on a white bond paper about the disappearance of "Ultimcia" dated ten years ago. Beside it were scribbled notes about a
certain "Edea Kramer."

Quistis furrowed her brows. Edea Kramer. She must be related to Cid, one way or another. She flipped on the next page.

It was a document of Edea Kramer's medical record, dated a month after the end of the great sorceress war. Her eye color changed from brown to dark violet, and her skin turning paler each day. She displayed an erratic behavior, hisses at anyone who came close to her except for her husband.

The husband's was named "Cid."

Cid Kramer.

The Headmaster had a wife?

The next page of the document enumerated the observations made on Edea. She displayed violent magic emissions, spoke in language similar to what was heard from sorceresses, levitated, unusual amount of strength for her built, and suddenly switched to a docile temper at the presence of Cid and interacted with him in what the observers could describe a "coquettish" way, prompting them to keep him as far away from her as possible. Each item had material references written next to it, most were video files. At the bottom of the page, it was concluded that Edea was demonstrating all the attributes seen from a sorceress and she will be put under observation "until a cure can be obtained." The word "cure" was furiously underlined many times.

Quistis could feel her heart beating furiously against her chest at this point. She had never heard of an Edea, and was never made aware of her existence. Not Cid, not the instructors, not even the Captain. She went over the next page.

A medical profile with a photo of what seemed like a lifeless body of a young woman with immeasurable number of cuts and bruises. In her profile, she was pronounced a sorceress from Deling, and she was tested for "electrical therapy". She expired on the fifth attempt.

The next page showed a similarly looking profile of a bloated woman, also labelled a sorceress from Deling, who had undergone "hydrotherapy". She expired on her twenty third session.

She quickly flipped on the next pages; all photos of lifeless sorceresses who died torturous deaths in the hands of the Garden: fire, water, physical trauma, and ones that she'd rather not read on any further. She gasped when she passed on a photo of a girl, one who was much too young, also a sorceress.

Expired on her fifteenth session.

Quistis gasped and shut the folder, refusing to see anymore of it. She cupped her mouth and stifled her sobs as tears came pouring down her widened eyes.

Atrocious experiments being done on sorceresses indiscriminately, even the very young defenseless ones.

Even on the harmless one who saved a life.

In the very place she called home.

She covered her face with her palms, holding down loud whimpers. All their life since they entered the Garden, they were lead to believe that they were going to be the protectors of the world from
the destruction of the evil sorceresses. They were groomed to dedicate their lives in defending everyone, especially the innocent. They were given advanced weapons and equipped with magic spells to aid them in cleansing the world of terror. They were taught to be ethical in their war by giving the sorceresses a time of peace each year for the red moon festival. Because being humane in their mission was what separated them from the sorceresses.

The Gardens were the good guys. SeeDs were the world's heroes. The sorceresses were the real enemies.

Quistis quickly placed the folder back into the cabinet as she had found it, fighting the sniffles and her tears. They had been kept from the truth that they were unknowingly part of and that felt dirty. They killed sorceresses because they were told to, and they were trained not to question orders because everything was under the good will of the Garden. It was all for the sake of the world. They left out the part that Cid was actively reaping from the sorceresses for his own experimental and personal harvest, and the SeeDs were left in the shadows of his shed. Or were they merely tools for one reason or another?

She held her flashlight up and glanced around the room, checking if she had left any trace for the Headmaster to spawn any suspicion. She picked her shoes up and left for the elevator.

She arrived at the ground floor without incident at an hour past their curfew. She was walking her way to the dormitories when she heard footsteps coming from the Quad, and a voice that belonged to Cid.

"Yes. Yes, of course… No, I must say no because there is a conflict in schedule."

He was getting closer and Quistis found herself sprinting. She slowed her pace when Cid's voice began to fade into the cafeteria and turned around when she reached the dimmer part of the hallway. She tiptoed backwards warily, focusing all her energy in making sure Cid didn't catch any of her movements, and slowing her breath down before she caught any attention. She gasped when she heard one door clicked open on her right and a hand shot out, covered her mouth, and pulled her inside.

Quistis tried to wiggle free from her her captor who muzzled her protesting yelp under a palm, dropping her shoes as she did. She was finally let go when the door was locked, and she immediately turned around to look.

There was a long pause between them.

"Fujin?"

Fujin swayed an arm to her side. "EXPLAIN."

She looked more worried than mad, and Quistis couldn't help but think she had been watching and waiting for her the whole time. She regained her balance and rubbed her hands on her sides as if it would wipe off her bluff, if the situation had indeed vindicated it.

"Uh," Quistis was trying to find her words. "I went to check the library for any students--"

Fujin slid a foot forward and cut her mid-sentence. "The library is on this floor." She said more quietly now. "I saw you ride the elevator up."

Quistis froze and her eyes widened. First of all, it was the first time she heard Fujin talk with multiple words in one complete sentence without exaggerating. Second, she realized that she really was watching her.
"Where did you go, Quistis?"
Quistis opened her mouth slightly and then hesitated.

"It's... uhm..."

"You went to the Headmaster's office, didn't you?"
Quistis pressed her lips together. "You saw where I went?"

"Yes."

"Was there anyone else?"
Fujin shook her head. "No. Just me."

"Seriously, how did you even do that?"

"Quistis, please tell me what were you doing."

"For your own good Fujin, I don't think it's a good idea."

"Is it about the sorceress?"
Quistis bit her lip and blinked a few times.

"It's okay, Quistis. Selphie and I are having our doubts too."

Quistis' brows met. "Doubts? Doubts on what?"
Fujin lowered her voice. "About the Garden's position in this campaign against sorceresses."

"Are you sure?"
Fujin nodded firmly.

"What made you say that?"

"Selphie thinks the sorceress didn't deserve what happened."

"How about Zell? Weren't you assigned to work with him?"

"He had doubts on the research, but couldn't say anything. Selphie confirmed it for him."

In what ways she confirmed, it didn't matter. As long as he was in it with them.

"What about you?"

"I believe her. And Squall. And Seifer."

Quistis thought about trusting her too easily. How would she know which side Fujin was really on? She was able to pretend she was one of the Garden's most trusted and responsible associates when they sent her to the interrogation room for Seifer. On the other hand, there was a reason why they chose her instead of Fujin, despite the latter having a stronger rapport with him. She was one of the people in the Garden who could never lie about big things like this even if she tried, more so if she was asked to pretend nothing was wrong.
Irvine was on Squall's side as well as far as she could remember. If she told him what she discovered about the Edea Project she could already imagine him doing a victory dance over it.

And then there was also Seifer…

"Look, Fujin," Quistis said prompting Fujin to lean in closer. "they are transferring Seifer to D-District Prison for helping Squall."

Fujin looked at her as if she already expected it.

"If everyone's with us, I'm thinking of getting him out."

Fujin nodded. "It will be tricky to get him out of D-District Prison, but we can manage."

"No." Quistis shook her head. "I'm thinking of getting him out of here."

Fujin furrowed her brow and tilted her head.

"I know it's harder." Quistis held out her palms. "But it's not impossible if we can get the others to help."

Fujin nodded with assurance. "I can get them together."

"Do you think they'll listen?"

Fujin stared at her for a while and her face turned serious. "AFFIRMATIVE."

Rinoa fluttered her eyes open at the sunlight streaming into her room. In a moment of disorientation, her eyes wandered around and searched for the glass wall, white linens, and that horrible chair just to make sure she was no longer in the white cell. A smile drew on her face when she realized she was still safe in a warm room at Serah's house. She lifted an arm to examine the color she regained on her skin and produced a light blue ball of magic from her fingertips. Her smile grew wider as she shaped it in an heart, then a fish, and finally an intricate feather.

"Rinoa? You awake?"

She turned towards the sound of voice beyond the door and the feather swiftly disappeared in her hand. "Y-yes?" she said weakly.

"It's me, Serah. May I come in?"

"Yes. Sure." Rinoa replied and sat up.

Serah pushed the door open with her back and entered with a tray of food and drink in her hands. She greeted Rinoa with a smile as she landed the tray in front of her and sat by her side. Rinoa's mouth watered upon sight of the food and glanced back at Serah with grateful eyes.

"Thank you."
Serah nodded. "I'm just glad you recovered really well."

Rinoa lifted the fork and began to work on the pancakes.

Serah leaned over and watched Rinoa with inspecting eyes. "So, you ready to talk to Squall?"

Rinoa responded with a sideway glance and slowed her chew down. She knew she couldn't stay, and she wouldn't insist on it. She was still on the run and eager to find and join her coven, while Squall was a fugitive himself if he really did go against his comrades to help her escape. And though she was hurt under his watch, she was safe and stronger now because of him. So she nodded.

"I guess so."

Serah smiled. "Snow said he really seems to want to see you since last night."

Rinoa glanced shyly at her. "Maybe he was just guilty-worrying about me."

"That's a funny thing to say."

"I don't know how else to put it." Rinoa pouted as she picked on another pancake. "But I guess I'm ready to face him."

Serah nodded. "Okay. I'll let him in."

She waited until Rinoa finished her meal before heading out of the room with the tray. Snow rushed to her from the dining area and took the tray from her. Claire peered at them from behind the newspaper in her hands before returning to her reading.

"She ready to talk to him yet?" Snow whispered.

Serah nodded. "Yeah. She's ready."

"I'll go get him."

Snow placed the tray on the table before walking to Squall who was leaning against a column as he watched the morning sunrise through the window. He tapped his shoulder and Squall turned around.

"So, Rinoa's awake now."

Squall nodded nonchalantly before looking back at the window. "Okay."

Snow waited a few seconds for a follow-up response. "Wanna go talk to her?"

Squall frowned.

"You know I can help out, right?"

Squall turned back at him. He knew why Snow was asking this question, the knighthood idea was all his doing after all. Now that Rinoa was awake and they weren't exactly taking their time with their stay, there was no better moment to do it.

"Okay."

Snow gestured at Squall to follow him and he began walking towards the bedroom. Before they
entered, Snow paused and faced Squall once more.

"Last warning, Squall." Snow was holding up a hand and stepping on his sides uneasily. "When you become a knight, it's going to be permanent. No turning back. You will be tied with her, and she becomes your responsibility, okay? I need you to take this seriously."

Squall glared at him. "Who said I'm not taking this seriously?"

"Okay." Snow straightened. "Good to know you're giving a lot of thought on this." He turned around to the bedroom and opened the door.

Serah was waiting inside by Rinoa, and Squall's eyes immediately fell on the latter. She looked better without a doubt, and more alive. But her eyes, they were unreadable as they looked back at him. The lack of emotion in Rinoa as she watched him was bothering.

Snow faced Rinoa and began switching to sorceress language.

"So Rinoa, right?"

Rinoa's eyes widened. "Yes. Sorry, it's my first time to talk to a man in our language."

Serah smiled. "This is my husband, Snow." She walked to Snow's side and slid an arm around his. "He's my knight."

Rinoa formed an "oh" with her lips. "Knights can understand us?"

"More importantly, you understand us." Snow smirked. "Actually, this is also why I brought Squall here with me."

Squall glanced at him at the sound of his name.

"But first," Snow faced Squall and switched to non-sorceress language. "Hey, buddy."

Still wearing that frown, Squall looked at him.

"Want to tell her something?"

"What should I tell her?"

"Things like 'I'm glad you're okay', or 'don't worry, you're safe with me.' Anything, really. That would be great."

Still looking at Snow, Squall replied. "We managed to escape Balam-

"Not to me. To Rinoa!" Snow laid out a hand at Rinoa.

Squall rolled his eyes and faced Rinoa. "We managed to escape Balamb Garden and rode the train to get away from our pursuers. We stopped at Winhill and dodged the Galbadian SeeDs. Claire found us and offered her apartment as a temporary hideout. We'll work on rejoining your coven as soon as you recover." He thought that felt silly. It was like talking to a wall.

Snow blinked a few times, glanced at Serah before turning to Rinoa. "Uh, he said you two were able to get out of Balamb Garden, that's his school, and you two were able to ride a train going to Winhill, which is here, and you were able to avoid SeeDs from Galbadia Garden until Claire found you. Claire is Serah's sister and the owner of this apartment. And this place is now your safety house, just until you get better."
Rinoa's eyes shifted to Squall then back to Snow, seemingly waiting. This was the first time she was able to talk to Squall with a translator, and with so many things left unsaid or, more specifically, misconstrued, maybe it was their chance to take advantage of the opportunity. But he was clearly not exploiting the convenience while they still could.

"Is that all?"

"And," Snow pressed on hesitantly. "he's glad you're okay…"

Rinoa's brows rose.

"Yeah, he's happy… maybe… probably…"

Serah nudged Snow hard on his chest. Squall frowned at them, clearly puzzled.

"Well," Rinoa started. "Please tell him I said thank you."

Snow nodded and looked at Squall. "She said thank you."

Squall nodded.

Snow swung a hand at Rinoa unsurely, eyes still on Squall. "So, you wanna tell her what you're here to tell her?"

Squall nodded. "Please explain to Rinoa what having a knight means, and that I wish to be her knight so she will have enough strength to make it to her coven."

Snow nodded. He faced Rinoa once more. "So, Rinoa, as Serah's knight, you're witnessing the advantage of having one.

Rinoa nodded understandingly. "Yes, we are able to communicate."

"Also, Serah doesn't—"


"Oh, good." Snow clapped his hands together and rubbed them a few times before dropping. "So, Squall here, your hero, your rescuer, ahehe… Well, it would give him great honor, and this is coming from him alright?" He extended an arm towards Squall as if presenting the mega jackpot. "He wishes to be your knight."

Serah gasped and smiled excitedly as she turned to Rinoa for her answer. Rinoa, on the other hand, widened her eyes at the truly surprising proposal. She looked at Squall who was leaning against a wall, looking at her, also waiting for her reply. She looked back at Snow.

"No."

Snow dropped his hand, clearly confused. "Wha?"

"No. I would not have him as my knight."

Serah's smile slowly disappeared.

"But, why?"
"I understand that he's merely paying me back for saving his life in Timber. I know he's only making it up for me with what happened in Balamb. I know he is only helping me for those reasons and though he is saving my life no matter how you look at it, he is still a SeeD and I'm a sorceress. He had proven our differences far enough, and I learned not to give my full trust in him again. And despite his offer being more advantageous to me, I will not accept it if it means sacrifice on his part for good business. And SeeD business means having to pay him back one way or another in the future, and I can see he's just not as willing as this commitment demands from him." Rinoa began tearing up, but she willed herself back to composure. "I know he left everything behind, maybe even his title just so he could help me. And for that, I am grateful. But I can manage myself, I just need to get back to my coven. I don't need the burden of paying his kindness back for being my knight. It's an eternal cycle of indebtedness. Maybe it's time to break it, for his own good and mine."

Serah pursed her lips and Snow's mouth gaped. Squall detected the rigid tone in Rinoa's voice and judging from their hosts' expressions, whatever she said couldn't be good.

Snow glanced at Serah who cocked her head at Squall to encourage her husband. He scratched the back of his head and gave Squall a defeated look.

"She said no."

Squall's eyes shifted from Snow to Rinoa.

"She thinks you're just paying her back for saving her life and for making it up for Balamb."

"Isn't that what this is about in the first place?" Squall snapped back.

"Well, she also doesn't trust you anymore because, how does she put it, 'you have proven your differences.' And she said something about not wanting to owe you anything anymore for your own good, and not needing your knighthood to get back to her coven, and--"

Squall held up a hand. He didn't want to hear any more. "I understand." He gave Rinoa a stern look which she gave right back.

"What's your plan now?"

"We're still going to Timber, finish where she left off until she finds her way back to her coven."

"And you?"

Squall thought for a moment. "Esthar."

"Oh." Snow shrugged. He guessed Balamb was not an option anymore.

"How long until we can leave?"

Snow translated it for Serah who responded unsurely.

"Serah said to give her one more day."

Squall nodded and left the room. He ignored the curious stare Claire was giving him as he walked past her on his way to the living room and sat on the couch.

He committed an act of treason against the Garden to save a sorceress who turned out to be less than willing to cooperate. Then again, he had discovered just enough about Cid's true colors to turn
his back and leave his post, Rinoa or no Rinoa. Besides, it wasn't like he had nowhere else to go. He already told Snow, he had Esthar to return to. Maybe it wasn't ideal considering the affairs it had with the Garden, but the President had no choice, he would take him in all the same. Maybe he just did it in the most ungracious way to leave a permanent smear in his name, but he thought it was what Rinoa deserved in exchange for the untimely death she spared him from.

For some reason, the thought reminded him of the look on Rinoa's face as she turned his offer down and it released a heavy iron that plummeted straight to his chest.

Squal propped his elbows against his knees, took a deep, pricking breath, and hung his head.

Quistis and Fujin agreed to use the dormitory of the least noticeable member of the group to keep any suspecting eyes from their unofficial meeting– Zell's.

It was the morning of Seifer's transfer, scheduled eight hours before. Zell swiped his ID and entered his room, unaware of the four pairs of eyes watching him cautiously as he closed the door. He was whistling less smoothly from his bruised chin, thanks to Selphie's surprise attack, as he threw his things casually on his desk. He turned around and jerked violently backwards, almost falling on the shoe rack just by the door, when he saw four people sitting on his bed.

"THE HELL YA'LL DOING HERE?!"

"SHHHH!" the four shushed him in unison.

"We're not here, okay?" Selphie whispered.

"What do you mean you're not here? How did you even get in here?"

"Seriously, dude, just chill." Irvine said calmly.

"Don't ask me to ch–"

"Quiet, Zell." Quistis hissed.

"Don't ask me to chill." Zell repeated in a much softer voice. "Someone tell me what's going on or I'll show you the way out that will drive you straight to the infirmary."

"Okay Zell, we will. Just tell us one thing first." Quistis said, holding out her hands to calm a visibly rattled Zell.

"Does it matter, he's already here with us!" Selphie protested.

"No, we need to know for sure first."

"Need to know what?" Zell asked.

"You have your doubts about Cid, right?"

"What do you mean?"
"Remember the sorceress?" Irvine started.

"Yeah?"

"And Squall?"

"Yeah, of course." Zell rubbed his chin and glared at Selphie. "How can I forget?"

"The sorceress helped Squall in Timber, that's why he left to save her from the laboratory."

"Oh." Zell finally relaxed and stood straight. "Yeah, I thought the tests were too much. Poor sorceress didn't even look harmless."

"She was so friendly!" Selphie added.

"Agreed." Fujin muttered.

"Well, there's more to it. I'll make this fast because we have another matter to attend to." Quistis said. "Last night, I snuck into the Headmaster's office to learn more about this research on sorceresses. And I found one file called the 'Edea Project'."

Zell held out an arm to the group and looked over his shoulder when he heard someone walking along the corridor beyond the door. When it faded, he turned back to Quistis. "Okay. And?"

"Edea was, or is, we don't know for sure yet, Cid Kramer's wife."

"The Headmaster had a wife?"

"My thoughts exactly. And she showed qualities of a sorceress which began after the great sorceress war. Now, if it adds up with the official historical records of Ultimecia's last sighting here in Balamb, then I'd say those two were somehow related."

"How?"

"I don't know either. I don't know any possibility. But whatever it was, Cid tried to find a cure for her so he captured a number of sorceresses and performed experiments on them."

"How big was the number?"

Quistis held out a hand and demonstrated the thickness of the folder through a two-inch gap between her thumb and the rest of her fingers. "This. None of them survived the experiment, and whatever the cure was never discovered."

"Except there was one more sorceress who did survive." Irvine said. "Squall's sorceress."

"So you're saying that this Edea is still alive, then?"

"Very surely alive and kicking. Or else, the Headmaster wouldn't be doing the experiments anymore, right?" Selphie said.

Zell's furrowed brows shot up. "Wow, that's..." He sat on a chair. "That's... you mean, we... all this time, there was... You mean in this Garden?"

"There's at least one sorceress in this Garden all this time? Yes. Considering the numerous confidential experiments done in this Garden. You do remember we were sworn to secrecy about the sorceress, right?"
"Yeah. Wow."

"I know, wow." Fujin said.

Zell jerked at Fujin and pointed a finger at her. "You can talk!"

"Quiet."

He looked at the other three people in the room. "Any more surprises you want to tell me before I officially freak out?"

"Yeah." Quistis replied. "Seifer."

"What about him?"

"They're taking him to D-District Prison."

"When are they taking him?"

"Later at 6:00."

"And before you ask, yes. We're extracting him." Irvine said.

"H-hey. Wait a minute. We're not going to do it Squall style, right? I mean, they're not just going to kick us out, they won't stop until they find us and kill us!"

"But the Garden betrayed us too!" Selphie cried. "Do you know how many innocent sorceresses my bombs killed just because the Garden told me they're dangerous? Only to find out they're actually trying to find a cure for a sorceress that they might be keeping safe in here? Just how messed up is that?"

"Zell, we're going to leave this Garden either way. I don't know why they sent us to missions, but my best bet is that it is all a ruse to hold up their side of the bargain in the international affairs. And Seifer's going to suffer for something that makes no sense."

"Wait, wait, wait, does the Captain know about this?" Zell asked frantically.

"We decided to leave the Captain out." Fujin replied.

Zell groaned and began flicking his hands nervously on his side as he paced around the room.

"You're welcome to stay here, Zell." Irvine stood up and stared at him. "But we don't want to be a part of this anymore."

"Fine, fine." Zell said. "I'll help out. I'll go with you."

Selphie pointed her nunchaku at him. "Swear you'll die for us!"

"Whoah, hold on Selph!"

"This is serious, Zell." Quistis said. "We need to know you're not going to rat us out."

Zell felt offended. "Of course I'm not going to rat you out!"

"Calm down."

"You calm down!"
"Voice, Zell." Fujin warned.

"You calm down!" Zell repeated with a low hiss.

"Then swear, Zell. Swear you're one hundred percent with us on this."

"Of course I am. I swear." Zell replied. "Just, let me call my Ma, okay? Might want her out of Balamb before we do anything stupid."

"THIS IS STUPID."

"Keep your voice down, Zell." Fujin hissed as they walked quietly under the shadows of the dark to their post.

Inside the Garden, Quistis was assigned to escort Seifer and his cortege of four SeeD guards from his cell and into his caravan. He exited his cell with his hands cuffed and avoiding Quistis' eyes. She turned around and began their silent procession out of the chamber and to the dim walkway of the parking lot.

When they reached the truck, the guards unlocked the backdoor and opened it for Seifer, unaware of the situation the driver in front was in. The poor, bulky man was shaking with cold sweat, careful to make any sound and his eyes were fixed before him as instructed by an Irvine hidden on the floor with his legs propped on the seat that separated the driver from the passenger, and his shotgun pointed at him. Selphie sat at the passenger's side wearing a common porter's uniform, her hair bunned under her cap that shadowed her grinning face.

Seifer wordlessly took a step up to enter the truck when a hand was placed on his shoulder. He looked over.

"Wait." the SeeD said and peeked over the driver's direction. Quistis froze but exhaled it out impatiently.

"What now?" Quistis asked.

"It's not supposed to be this dark in here," he said. "Hey Raijin! Turn the lights on!"

Raijin, the driver, diverted his eyes to the side mirror. "O-okay!" He then gave Irvine a look who gestured him to follow the SeeD's order. Raijin reached for the switch behind him and flicked it open.

The four SeeDs behind gasped when the lights revealed Zell and Fujin sitting on the benches who lunged toward them. One of the SeeDs fired her gun instinctively but missed anyone in the midst of the ambush. At Quistis' cue when she whipped the SeeDs, Seifer elbowed one and kicked another. The alarm in the Garden blared once again.

"INSIDE!" Fujin yelled. "NOW!"

Seifer and Quistis jumped in as soon as the last of the escorts was knocked out. They locked the door and Zell tapped the middle window to the driver's side.

"LET'S GO!"

Irvine pulled himself up, gun still pointing at Raijin, and sat in between him and Selphie.

"Floor it!"
Raijin revved the engine and drove as fast as he could out of the parking lot.

After unlocking his cuffs, Quistis pulled out Seifer's gunblade below the bench and handed it to him.

"Couldn't pack all your stuff up."

Seifer took his blade and scanned it like it was the first time he saw it. He grinned as he slid his hand over the blade.

They felt the vehicle slowing down when SeeDs with guns gathered in front of the closing gate.

"Why are we slowing down?" Selphie yelped in panic.

"There are people, ya know?" Raijin replied in shaky voice.

Irvine pushed his gun closer at Raijin's temple. "Floor. It."

Raijin groaned and pushed for the gas. SeeDs fired at the truck, but the bullets ricocheted against the sturdy surface. Half of the human blockade ran to the side and avoided the truck as it drove past them. One of them prepared a fira-infused rocket and was about to fire it toward the truck when he was knocked unconscious by Angeal's sword.

Zell and Fujin watched from the small windows of the backdoor as their Captain fought the SeeDs who brought more rockets and grenades intended for the defectors. He swung his sword with vehemence and without relent, even when he was struck by magic, bullets, and blades by SeeDs who flocked on him. When a group ran after the truck, he dashed to them, albeit weakly, and stopped them from reaching his squad.

And then one SeeD held out his blade and pierced the Captain right through his chest.

"NO!" Fujin cried. "CAPTAIN!"

Zell froze at the sight of Angeal kneeling in defeat as he gazed at them from the distance. "No! You bastard!"

"What?!" Quistis sprinted to the window and peeked. "Oh no… No… Not Captain…"

Seifer didn't have to ask. He knew as he stared helplessly at his comrades.

Selphie knocked on the window. "What's going on in there?"

Seifer took a moment before he answered. "The, uhm…" he croaked. He cleared his throat. "The Captain is gone."

"WHAT?!"

"He fought the SeeDs who were after us and…"

"This is not funny, Seifer!" Selphie choked.

Seifer looked away just as Selphie peeked from the window and saw Fujin sobbing in her palms. Quistis was crying on Zell's shoulder, whose fist was pressed against his mouth.

"No! NO!"
"Selphie, Babe…" Irvine cooed.

"NO!" Selphie cried. She fell in Irvine’s arms and began sobbing against his chest.

With the mourning over an important man he never knew, Raijin just had to say something. He opened his mouth but closed them again when he couldn't find the right words. He kept driving the vehicle towards Fisherman's Horizon, their only exit out of Balamb. It would take them hours, even days to reach the Great Salt Lake, but he was surrounded by SeeDs. What could go wrong?

Thirty minutes into their trip, Zell finally broke their silence.

"What now?"

Seifer and Fujin looked up at Quistis.

"We…” Quistis stammered. She wasn't sure where this was going, but any place was better than Balamb Garden. "We might find Squall in Esthar."

She waited for any comments or protest, but none came. She continued. "Squall somewhat has authority in Esthar, And that's the best place he can run to. Same goes with us."

Quistis could only hope, with the extent of strife they got themselves into. And the price they had to pay for fighting, the loss they didn't deserve.

But her friends didn't need to know that. They would just have to keep moving.
He began packing what little things he had at first light. If Serah said one day was enough, then there was no point in staying in their apartment any longer. Rinoa could only hold her replenished powers for so long until they could find her coven. And given that she rejected his offer to be her knight, they had to leave immediately regardless of her recovery.

Squall exited his room and was greeted by the sight of Serah talking to Snow. The former took one look at him and gasped. She wore a worried look at Snow whose eyes widened at Squall's direction.

"Whoah!"

Squall glowered at him. "What?"

"Man, you're not going out in those."

Squall glanced down on himself in his uniform and brought his eyes back up at Snow.

"I have spare clothes. Will blend you right in with the crowd." Snow said treading towards his room. Serah gave Squall a nervous smile, muttered something while slightly bowing before returning to Rinoa's room. Snow appeared a few seconds later with a yellow striped t-shirt and brown trousers. He handed them to Squall.

"Hope left these before he went back to Palumpolum."

Squall's face contorted into a look of confusion.

"Ah, that's one of our friends. Came by to visit and fix some things. He stayed here, left some of his stuff, and went home."

Squall was more confused about the existence of Palumpolum which he had never heard of before, but he chose not to say anything. He grabbed the clothes, thanked Snow, and returned to his room.

In the other part of the house, Claire was helping Rinoa into her black tank top. Though Rinoa had insisted disparately she would be fine dressing herself, Claire asserted (through Serah's best effort to translate) the need to help her and save more of the energy Serah gave her. To help her avoid any suspecting eyes from the still lurking SeeDs, they chose a casual light blue and black motif for Rinoa's clothes.

After slipping into a cerulean vest, Serah handed Rinoa a pair of black boots. "Here. Try them."

Rinoa examined the boots and slowly took them. She slid a foot into one and though it felt a little loose, they felt comfortable.

She beamed at Serah. "Thank you."

Rinoa glanced behind her where Claire was fixing a bag of more clothes and potions for them. She turned her attention back at Serah. "Please tell Claire I said thank you. For everything."

Serah smiled back. "It's nothing. It's been really nice seeing another sorceress after a long time."

"What about your coven?"
Serah shook her head. "I never exactly came from one."

Rinoa's brows curled upwards. "Really?"

Serah shrugged. "Mom was a sorceress, and while our dad was still alive as her knight, she took

Serah shrugged. "Mom was a sorceress, and while our dad was still alive as her knight, she took
care of my magic. When our parents died though, Claire had to find me a coven where we stayed

"A dad, huh." Rinoa muttered. She was sure she used to have one, but she was far too young to

"A-and then," Rinoa started again to whisk her out of her own thoughts, specifically on a painful

Serah nodded. "Yes. Then I met Snow a few years later."

Rinoa smiled. "You're lucky to have him and Claire."

Serah smiled. "And you're lucky to have Squall."

Rinoa felt a strange warmth creeping up her cheeks and tried to hide it with a scowl.

"Face it. He's the best chance you have right now. Besides, he offered to be your knight."

"But I declined. It would be unfair."

"Still!" Serah said in gentle insistence. "That shows some dedication!"

Rinoa was about to retort when Claire declared something in her usual stoic tone behind her. Rinoa
turned around and was handed a bag. Whatever it was she said, Rinoa only nodded and took the

"I'm not too fluent yet, but I believe she said that she packed everything she thinks you'll need for

"Oh." Rinoa examined the bag. "I guess I should say thank you again."

Serah sighed and pulled Rinoa in for a hug. "Just take care out there, okay?"

Rinoa embraced her back. "We will. Thank you so much."

They pulled away and gave each other one last smile before heading out the door.

Squall was already in the living room, shoving his sheathed gunblade into a duffel bag. Just as his
eyes lifted to hers, Rinoa looked away.

"Here. Use this." Snow tossed a black bandana to Squall who quickly caught it. "Will give you

Squall peered at the bandana, reluctant to wear an accessory against his taste. But there was no
denying that the man was right, he needed more cover out there than he could admit. Besides, it

"Here. Use this." Snow tossed a black bandana to Squall who quickly caught it. "Will give you
more cover, especially for that scar." He motioned a hand on his own forehead.

Squall peered at the bandana, reluctant to wear an accessory against his taste. But there was no
denying that the man was right, he needed more cover out there than he could admit. Besides, it
was only temporary, just until they reach Timber and Esthar. He wrapped it around his head,
making sure to cover at least half of his dark scar.

Claire silently passed a black cap to Rinoa who took it with much curiosity.

"You have to wear that so people won't instantly notice you." Serah cleared up for her.

Rinoa nodded and slid the cap on her head. "So, we're going to Timber first, right?"

Serah nodded.

"Is it far?"

Serah twitched a side of her mouth downward. "Yeah."

"A chocobo will help." Snow added. "I already told Squall to rent a pair for you two as soon as you leave. It will help you get there faster."

"Oh." Rinoa grew a wide smile. "I've always wanted to ride one."

Still avoiding Rinoa's eyes, Squall adjusted the strap of his bag on his shoulder. "Is she ready?"

"More or less." Claire replied. She cocked her chin at Squall's direction. "Squall."

Squall turned around and faced Claire.

"You're taking care of Rinoa. Knight or not. Make sure she's safe." Claire's voice was stern with a hint of threat.

"Only if she'll let me." Squall said in an equally cold tone.

"First lesson of growing up, schoolboy. Responsibility is still a responsibility, whether or not it leads anywhere."

"Stop calling me a schoolboy."

"In due time, maybe. Just until you decide to take adulthood more seriously."

"Besides, what's so wrong about being a boy?" Snow said, attempting to relieve the friction in the air. "I mean, look at you, trying to act like an old man when you're like, what, 17?"

Squall glared at him in response. "Whatever."

Claire stretched an arm at Squall and faced Snow. "Case in point."

Snow chuckled and shook his head. "Okay. Just take care out there."

Squall nodded at the two as he held the door open to the streets of Winhill. "Thanks."

Rinoa gave their hosts one last nod before stepping out. Squall immediately followed behind.

The three residents of the apartment watched through the window as the sorceress and the SeeD walked further away while maintaining a couple of feet distance between them.

"Both of them look 17." Claire said.

Snow smirked. "No wonder things went more wildly than anticipated. Squall was a little too quick to decide he wanted to be a knight. And Rinoa rejected his offer as if she had a better option for
herself. Only kids do that."

Claire began to chuckle. Quiet as it was, it was one of the rarest moments she did. Serah glanced at her sister curiously, and so did Snow.

"Their journey together will not stop in Timber." Claire said. "I'd bet my life on it."

Squall searched for the nearest chocobo ranch they could find and rented two chocobos. Rinoa was assisted on one by the merchant while she refrained herself from thanking him, lest she gave herself away. She allowed Squall to do all the talking, hoping he expressed gratitude in her behalf. The merchant seemed nice after all.

Rinoa tried to find her balance as both of them sped out of the ranch and was falling too far behind. She caught Squall glaring at her over his shoulder as if scolding her to catch up. She scowled back and stuck a tongue out. Squall rolled his eyes and slowed his chocobo down for her.

If only he wasn't bound by guilt over what happened to her, if only there was no nagging last words from Claire for him to keep, if only they had been given more options, he wouldn't have the nuisance of travelling with a stubborn sorceress.

"You know, if only I have a choice and know how to travel to Timber by myself, I wouldn't be stuck here with you, meanie!" Rinoa miffed at him. She didn't care if he didn't understand, nor if it was rude that he didn't.

Squall could detect the annoyance in her irritating bicker. It wasn't like she wanted him with her in the first place, why was he helping her? They couldn't even understand each other. "If only you accepted my offer to be your knight, things would be easier." He muttered to himself through gritted teeth.

"If only you said sorry, maybe I would have forgiven you, made you knight, and things wouldn't be this hard for both of us." Rinoa berated from behind.

She, too, was finding the conversation pointless. "Maybe I better shut up before anyone finds out you're with a sorceress. Before you blame me for more things."

Thus, they finally travelled in silence, much to Squall's relief.

Hours stretched into a day and soon, night fell. Once they found a well-shaded spot by the river, Squall stepped down from his chocobo to set up camp. Though Rinoa was able to halt hers, she couldn't find the right side to unladle herself without falling hard on her back. Squall watched her for a moment while gathering wood and branches for their bonfire, anticipating a disaster she would bring upon herself. All she had to do, really, was ask for his help nicely. But if she insisted to do it on her own like what she had wanted for everything else, he would gladly oblige.

After looking back and forth on her sides for a safe exit to no avail, Rinoa threw her head back and groaned tiredly. Her eyes fell on Squall staring and mocking her silently with arms crossed against his chest and a thin line on his lips. He motioned his head towards the ground as if challenging her to do the impossible.

Rinoa had another idea, but she'd rather not do it save for really dire situations. Unless she would count this as one, then…
She placed her arms on her sides and her body began to hover from the chocobo with a float spell she cast on herself. She drifted closer to the ground until she landed safely on her feet.

Squall frowned and almost took a step toward her. In his eyes, she was much too brash and risque on her preferred solution. But when she lifted her face and gave him a smug look, he shook his head with disbelief and disapproval. They were on the run from SeeDs and making sure she didn't run out of her magic energy before they reach her coven, yet she'd rather waste it for some petty proud reason than asking him for help.

As if she cared what he thought.

Squall knelt back on the ground and finished fixing their makeshift camp. Rinoa turned back around to her chocobo and caressed it lightly around its neck which was reciprocated with a cheerful "kweh!"

She rummaged her bag for anything useful Claire might have packed for her and saw a folded blanket. She laid it on the ground by her chocobo, which stooped down and prepared to sleep. Squall watched from across the bonfire as Rinoa leaned against the soft feathers of the chocobo and closed her eyes.

He glanced at his own sleeping chocobo, tempted at the notion of laying on it for a more comfortable rest. He resisted however when he remembered he could use his duffel bag as a pillow instead.

The night passed without incident despite Squall's fear of monster ambush especially by cactuars. Dawn broke gently upon them and he woke at the thin smoke rising from the blackened logs. He threw a water spell on it to extinguish any more trace of fire, and the splashing sound woke Rinoa.

She stretched against the chocobo, eyes still squinting, and turned to Squall. He was waiting for her to wake up before fixing his own things and removing any trace of their stay in the camp. Rinoa sat up and did the same. She surveyed the area as she did and she was beginning to recognize a few of the trees that were local to Timber. They must be close.

They found themselves on road again an hour of silence later. Whatever it was between them was becoming more tense the longer they nurtured it with time, and Rinoa could feel it. She wanted to say something, even if it meant only to make a sound, but if there was anyone between them who should be banned from talking, it was her. Besides, what would she tell him?

Squall just knew Rinoa would not be able to keep herself from talking, and he was anticipating that moment when she would say something. But minutes became hours, and they were getting closer to Timber yet not a single utterance was heard from her. Between the two of them, he could talk without attracting any attention. But he was never the talkative type. Besides, she wouldn't understand what he had to say, would she? Even if he did have a lot to say.

When they reached Timber, it was Rinoa who went ahead and lead the way. If there was any good place to start tracing her way to the tunnel, it was the cabin. They reached the place just before noon, but the skies were dimmer under the glimmer of sunlight.

They both stared at the place where it all started. Memories came flooding back to them from the moment he woke up under her care and almost killed her, to the torama attack he spared her from, to the storm that tested their unusual camaraderie, and that indelible last morning before everything went to hell.

As cliched as it sounded, it was the end that started the beginning where things inadvertently fell
into pieces that stung too much to pick up.

Squall took a sideway glance at Rinoa whose eyes were still fixed at the shelter. Her breathing hitched at the reminiscence of her fingers brushing against Squall's as she stared into his eyes, and the privilege she was bestowed of being allowed to those delights. Now it all felt foolish and naive. She was foolish and naive to believe it would lead somewhere good.

What she were staring at was nothing more than a shabby shack where two people desperate for survival sought refuge as a last resort.

But what he saw was a place that held the most surprising things he experienced in his otherwise bleak life. A sorceress helping a SeeD, the giver of warmth in the middle of the storm, his healer—all those miracles he found in those few days spent in the cabin.

He observed her as she pulled the roped around her chocobo and lead it around the empty shelter without saying a word. Hadn't it meant anything to her at all?

Squall quickly brushed off those thoughts and followed her behind. At that moment, he was no longer the initiator of their current mission, but the self-designated watch for threats. He didn't even know why he was sticking around when she clearly knew where to go more than he did.

They continued tracing their tracks back to the forkroad where he had initially left her before running back to the cabin the day his squad came to extract him. Rinoa carried on until they reached a narrow tunnel covered by the trees. She gasped and carelessly slid herself in haste from her chocobo before running to the entrance of the tunnel.

It was blocked.

Wooden planks were neatly nailed into place along the circular entry concealed behind the shade of leaves from the trees.

Rinoa slammed her hands on the barricade. "No." She shook her head. "No, no, no…"

Squall didn't need a translator to understand the urgency in her voice. He slid down from his chocobo and sauntered to her side, examining the planks. He observed the light color, the crisp around its edges, and the lack of rust on its nails. No way did the planks' fresh appearance survive the storm. They were fixed in place just very recently.

He hoped Rinoa had the same observation so she would stop frantically looking for a way into the tunnel. Squall sighed and shook his head.

"Someone sealed this place shut not too long ago." Squall said. Rinoa turned at him over he shoulder. It took him a day to finally say something and it had no emotion in it. Not that she expected one in the first place, but she couldn't tell if he was trying to be helpful or not. So she turned back around.

"I'm supposed to go through this tunnel, and I don't even know where this leads to." she said. "Worse, I don't know if the others made it, and that's a big, huge problem." she was getting anxious and despairing. She spun to Squall. "Who would do this? Why would they do this?"

Squall shook his head at her frantic ramble. "Rinoa."

"What am I going to do now? I don't know where to go. There must be another way into this tunnel!"
"Rinoa." Squall called again, more sternly now.

Rinoa stopped, mouth agape, and her brows wrinkled at him.

"Fisherman's Horizon." he said. It was a name possibly translatable to sorceress language, and she must not have understood him as well as if he said "Balamb" or "Timber." She only stared at him.

Squall sighed. "Fisherman's Horizon." he repeated. "That's where we're going. We can rest there before we head for Esthar. I know people who can help us."

"Esthar?" Rinoa repeated.

Good, they were getting somewhere.

"Esthar." Squall nodded.

Rinoa shook her head. "No. I'm not going to Esthar. I have to find my coven!"

This was getting pointless. The whole thing was pointless.

Squall gently clamped his hand on her wrist and guided her away from the tunnel. He didn't want to do it, pulling her away like that when it was clearly where she wanted to be. But it was the end of the road for her, and they had to find another way around it.

Rinoa angrily pried her arm from his grasp and took a step back.

"I'm not going anywhere! My coven's in there and I need to get to them!"

That was it. He was done.

Squall thwarted a hand on his side and began walking away backwards. "Fine. If you want to stay here, be my guest." He was only supposed to bring her there anyway.

Rinoa's eyes trailed on him as he turned around, jumped on his chocobo, and galloped away from her. The image of another man leaving was much too familiar, unfortunately. It didn't distress her as much anymore. She turned back to the blocked tunnel, heaving.

His chocobo had been sprinting for a few minutes and he refused to look back no matter how tempting the thought was. He hauled the ropes to slow the chocobo and turned around only to see the thick trees of Timber. He never figured how far he had gone until he realized that Rinoa had completely disappeared in the scenery. It felt strange being away from her, and that nagging feeling of leaving her to her own devices had come back to nibble him slowly but painfully. Even though she wasn't his business anymore at this point, and she couldn't emphasize it more, he couldn't imagine making the same mistake of leaving her again. Alone. In Timber.

Besides, who was he to know what she really meant all this time? Maybe he just misunderstood her. That thought just gave him a whole new reason to doubt otherwise, until something else made it all clearer for him.

The roaring sounds of vehicles suddenly echoed from his east. Provided by the height of his chocobo, he was able to make out two jeeps with familiar colors dallying towards the direction of the tunnel.

SeeDs.
"The nerve of him to actually be my knight, and then leaving me here alone anyway." Rinoa mumbled under her breath when Squall was out of earshot. She was improvising a flint with two rocks to burn the planks down, unsure that she was on how effective it would be given how thick they seemed and felt. She could use fire magic and make it easier, but fire would cost her too much energy she terribly needed. "Who does he think he is? He's not someone worth gushing at to be my knight. I'm not that desperate."

Frustrated in her failure to produce even a spark, she grated the rocks too hard and broke one into half.

"Argh!" Rinoa threw the stones ruthlessly to the ground. It was spending too much energy that it needed and she was nowhere close to scraping a hole out of the planks.

"This is stupid! I was so stupid! I should have followed Vanille into this tunnel! I should not have saved that meanie if I only knew everything would end up—"

A hand suddenly clamped on her mouth and she was shoved down to the ground along with someone else. She tried to scream but could only manage muffled sounds underneath the tight grip as she wiggled against a strong arm restraining her. Her chocobo, which had been waiting under a tree the whole time, released a last "kweh!" before running away in panic.

"Mlmiguh!"

"Quiet."

Rinoa froze at the sound of Squall's voice behind her. Her eyes ambled around and realized they were surrounded by thick leaves. She was about to pull herself away from him until she heard unfamiliar voices beyond their hidden spot. She sealed her eyes shut and tried to alleviate her sharp, shallow breathing while trying to concentrate on the comfort and security Squall's close proximity was bringing her. She'd hate to admit it, but she was glad he was back.

Squall's eyes pierced through the gaps among the leaves in the bushes, waiting for any sign of the approaching SeeDs. He was prepared to draw his gunblade and fight if he had to, but it was best to stay stealthy.

"I saw something!"

"Where?"

"Over there!"

"It's just a chocobo."

"Oh."

"It seems lost."

"We've had hundreds of chocobo encounters on this mission, and now you're suddenly concerned about this one? It'll find its way back on its own!"

"Why are we here anyway? I bet they're not even in Timber. They can't be that stupid."

"I don't know."

"I think it's about time that we check the Southern area."
"Thank Hyne!"

The engines began to drive farther and faded into the distance. Squall waited another minute before releasing Rinoa from his grip and standing up. They didn't find the tunnel. Good.

His eyes fell on Rinoa who was gaping at him as if he had grown two more heads. When he offered a hand to her, she looked at it curiously before taking it and pulled herself up. She tore her gaze when she realized she had been staring at him a little weirdly and patted the dirt off her clothes.

Squall began walking away again, and though Rinoa wanted to follow him this time, she hesitated. What if she wasn't supposed to go with him? He jumped on his chocobo, lead it to her and reached for her hand. She tried to seek for any meaning in his gesture, but his eyes were hopelessly undecipherable. She took it anyway and was pulled to sit behind him. She wrapped her hands around his waist and they silently galloped away from the tunnel.

While breezing through the trees, Rinoa spotted something on the ground.

"Squall." she called meekly and pointed at her bag. It must've fallen from her chocobo when it escaped.

He halted his chocobo and waited until Rinoa retrieved her bag and hopped back. Then they went on their way out of Timber.

It was already dusk when they reached the Fisherman's Horizon, and they were tired. Squall spotted a hostel hidden well enough along an alley and decided they could stay there. He paid for a night for two, climbed up the stairs, and entered their room.

The accommodation was worn out with time, but clean enough to sleep in. It had two single beds, a chair, a desk, a bathroom, and thick curtains. Squall landed his bag on the floor while Rinoa placed hers on a desk and took her cap off. They had spent quite a while together in a cabin and slept close to each other by the fireplace, but this somehow felt different. The unexplainable disquiet was thick in the air, and words were yet to be exchanged between them since they arrived.

He headed out again to buy themselves a simple meal from a convenience store he caught a glimpse of earlier while Rinoa went to the bathroom to wash her face. Still wiping with a towel, her attention was stolen by a tall, narrow mirror hanging by the wall.

She stood in front of it and gazed at her reflection. Her dampened skin further emphasized the dark circles forming under her eyes, her lips a little chapped, and her hair was slightly tangled in different places. The last time she saw herself was back in Timber before the attack. They used to have a larger one adorned with a wooden frame of chiseled flowers. She was trying out a dress she prepared for the Red Moon festival, and she remembered looking more alive with flesh and color. Now, even under the yellow dim light of the room, she looked pale and thinner. At least she was alive and still herself.

Squall came back a few minutes later with a plastic bag in his hands and paused at Rinoa's melancholic sight. Her eyes travelled to his through the mirror and gave him a sad smile.

"Thank you." she said. "If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't be alive."

Squall was just glad to hear her voice back to its soothing spirits. He fished out one flavored bread and bottled water then handed them both to Rinoa who gingerly took them. He walked to his bed and sat, placing the bag on his side and sliding the bandana off his head.
She sat on the bed across his, facing him, her dinner still in her hands.

He lifted his eyes on hers without any trace of the mulishness he kept the whole day. "Sorry." he said. He didn't usually apologize around people because he seldom needed to. But there was some ease with knowing she couldn't understand him, even though he wanted her to. "Sorry for everything. And I hope..." He took a moment to search for the right words. "I hope you're okay."

She could only judge by his tone that he was back to the Squall she knew in Timber– serious but calm, reserved but vulnerable. And in his steely blue eyes that glinted even in the shadows, she could easily lose herself with the way he looked at her. There were emotions in them than he had never shown before. Not even when he fought, not even when he was angry. Not even during those rare moments when he smiled a little. She could be overthinking things, but she was certain that something stirred him.

Maybe that morning in the cabin did mean something. Somehow.

She hung her head on her lap as she brushed her thumb along the wrapper of her bread. Neither made any movement, and the silence between them helped ease whatever ripple of tension was left.

And then he remembered something.

Squall reached into his pocket and pulled out Julia's silver necklace. The shuffling sound brought her face up just as he was studying the jewelry in his palm. He reached for Rinoa and handed it to her.

Her eyes widened when she realized what was dangling in his grip and gasped. She took it with two hands as if it was some fragile stone, and examined it to make sure it really was what she thought it was.

"It was Julia's." Squall said.

Her mother's necklace.

"Mom." She choked and found herself breaking at the vivid memory of her mother wearing the necklace. Her eyes shut tightly and tears streamed down her cheeks. She had been through many things, faced countless trials that almost broke her spirit, but what she was scared of the most was forgetting that she once had a mother who took all her fears away. And then suddenly, she was there with her again. She wanted to tell her all the pain, dangers, the risks, the friends and family she found and lost from different places. She wanted to tell her she survived because if there was anything she could never forget about her, it was what she taught her about courage.

"Mom." she breathed again in her sobs.

Above all, she wanted to tell her that she wasn't abandoned this time. She wasn't alone. Squall freed her, went back for her, and she was safe, well, and surviving in a world where everyone was hellbent on killing her. Maybe Serah was right, she was lucky she had Squall. She was sure her mother would love to hear about him.
Dear oh dear oh dear, what happened to their Garden?

His Captain had been officially made defunct, his Commander gone rogue, and five of his most well-rounded SeeDs had gone away with the traitor, who also happened to be one the Garden's two gunblade masters.

Two renegade gunblade masters.

In retrospect, however, he still had hundreds more SeeDs at his disposal, but NORG was not happy. Though he cared little about the students, he wasn't happy about how things were going for them. It was a disaster, there was no denying it. Cid promised he had everything under control, and he certainly did for the longest time. Until someone ruined it for him. Someone who was apparently more influential.

Ten years of putting up with everything, ten years of pretending for the treaty, and he was nowhere close to getting her cure.

He pulled the widest shelf in his office from a side which revealed a dimly lit box that could only fit one man. He pulled the shelf back to shut, waited until he was properly identified by the installed sensory lasers, and began his descent.

Down and down he went until he reached a larger room that housed a broad glassed sphere held in place by thick steel beams. Inside was a sleeping feminine figure in advanced cryogenic stage.

Without removing his eyes off her, he strode closer. She was still as beautiful as he remembered.

Her long black hair formed a graceful web around her head and her slender fingers almost clamped together over her chest. The pristine glow of ice glimmered against her soft, pale skin, and her thick peach lips were still worth kissing, if only nothing was in their way. He stepped closer, drawn by the addicting details of her features until he could touch the glassed surface.

"Edea." He whispered, trapped in this intimate moment with his wife. "I failed. I failed to get your cure. The sorceress got away. She survived two tests, but she got away. If I could only talk to her, I could have made her understand how important she was to help a fellow sorceress find a cure. I wish you were there with me, talk some sense out of her, and made her see."

He pressed a palm where her feet had been. "But that Squall." He almost spat at the mention of his name. "That Loire brat."

Cid doused his fume with a clenched fist against the cold glass as Edea floated motionless in her frozen casket.

"Don't worry, my love." He whispered when he finally calmed down. "We'll get him. And I'll bring her back. We'll extract the cure out of her. I have more ideas how to do it. Until then, please wait a little longer." he said, convinced that it was more for her than him.
Rinoa woke up first. She sat up and took a good deep breath while rubbing her eyes with the heels of her palms. After blinking a few times, she stared at the window that glowed with early sunrise and her hand instinctively held the ring hooked through her mother's necklace she had worn around her neck. She smiled at the solace it brought her and the memory of the peaceful night when she received it. She turned to the other bed in the room and her eyes fell on Squall still sleeping on his back. He had changed his clothes into more comfortable ones after they had taken turns with the first showers they had in two days. Maybe he earned more rest, and a longer stay in the hostel wouldn't hurt. Well, not yet anyway.

She slid off her bed and took out the clothes she planned to wear for the day from her bag when she heard a group of people talking outside through the window. Rinoa peeked at the street and saw a group of seven uniformed SeeDs describing something with hand gestures to a man on his bicycle. She sprinted to Squall and shook him.

"Squall." She whispered. "Squall."

Squall's brows met and his eyes slightly opened.

Rinoa pointed at the window. "SeeD."

He quickly sat up, left his bed and looked through the window to confirm Rinoa's claim. True enough, there was a group of SeeDs gathering information from the wandering locals, showing a photo of himself and each person they asked shook their head. It was definitely an advantage on their part, yet he couldn't help but think how careless the SeeDs were as far as hunting for them was concerned. First of all, they should have rolled out separately to widen their parameters. Secondly, they should have utilized digital communications to spread out information more efficiently.

Morons.

Then again, they may have had better reasons to do those otherwise, and the more unexplainable a strategy could be was far more unnerving. Maybe they had spread out, and they clumped themselves into bigger groups. Maybe they had disseminated the message, but they were to do it more subtly. Primeval as their methods were, they still made it within the vicinity of where they really were. They were pretty close.

He turned his gaze back in the room and eyed Rinoa. "We have to move."

After a few minutes of hurried packing and dressing, they left the room, returned their keys to the receptionist, and left for the alley. Though it was an unusual route, Squall knew the place well enough to find the train station from any corners of the town.

He halted on his steps when they arrived to see three more SeeDs watching each person passing through with their tickets. So he was right. They were monitoring different corners of the place in groups.

Rinoa let out a small gasp and quietly hid behind his back, tugging her cap down as she did. Squall
was confident his bandana was doing its job, but he was sure they would be quick to suspect. Subtly, he looked over his shoulder at Rinoa and gestured his head forward, implying that she follow his lead.

They paced lightly through the bustle of the crowd, stopping by the counter to buy their tickets for Esthar. They climbed the stairs into the station and one of the SeeDs leaning against the arc of the entrance was trailing them with his eyes. Squall gave him a sideway glance but pretended he didn't notice. Rinoa tried not to look, but she knew he was watching them. When he took a few steps toward, Rinoa slid a hand into her pocket and flicked her fingers inside to his direction.

The SeeD paused, blink a few times and shook his head. He looked around the place, mystified and evidently lost.

Rinoa giggled faintly at the amusing effects of her little confuse getting-back-at-SeeDs spell while Squall snapped his head forward and fought a smile over what just happened. Poor SeeD, didn't know what hit him.

They successfully got inside the train without creating any further suspicions and promptly found their seat with a table. They both slid onto theirs, facing each other, still holding their breaths just until they were sure there were out of the SeeDs' sights. When the train began moving, they huffed in relief.

"Good morning, and thank you for using FHZ line. We will be heading for Esthar. Time of arrival is 12:16. Thank you for your patronage and enjoy the trip."

Through the PA announcement, Squall's eyes moved along the corridors and the opening and closing of doors in between cars, watching out for any SeeD who may have slipped through. His eyes stopped at Rinoa who was watching the blue eternity through the window with a content smile and her chin resting on her palm. She had always admired all things blue, but the ocean's color was among the best she had seen yet. It would be a long ride across the ocean before they could reach the salt flats of the Great Salt Lake, and her fondness of the waters was at least a good sign.

The only thing that stole her sights away however was the scrumptious aroma of toasted cinnamon bun she caught a whiff of a few moments later. Her senses lead her to a waitress serving the pastry from a tray to another table.

Wondering what Rinoa was ogling at, Squall followed her line of sight and turned around. He spun back at her.

"You're hungry." he said.

Rinoa met Squall's look and was about to ask him if they could get one when he held up a hand. She pressed her lips together when she remembered that she could not speak if she didn't want to attract any attention.

Squall raised an arm halfway for the waitress who promptly responded. He ordered for the food she served previously (it was a cinnamon swirl) for one. She turned to Rinoa with a smile.

"And what about you, Ma'am? What can I get for you?"

Rinoa only smiled at her, not wanting to break eye contact and be rude.

"She's mute." Squall finally said a little hurriedly. "I placed the order for her."
The waitress mouthed an "oh" and nodded. "Okay Sir, that would be one cinnamon swirl."

Squall nodded. "Yes, thank you."

When the waitress left, Rinoa was looking at him, almost laughing and shaking her head. She wondered what on earth did he tell the waitress to garner an unusual reaction?

Squall shook his head slowly and looked away. There was no need for her to worry about it.

A few minutes later, the waitress returned with a plate of steaming cinnamon swirl and placed it in front of Rinoa. She also gave each of them a glass of chilled water before asking them what else did they need. Squall thanked and dismissed her, all the while Rinoa was just staring at the edible roll of happiness.

She sliced a piece with her fork, took a bite and instantly felt the same fuzzy sensation whenever she ate Yshtola's raspberry-filled bread, or the cream cheese toast Celes always made in rainy mornings. After taking a few more delightful bites, she saw Squall's hand pushing a napkin to the side of her plate. She looked up at him pointing at the side of his lips. She felt hers and touched something sticky which she presumed to have come from the swirl. She took the napkin and wiped it off bashfully under his watchful, uninterested stare. She was too immersed in her cinnamon craving that she forgot she was in the company of Squall.

Rinoa bit her lip. Had she been too rude to him to forget to ask if he wanted some of the dessert himself? She noticed that he ordered only one. Was it all just hers to finish?

She pushed the plate to him and he wore that frown again, more surprised than angry. She nodded at him with a smile and handed him the unused spoon.

Squall instantly understood what she meant– she wanted to share the food with him. He shook his head.

It's all yours, he wanted to say.

Now she was beginning to frown, insistent that he take at least a bite so she wouldn't feel so selfish. If only she could speak, she would give him a long good bicker until he relents.

And he knew she would reach that tipping point if he kept on refusing her offer. So before she could burst into her rants, he looked around, feeling a little ridiculous for giving in, took the spoon, and sliced himself a portion. He was never a fan of anything cinnamon, but he ate it, keeping his eyes on her as if to tell her he had humored her to make her happy, and chewed.

She began to giggle softly while drinking from her glass. He too drank his water to flush down traces of the pastry. It wasn't too bad, but he found it too sweet. And as soon as he landed his glass on the table, he felt her hands lightly tugging his bandana down his forehead. He glanced at her leaning closely to him before retreating to observe him from her chair.

Last night, she admired his deep blue eyes. But at that moment, without his bangs on the way and with the bandana covering a part of his face, his eyes were given more emphasis. She smiled at the sight. She had always adored his eyes, and they were looking right back at her. They were not hers, but to be gazed at the way he did, even if the encounter would occur only once in her lifetime, was enough to cover all the beautiful magic she would witness thereafter.

And then they began frowning.

Squall leaned on his side and peeked along the aisle when he heard loud, tensed voices from nine
seats away.

"Wedge!"

"What!"

"Answer me!"

"Watt?"

"I said, what's my name!"

"Watt's your name."

"DON'T THROW THE QUESTION BACK AT ME!"

"I'M TRYING TO TELL YOU WATT IS YOUR NAME! I CALL YOU 'WATT'! THE 'WATT THE HELL IS GOING ON' WATT!"

"I'm not Watt! I'm BIGGS!"

"I'm Watt." The third SeeD said. "Watts, actually."

"AND YOU BETTER TELL ME WHAT AM I DOING HERE!"

"What the hell, Wedge?! We're here on a mission! A mission YOU approved!"

"What are you talking about?!"

"Oh for crying out loud."

"What's happening to him?"

"He's got a bad case of confuse spell."

Squall carefully creeped back to his seat.

"I'M NOT CONFUSED! I've been COMPROMISED!"

"Enough already with your conspiracy theories! You were not compromised! You know what, forget it! Stay here. Watts and I are going to look for the targets ourselves."

Rinoa froze on her seat when she saw Squall's perturbed reaction at the noisy commotion among the men behind her.

"Are you sure they're here?"

"That confuse spell is a sure sign they boarded this train. SeeDs are not freely prescribed with confuse spells by the Garden, and it's hard to draw those out just anywhere. Sorceresses, on the other hand, can conjure those spells naturally."

Their voices were getting closer to their table.

"What does this Squall look like?"

"Not sure, never met him. Was informed he's tall with a scar on his forehead. Too bad only Wedge can recognize him. Not sure if he can still remember him."
They passed by without noticing them and proceeded to the next car. Rinoa and Squall looked at each other and they knew they had to move. Quickly.

"Aaand we need this one." Selphie placed a thick lamp on top of the bundle of camping items Irvine was carrying. After they made their daring escape from the Garden, Raijin drove them to Fisherman's Horizon as their last stop to replenish supplies and refill the tank before reaching Esthar. Fujin chose to stay with Raijin at the gas station, while the rest went inside the shop. Selphie volunteered to pick out the supplies they need, and Quistis, knowing she had the tendency to pick out absolutely *everything* they need and more, allowed it.

Irvine carried them all to the counter and Zell followed behind with a load of his own. Quistis was waiting by the cashier, ready to pay. She gaped at the seemingly endless sloughing of items.

"Do we really need *all* of those?"

Selphie nodded firmly. "Yep! All of 'em."

Seifer was scanning through the drinks in the fridge, contemplating on getting a few beers for himself, and maybe the other boys too. He was examining one in his hand when he heard the familiar music of the station's "News Flash" segment. He looked up from the bottle at the television hanging from a corner of the ceiling and took a double take when he saw Squall's picture positioned beside the news anchor. Her voice was a little audible, but the supers was enough to see what she was reporting.

"**SeeD with a sorceress at large**"

Still carrying the bottle in his hand, he casually waltzed beside Quistis who was agitated at the growing amount of Gil they had to pay. Her decision to leave Selphie go crazy with shopping was beginning to become a really bad idea.

So it seemed only natural for Seifer to thump the bottle of beer, rather ungracefully, among the items. He earned a glare from Quistis.

"Seriously Seifer? *A beer*? Nuh uh, no way we need that. Take it back."

Seifer ignored her remarks and cocked his head backwards at the television nonchalantly.

When Quistis shifted to the screen, her eyes widened and she took a very deep breath.

It showed a footage of Squall's one-man battle in Balamb Garden. It then cut to a map with animated broken lines tracing a path from Balamb, to Timber, then to Fisherman's Horizon. The superscript at the bottom of the page read "**Balamb Garden's Commander at large in Fisherman's Horizon with a sorceress**".

"That's 10,896 Gil." the cashier said.

Quistis whirled back around and forced a smile. "Yes! Yes, of course."

Thank goodness the cashier only ever cared about paying up. She handed her the exact amount, called for the others, and sprinted towards the door.

"Thank you!" She yelled after the cashier. Irvine gave her a last, grinning salute before following the group outside.
Squall placed a handful of Gil on their table to cover for the food they ordered. He sat still, looking at Rinoa. After a short moment, she drew a long, deep breath and nodded to let him know she was ready.

Slowly and quietly, they both rose from their seats and headed to the door for the next car where the SeeD called Wedge was apparently left by. He didn't want to sneak into his line of sight, but there were two more SeeDs at the other side. One was more manageable by chance. Hopefully.

They were approaching closer to the danger area and Squall was trying to fight the drumming in his chest while acting like nothing was wrong. Rinoa was walking closely behind him, looking down the floor to conceal her face beneath her cap.

"Biggs? Watts?"

Squall paused for a split second and immediately tried to dismiss him. He marched forward.

"Where are those little shits?"

He stepped back when Wedge shot up from his chair, first looking at Squall, then looking past behind him down the aisle. He then slowly sat back down, muttering about being left behind under his breath.

Squall's frown deepened and threaded forward. They were getting close to the next car.

"Hey." He heard Wedge say behind him, which he chose to ignore. "Hey, tall guy!"

Rinoa looked over her shoulder and realized that the man they had been trying to avoid was peeking out of his seat and calling for Squall. She tugged the edge of his jacket until Squall turned around.

Wedge was looking at him and began smiling. "Heeey! I know you! How have you been?"

Squall blinked a few times. "Hey, Wedge."

"Hey, you still remember me, eh?" Wedge stood up and approached him, extending a hand. Squall casually shook it. "So what brings a fellow SeeD here in Fisherman's Horizon? And not in his uniform?"

"Vacation." Squall replied.

"Wow, they approve vacation leaves that easily in your Garden?"

Squall shrugged. "If you call that easy."

Wedge nodded with a smirk. "Nice. And, uh..." He angled his head to his side. "Who's the lucky girl?"

Rinoa glanced nervously between the two. Squall thought for a moment and tried to maintain a straight face. "My girlfriend."

Wedge chuckled. "About time, man!"

Squall forced a chuckle and adjusted the dufflebag against his shoulder.

"Well, I apparently have a mission, which I don't actually remember, but I do recall being dragged
"Yeah, thanks. Nice to see you too." Squall nodded and excused themselves to pass through. He noticed that he never referred to him by name. He assumed he probably forgot it but was too shy to ask. They entered the next car.

Just then, Biggs and Watts returned to their car and noticed Wedge standing. Was he having hallucinations again? It was beginning to feel like taking care of a lost old man in advanced stages of senility, only he wasn't old and didn't deserve any care or respect.

"Wedge?" Biggs asked when they reached their table. "What the hell are you doing this time?"

Wedge turned around, seemingly in good spirits. He then scowled at the sight of the two. "You LEFT me here!"

"We told you we were looking for dangerous people as our mission! Argh!" Biggs groaned.

"I think we should all sit first." Watts suggested.

Biggs lifted his hands on either side of his head. "Fine. Let's take a sit. On this very comfortable chair and regroup. See, Wedge? I'm doing all the thinking! This better appear on my appraisal report."

Wedge hitched a thumb behind him. "I'd give that guy a better report. He was nice to me."

"What guy?"

"That guy I saw from Balamb. That tall, pretty guy. I know him by face, just can't remember his name."

Biggs hiked his shoulders and shook his head. "Well? Does he have a scar?"

"Yeah!" Wedge replied gleefully. "Don't remember him having one. You can see it peeking through his black bandana though."

"Does he come with a sorceress?"

"Don't you call his girlfriend a sorceress!"

"What the hell, Wedge! That's our target!"

"What target?"

Squall and Rinoa trudged forward until they were closer to the next car, carefully avoiding patrons and servers. He would glance every now and then to check Rinoa who was catching up with him silently.

"HEY YOU!"

Squall kept his pace despite the sound of Biggs' voice at the other end of the car.

"SQUALL LEONHART."

Squall paused.
And then they began running.

He ignored the panicked screams and cries of the passengers as they ran for the next car. Watts threw spells at the two while Biggs started shooting his guns, both missing them. Squall pulled Rinoa by the wrist and lead her to his front, unsheathed his gunblade and pulled the trigger at the two, releasing a blizzard spell. It burst at Watts' feet, trapping his legs in frozen pillars. He began melting them with a fire spell.

"Targets spotted!" Watts shouted on his transmitter. "We're aboard the FHZ Line! Rendezvous in Salt Lake Station in ten minutes!"

Biggs dashed forward and aimed at the two while Squall deflected every bullet with his blade. Biggs took a sidestep and barely missed a bullet whiz past him, brought his guns back up, and kept shooting. Squall cast an aero spell at him, flinging Biggs against the sturdy window of the train. He staggered up and launched himself at Squall who blocked him with a blade, sparring for their lives with their weapons.

As Squall dealt with the other SeeD, Rinoa opened door after door to reach the next car. Before she could open another one, Biggs threw a firaga spell just as Squall cast a Bio. The two spells met in between and the combination caused an explosion, blowing off a large hole on the train.

Rinoa held on to the door when the wind started sucking out all the contents of the car and grabbed for Squall's hand. She pulled him closer to the door until he could open it. They immediately threw themselves into the car as soon as he did.

They propped themselves up on their elbows and looked around, wondering why it was darker and quieter than the previous ones. It was when they saw boxes, luggages, and cars did they realize they were in the cargo carriage.

Squall stood and helped Rinoa up, staring at a large, black motorcycle customized with sword holders and embellished with wolves molded with metal. They looked at each other as if they had the same idea.

They jumped into the motorcycle, revved the engine, sped out of the car, and throttled out of the hole, removing their bandana and cap as they did. They bounced upon their landing against the white soil of the Great Salt Lake and Squall accelerated with the train.

A loud BANG echoed from the distance followed by a bullet streaking and buzzing to their direction. Rinoa shrieked and tightened her grip around Squall's waist. He held out his gunblade and shielded the bullets from Rinoa when a SeeD bolted towards them out of nowhere. Squall drifted the motorcycle to the opposite direction and parried the SeeD's spear, pushing her away. Rinoa held out a hand and was about to cast a demi spell, but Squall grabbed it and shook his head at her.

Another SeeD dashed from his other side and Squall sparred with his kukris while maintaining their balance. Squall roared when another came brandishing a sword and clanged his blade against his.

With his gunblade against two weapons, he channeled a thundara through its metal and it successfully repelled both of the SeeDs.

He continued to accelerate towards Esthar when a jeep appeared on their side, carrying four more SeeDs. One of them drew out a gun and was about to aim at them when a bullet from behind flew it out. Squall frowned, looked over his shoulder and saw a SeeD truck behind him.
Propping out of the passenger's side window was Irvine holding his rifle out, and on the roof was Zell and Selphie crouching. When the truck drove close enough, Zell and Selphie dashed forward to make their leap into the jeep and dealt with the SeeDs by squeezing a throat with a nunchaku, and swift punches to another one's face.

Knowing they needed help from the obviously skilled and well-equipped opponents, Squall was about to hurl another blizzard spell when Fujin jumped right in, knocked the driver out with a swift kick, and took his place. She rammed the vehicle to a slightly inclined rock to topple it over and throw its occupants out. And just before it met the ground, Selphie and Zell made their quick and graceful dashing exits, while Fujin threw her chakram at the one last SeeD who attempted to follow them, knocking him out as she cast an aero on herself, and somersaulted safely back to the ground. Her weapon recoiled back to her arm just as Raijin's truck passed by. They grabbed on the back door and pulled themselves inside.

Squall zoomed by, slowing his pace so he was moving right beside them. His glowering eyes were up on Irvine who tipped his hat at him and Rinoa with a grin. The latter was staring open-mouthed at the familiar SeeDs who captured her, tortured her, and were now trying to help her.

They skidded to a stop just as the sight of the jeep had faded into the distance. Squall stretched a leg to his side to steady the motorcycle as he observed their work. Smoke coming out of the hole was trailing out of the train, and the dust suspended around the totalled jeep camouflaged the otherwise white, plain view. With the way things were with the Garden, it was tame compared to what could possibly follow.

Squall kicked the brake lever down his motorcycle.

Seifer exited the truck and trudged slowly to Squall, smirking. "Surprised to see you're still alive."

Squall glared at him reaching a protective arm at Rinoa.

"SeeD." Rinoa said uneasily, clutching his jacket and shrinking behind him.

"We're no longer SeeDs." Quistis replied after following Seifer behind.

Squall frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Got lots to explain." Seifer said, taking in a large breath. "What about we make camp first? Then we'll tell you everything."

Dusk was almost upon them when they found a good spot in a hidden area among the boulders and decided that it was a good place to set up camp. Their makeshift tent made out of a wide blanket and some steel bars could barely fit a party of nine and they all decided to use the back of the truck as an extension. They laid out more blankets, assembled the chairs, and used a fire spell to light a bonfire.

Squall was spearing one of the steel bars steadily on the ground along with the rest of the boys and stepped back to examine the tent. He assumed that they would have to stay inside while the girls rest inside the more comfortable truck. They then took their spots on the blanket.

Selphie suddenly jumped on his side. "Squall!"

Squall looked up from his work.

"What's her name?"
He knew who she was referring to. "Rinoa."

Said sorceress was helping out distribute the paper plates handed to her by Quistis and made sure there was food in each. She was about to retrieve more when she suddenly felt slender arms embracing her from behind.

"Rinoa!"

She gasped and jumped, turning to Squall with a questioning look.

"That's Selphie." he said.

Rinoa tilted her head.


He stopped at Raijin who was eagerly waiting for his turn.

"OH! Sorry, we just met, ya know?" He pointed a thumb at himself. "Raijin."

Rinoa smiled and nodded while waving on her sides with the hug from Selphie. "Selphie." she repeated.

"Rinoa! I'm so sorry!"

"Huh?"

"Rinoa! I'm so so so sorry!"

Rinoa turned around and was met by Selphie's teary eyes. "I'M SORRY!"

"Hey, I remember you!" Rinoa gave her an amicable smile. "You're that friendly girl!"

Selphie began wailing.

"Somebody make her stop before the SeeDs hear us, ya know?" Raijin said.

"Oh no." Rinoa cupped Selphie's face in her hands. "Please stop crying. There's nothing to cry about, really."

Selphie's cried calmed to sobs and sniffles. "You're voice is so beautiful!"

"So," Squall began after a moment of silence, save for Selphie's cries and Rinoa's cooing. "Will you tell me now what happened?"

"For starters, the Gardens are after you." Zell said.

"No shit."

"Funny. That's exactly what I said when Quistis told me." Seifer remarked.

"Secondly," Zell resumed. "Seifer was supposed to be transferred to D-District Prison, so we busted him out."

Squall looked at Seifer. He was not surprised after the risky stunt he did to help him escape, but did not expect that heavy of a sentence for him. "Really?"
Seifer chuckled. "There's nowhere else that can handle me, I guess."

"Quistis," Zell continued. "Also made some discoveries."

"On what?"

"Sorceresses." Quistis replied and sat on one of the chairs. "And the real nature of the Garden's project on them. On her." She motioned her head at Rinoa's direction. Squall's eye twitched at the memory of her strapped in that Hyne forsaken chair.

"Did you know Cid had a wife?" Irvine asked.

Squall shook his head. "No."

"Well, her name is Edea, and she seems to be a sorceress based on the reports I found in Cid's office." Quistis said. "She began showing her powers after the great sorceress war, and I believe there is a connection between Ultimcia's disappearance in Balamb, and Edea's transformation into a sorceress.

"I also saw files of many sorceresses being experimented on, just like what they did to…" she didn't catch her name.

"Rinoa." Squall and Seifer said in unison.

"Right. Rinoa." Quistis continued. "Only that they weren't so lucky."

Seifer shook his head. "What's his reason behind this?"

"As far as context clues are concerned, He may be looking for a cure."

"For what?"

"To rid Edea of the sorceress powers."

"That's not possible" Squall said. "If she's a sorceress, there's nothing he can do to change it."

"But what if Edea was not a sorceress to begin with?" Quistis prodded. "The reports said she started displaying behavior similar to a sorceress. An aggressive one at that, too."

"That's the reason why the Headmaster is looking for a cure." Fujin added.

Squall jerked his head up slightly at Fujin. "You can talk?"

Seifer rubbed his chin. "But, if that's the case, who gave him an idea that there's a cure?"

"Someone with experience with sorceresses, I bet." Quistis said.

"Like who?"

"Dr. Odine." Squall replied as he watched the campfire.

Quistis stared at him for a moment. "Squall, where exactly are you planning to go?"

"Esthar."

Irvine turned to Quistis. "You're right."
"I want to see Dr. Odine." Squall said. "He might be able to give us some answers."

"And what answers are you exactly looking for?" Quistis pressed.

"Rinoa's powers. She's running out the longer she's away from the coven. Maybe Dr. Odine knows how she could get some just until she reaches her coven."

"What happens if she runs out of powers?" Fujin asked.

"Just like what happens if we starve for far too long, or we push ourselves too hard. She grows weak and she dies."

Seifer held a braised beef impaled through a stick over the fire. "How are you sure she will survive if she's in a coven?"

"I've met a sorceress in Winhill."

"Winhill? Are there covens in Winhill?"

"No."

"Okay, so how is she surviving then?" Irvine asked.

"She has a knight."

"A knight?"

Squall nodded. "When someone, presumably a male from the sound of it, swears to be a knight to a sorceress, and she accepts, she will never run out of powers even when she's not with her coven."

"How did you find out? Can you understand sorceress language now?"

"Not, but her knight can. Knights can understand and speak to sorceresses. He told me."

"So..." Irvine cocked his head at Rinoa. She was gently patting Selphie's head who refused to let her go even while they were eating. "No plans of becoming her knight?"

"I offered." Squall bounced his arms against his knees and dropped his gaze on the ground. "She declined."

Irvine whistled. "Wow. Squall Leonhart, rejected by a girl."

"Rub it in, Irvine." Zell said sarcastically.

"Is the position still open?" Seifer chimed in, wearing a priggish grin. "Maybe I can try being her knight."

Squall flicked a coarse pebble under his knees onto him, hitting his temple.

"AH!" Seifer slammed a palm on the pricking area and glared at Squall.

He shrugged. "Oops."

"How did the train ride go? Heard FHZ has the most romantic accommodations." Irvine said, wiggling his eyebrows.

"It was the only train bound for Esthar." Squall replied candidly.
"You were already on FHZ! Didn't you at least try their food?" Zell asked a little too euphorically.

"She tried the cinnamon swirl." Squall said. "She seemed to enjoy it."

Selphie gasped. "Squall, you had your first date ever AND YOU DIDN'T EVEN KNOW IT!" she cheered, shaking Rinoa's arm excitedly around hers. Rinoa gave her a confused smile.

He wasn't sure he could consider that a date, but his cheeks began to burn. He changed the subject. "And what about you? How did you get here?"

"I helped, ya know?" Raijin said.

"HAPPY." Fujin said. She faced Squall. "He's from Galbadia Garden and was assigned to transfer Seifer to D-District Prison."

"You guys seem cool, ya know? With deep-hearted cause that is real, ya know? I just thought I want to stick around you guys and help out, ya know? See this mission through." Raijin said.

"There's… also another thing you should know." Quistis mumbled, a little dismal with her tone.

Squall peered at her, sensing the need to hear what she had to say.

"When we fled the Garden with Seifer, SeeDs attacked us, tried to block us from getting out." she said, trying not to choke at the memory. "Then the Captain, he, well, he bought us more time and…" she trailed off.

Squall was hesitant to ask, but he had to know. "… did he…?"

"Make it?"

Everyone stood silent. Even through their wordless reply, Squall knew the answer. He turned back to the bonfire.

"Oh…"

Rinoa glanced around the circle, wondering why they abruptly fell silent. When their conversation died down, an air of reticent bereaving took its place. Even Selphie's arm dropped on hers, suddenly losing all her vigor. Squall had stopped talking as well, even when he seemed to have driven most of their discussion all night. He was just staring blankly at the fire.

She pulled herself away from Selphie, took a plateful of small sausages they prepared, and knelt in between Seifer and Squall to join their circle. She wore a soft smile, handing over the plate to whoever was interested. Squall was the first to take one, then Zell who wore a grateful but forced smile. Seifer was next, taking one a little too roughly, and everyone else followed. Selphie returned to her side and held her in an embrace again, possibly seeking comfort she wasn't sure she could provide. Then she also took a sausage.

They were like a coven of their own, sticking together and refusing to part, joining each other in celebration, mourning, and in battles. And maybe it wouldn't hurt to make herself a part of their coven—a family. At least for now.

Squall took off his jacket and draped it around her shoulders. She turned to look, surprised at his gesture. It really was a little chilly, but she didn't mind. Nevertheless, she appreciated it.

She appreciated him.
She returned a smile and nodded slightly as her thanks. His lips twitched on a side and he nodded back.
"Manageable" was an overstatement to describe the night they spent at the camp.

The boys cramped themselves together inside the makeshift tent despite Zell's objections. He suggested that "someone" should use one of the sleeping bags they purchased as their failsafe should situations like this arise, but "someone" never came forward. Each of them refused to deal with the roaming monsters out in the freezing night of the salt lake alone with limited movements inside a tiny and restraining sleeping bag.

Squall found himself waking every few hours with this face almost pressed against the soft wall of the tent and feeling Irvine's breath on the nape of his neck while waiting for Raijin's atrocious snore to die down. What great lengths they must sacrifice to make sure the girls slept comfortably and soundly in the back of the truck. He was almost, almost tempted to take the sleeping bag and risk it, but he wasn't an idiot.

On the other hand, he did manage to get a few hours of sleep, at least.

When the sun came the next day, Quistis was the first to point out what he looked like as a result.

"You okay, Squall?" Quistis asked a little worriedly. "Still thinking about the Captain?"

He didn't know if she was trying to kid him or was genuinely concerned, but he was just too tired to shoot her a glare. Squall pushed his hair back and laxly shook his head. "Camp just didn't really cut it for me last night."

Quistis only shrugged as she folded the chairs with Zell's help. Seifer yawned and raised an arm as he walked by, smelled his pits and recoiled with a scowl.

"I really need to get new clothes. Showers will never take this smell off."

As a response to his grumble, Quistis tossed a dufflebag his way. "You have a few here."

Seifer caught it and frowned at the familiar bag. It was his favorite among his bags, green and sturdy to outlast any mission. He unzipped it and saw his things inside.

"I thought you said you weren't able to pack all my stuff?" He said with incredulity, looking up at Quistis.

"When I said all, doesn't mean I didn't pack some of them."

Seifer blinked a few times. "You had my stuff this whole time, and you're giving them to me just now?"

"You never asked."

While Fujin was piling bulkier supplied on Raijin's arms, Selphie and Irvine were making sure no traces of their stay were left in the area. Rinoa was picking up some of the things still strewn about, seeing it as the only way she could help them.

Though she was beginning to feel a little strange. Her movements were slowing, and her head was beginning to feel lighter. Sleep seemed so tempting, but she just woke up from an otherwise good night's rest.
Unless…

Selphie broke from her post when she observed Rinoa's constant need to catch her breath. "Rinoa?"

From a few feet away, Squall's head snapped at Rinoa's name. The latter looked up and pushed a smile.

Selphie rushed to her side and placed an arm around her. "Are you okay?"

She looked worried. In as much as Rinoa couldn't understand what Selphie was asking, she wanted to know what was worrying her so much. What did she want to know? Was she looking for something? Did she do something wrong? Did she lose something important in the camp?

"I wish I could help you." was all she could say. "I don't know what you want, but maybe you can point it out?"

"Don't push yourself too hard, Rinoa."

Rinoa shook her head. "Why do you look so worried? What's wrong?"

"She doesn't understand you." Zell pointed out.

Selphie rolled her eyes. "I know, dummy. But something's wrong with Rinoa. She looks paler than I remember."

That prompted Squall to join them. He examined Rinoa who looked back at him with confusion and anxiety in her fatigued eyes.

"Why are you guys looking at me like that?" Rinoa asked in nervous laughter.

"Well?" Selphie asked after seconds of looking expectantly at Squall.

He glanced back at her. "We need to hurry."

As far as seat plans are concerned, the group decided that it was better if Seifer, who designated himself as their "first line of defense", sat by Raijin. Quistis volunteered to join them, but he told her to "stay back." She didn't sit well with it, but she wagered he would be an extremely impatient "first line of defense."

"Where is Esthar?" Seifer groused from the passenger's seat. Beyond them was a sea of white salt flats and even after an hour of travel, there was still no sign of Esthar or any civilization. "Can't see a frigging thing."

"It's an invisible place, ya know?" Raijin said. Quistis was grinning and inwardly congratulating herself for correctly guessing Seifer's complaint.

"It's just beyond that L-shaped border." Squall pointed from the back window at the small view of gathered rocks further into the plain. "Fifty meters from that landmark is the gate."

"Cure!" Selphie whooped and extended her arms that surprised Rinoa. She felt the sensation of the healing magic, but she wasn't sure it did anything. She wasn't injured or afflicted with any harmful status effects for her to need way it came out of the blue wasn't usual for a personality like Selphie's, but still strange.

"What are you doing?" Zell asked with curiosity.
"Yeah, Babe." Irvine chimed in. "What are you doing?"

"Making her better!"

"USELESS." Fujin declared.

"You're wasting your cure on her." Quistis said. "She's not getting better that way."

Selphie sighed in defeat. "I know. But I gotta try somehow!"

Amidst the discourse, Rinoa was unsure how to respond. "Uhm, thank you Selphie. I guess."

Selphie's almost teary eyes widened. "She said my name!"

"Hey guys," Raijin called, his voice a little shaky. "Are those supposed to be there?"

Seifer leaned forward and peered at the black jeeps moving around a few kilometers beyond them. "What the hell?" he grumbled under his breath.

Squall squinted his eyes through the windshield. "Raijin, slow down."

"What are those?"

Quistis scooted closer to get a better view. Her eyes narrowed. "Trabia Garden."

"Trabia?" Selphie asked.

Loud pounding noise began drumming against their truck. Everyone ducked down from the windows and wrapped their hands protectively around their heads and necks.

Fujin peeked through the cracked backdoor window and saw four black jeeps closing in. And that didn't count the few more possibly running beside their vehicle. She flinched when the Trabia SeeDs began barraging them again with bullets.

"AMBUSH!" she cried.

"Selphie, can you manage a protect spell on each of us?" Squall directed sternly.

Selphie gave him a curt nod. "Yessir!"

"Cast it first on Irvine. Irvine, try to target the gunners, then the drivers. We need to take out their offense in stealth."

Still hiding under the window, Irvine propped up his rifle and aimed at the closest jeep. "On it."

"Fujin, take the other side and blow them as far away from us as you can with Aero."

"AFFIRMATIVE." Fujin replied.

"Raijin, swerve to your left. There should be a large boulder there in the middle of smaller ones. Head over there."

"I'll try, ya know?" Raijin shouted back.

Though the motion was intermittent, Irvine was able to take down gunners from three jeeps. There were seven more to go.
Fujin threw two succeeding aero spells that overthrew four jeeps on her side. However, the other four was able to avoid the same fate by drifting their wheels away from the blow of the spell. After regaining their balance on track, they zoomed forward.

Just then, the shooting abruptly stopped.

Irvine lifted his head from his rifle and gaped at the jeeps. Fujin narrowed her eyes as they moved forward where Esthar should be without attacking them.

"SQUALL." She called for further instructions.

Squall too was baffled at the sudden silence around them, save for the heavy revving of the engine that sounded like it was about to explode. His eyes wandered around, waiting for more surprises.

Rinoa released her head and lifted her gaze to the window. She sat up and peered outside.

"Where are they?" she asked, fearing for what the sudden silence could mean.

Seifer banged the divider of their truck. "Leonhart! What are we supposed to do with those?"

Squall stood, still hunching against the roof, and saw about twenty more jeeps just beyond the boulders. The others that pursued them joined the assembly.

He groaned. "Just keep heading to the rocks. They don't know where Esthar is yet. We need to regroup and figure out how to get through them."

"How about we take a detour?"

"They're all eyes on us. If we go around them, they'll discover the way in to Esthar. We cannot allow that to happen."

"Shit."

"Do you seriously think we can take them on?" Zell asked, unable to mask the split squeak in his voice.

"We need to take them on."

"Deal with it, chickenwuss." Seifer retorted without humor.

When Raijin skidded the truck behind the boulders where Squall instructed him to, he was told to stay inside, or anywhere close to the vehicle. He would be their getaway if things got too messy.

"Stay safe." Fujin bidded him.

They left the truck and concealed themselves behind the boulders. Rinoa wanted to ask Squall where they were and where Esthar was, but he seemed too engrossed devising a strategy on the hostile jeeps that she thought against distracting him. Besides, she seemed to have worried him enough at the camp for some reason. He might get mad if she bothered him any more.

She strode next to Selphie who promptly turned to her.

"Are we close to Esthar?"

Selphie tilted her head. "Esthar?"
Rinoa nodded. She got used to relying on context clues to communicate, regardless if they understood each other or not. "Yes. We're supposed to go there, right?"

Selphie pointed forward. "Esthar's that way."

Rinoa's eyes followed her hand.

"What about it?"

Rinoa was still gazing at the sky where the place was supposed to be. "Esthar…"

Irvine striddled to Selphie's side glancing between her and Rinoa. "What does she need?"

Selphie shrugged. "I don't know. She was asking something about Esthar."

After surveying the area as far as they could see, Quistis stood by Squall's back. "What's your plan now?"

Squall's eyes were searching the ground for an answers. He lifted them at the jeeps in the distance.

They were not attacking from their positions as they sat idly in the distance, taunting them silently to make their move. They could march forward, start the battle and be done with it, but they would all be dead before they could take their tenth step. If they turn back, they would still know where to find them, and the chase would never end until they were all completely and properly disposed of.

Squall knew he had to fight, one way or another. Dying in battle was better than running away.

"I'll go after them."

"Of course you won't."

Squall unsheathed his gunblade. "Watch me."

"Hey, hey!" Seifer blocked Squall with his arm when Squall was one step away from revealing himself out of the boulders. Squall shot him a glare while Rinoa gasped and clamped her palms over her mouth when she realized what he was about to do. "We don't plan to commit treason against Esthar this way, Loire."

"Don't call me that." Squall hissed through gritted teeth.

"Oh, I'm sorry." Seifer mocked a curtsy. "Puberty boy."

"Both of you stop that!" Quistis scolded and pushed Squall back when he was about to charge at him. Seifer held his chin up while glaring down at the other.

"Irvine, don't!"

**BANG!**

They all ducked and swiveled around at the explosive clap. Irvine was facing the distance before them while reloading his rifle apathetically and looked at the two stunned gunblade wielders. "You two done yet?"

Then the barrage of bullets came.
They dropped on the ground and laid still behind the rocks.

"IDIOT!" Fujin yelled at Irvine.

"Squall was going to attack them by himself!" Irvine screamed back through the gunfire. "I didn't hear you call HIM an idiot!"

"They're closing in!" Zell yelped when the shots became louder and the ground began to shake.

"Shield behind the rock!" Squall barked.

Rinoa looked around from under her arms. Everyone bolted and leaned their backs against the rock, readying their weapons in hand. Seifer threw a ball of fira spell blindly toward the unseen enemies, while Irvine held up his gun at the side of the rock and fired shots aimlessly. Zell tossed a bio spell over his head while Fujin threw her chakram that reeled back to her, both hoping their attacks hit someone. Quistis was the bravest to take a peek but immediately pulled back when a thunder-infused bullet almost hit her. Raijin was about to charge forward with his thick staff, but Selphie held him back and questioned his sanity.

Squall left his post and quickly knelt beside her, shielding his head with his arm while shooting ice spells to the enemy's direction without looking.

"Stay here!" Squall shouted.

Rinoa frowned and shook her head. "What?"

"Stay!" Squall vigorously patted the ground where she was. "Stay!"

She watched his gestures and tried to read through his actions.

He paused, his hand pressed firmly on the ground. "Stay!"

"S-ssst…” Rinoa tried to mimic the word, but her hiss was getting in the way. "Sstay?"

Squall pulled his head back and he thought his heart stop for a second. Could he finally understand her? Could she understand him? "Am… Am I your-"

"Are you asking me to wait here?" Rinoa asked in disbelief. How could he ask her to sit still in a such dangerous situation? Did he mean to leave her? "I can't wait here! Those are SeeDs out there! I'm going to die!"

Squall's eyes softened and veer away when he realized she was still speaking in her language he still couldn't understand. He frowned back at her. "Stay here."

Rinoa stared at him, shaking her head a little. Squall went back to the other at his post behind the rock and joined in their defense.

As she watched them evade and attack, she thought about everything she could do to help, and the prospect of making Squall her knight was starting to become tempting. If she had more magic energy, she could cast a powerful spell to push the SeeDs out of the way until they could make it to Esthar. It was just straight ahead, they were so close.

But the more she thought about it, the worse it appeared. It was unfair for him to be committed to a pact just so she could grow mighty and powerful while staying alive. It would greatly help them if she could be of use and ensure her group's safety, yet she couldn't shake off that horrible feeling
that it meant *using* him to do her bidding.

On the other hand, how certain was she if he was still up on his offer? She had no way to know. She rejected him once, he wouldn't be too foolish to experience it again. No one would, especially with the likes of the proud and arrogant Squall.

Besides, her indebtedness to him was piling up. He had done so much for her and went for great lengths just to keep her from harm's way. So maybe it was her turn to pay it all back without having to ask him for help. She could do it without him. Yes, she certainly could.

She turned back around and all she could see was the rock and the dust in the air that blocked the horizon in her sight. The drumming kept beating and drowning the screaming voices of her friends, and she couldn't allow it to overpower them any longer. She stood up and stepped a foot beyond their boundary of safety.

"Rinoa! What are you doing?!” Selphie shouted behind her.

As she pressed forward, she waved an arm and the bullets, grenades, and spells directed to them dissolved as soon as they touched her Protect spell.

Distracted by Selphie's cry, Squall looked at the spot where he last saw Rinoa and grunted when she was no longer there. He scanned their area then realized that the tremor on the rock had ceased. He sprinted out and watched as Rinoa took one daring step after the other, holding out both of her arms as her transparent shield vaporized oncoming ammunitions.

"What the..." Seifer muttered.

Squall began running toward Rinoa with his gunblade in hand. He blasted thunder and blizzard spells at the jeeps.

Following his lead, Quistis yelled "ONWARD!"

"DAMNIT!” Zell roared as the rest of them rushed forward and threw spells of their choice. The jeeps began unloading more SeeDs going for the melee, so Rinoa waved another arm to cast Regen to her party just in time as a bullet grazed Fujin's arm from someone who got through her wall of Protect. The recovery magic quickly took action and closed the wound.

Quistis whipped her Slaying Tail to a male SeeD and threw him to the ground when he managed to evade Squall's attack. Zell landed punches so quickly they were almost undetectable, while Seifer sparred with another SeeD who was about to charge at Zell. Selphie leapt using Irvine's rifle as her leverage and flailed her nunchaku at another SeeD while Irvine fired. Raijin swung his staff to his sides, sending the SeeDs up in the air and away.

As Squall blocked an attack, he glanced where Esthar's gate was supposed to be and it dawned to him that they were getting closer. He pushed his opponent away and promptly fired his revolver at him. When they reached the jeeps, Squall pointed his gunblade. "Target the vehicles! Eliminate their arsenal!"

"There's too many of them, Squall!” Quistis barked back.

"Just do it!"

Fujin flung an Aeroga, but it came too weak when it reach a jeep. Instead of flying it away as she had intended, it rose only to drop again and merely bounced on the ground.
"FAILED!" she cried.

Selphie propelled a grenade she stashed from a knocked-out SeeD unto another jeep. It exploded, hurling its occupants out with little defense. One down, nineteen more to go.

Meanwhile Rinoa had other plans.

Observing that they were aiming for the vehicles this time, she lifted herself with a float spell and began her ascent, just high enough to give her a better perspective of the battle. If she flew any higher, Squall and the others would look like ants compared to the swarming beetles of jeeps, but she was beginning to run out of breath and could only manage a few meters far from the ground.

Just a little longer, she told herself. Just until they are out of the way.

She clasped her hands together and parted them as soon as her red glowing ball of flare materialized between her palms. Thin, wispy arms stemmed out and reached for each jeep in her view. When her spell had a good grasp of every vehicle, she released her flare spell like a catapult and her body jerked backward.

And down she fell.

Squall was watching her with dreaded anticipation from the grounds below since she lifted herself up in the air. He was hoping she would stop the moment she radiated a powerful Protect and let them take care of the rest. He was alarmed when she started soaring and summoning that familiar flare spell in her hands. He knew, at that moment, it would take an ultimate toll on her.

When she began dropping, Squall pushed his feet hard on the ground and dashed up to her. He wrapped his arms around her, lost his balance on his landing, and slid on his back against the rugged soil.

"Squall!" Selphie called and rushed to him.

He lifted himself with one arm and placed it back around Rinoa once he sat up. Her eyes were half-closed, her skin almost translucent with the same pulsating glow she emitted back in Balamb, and her body was shaking within his grasp. What alarmed him the most was the way she wheezed for breath—shallow and short.

Squall erected his glare to the crimson smoke that blended with the black accompanied by the stench of burning gas and oil from all twenty jeeps, capsized and splayed in his view. The SeeDs came crawling out leaving a train of blood behind while the ones safe from the wreckage pulled their comrades out from the possible explosion that threatened to follow. Squall almost thought no one survived, but if he was to assume correctly based on the number of them still moving, no one actually died. Heavily injured, yes. But certainly not dead.

"Selphie! Squall!" Irvine called in panic.

Selphie looked over her shoulder as Esthar's towering wall gradually coalesced in ripples and revealed a visible portion of a gate. It slid open where Estharian soldiers in armor and assault rifles came pouring out from a darker place. Once they settled on their positions, they pointed their guns at the remaining SeeDs, including Squall's group, while two of them went to his assistance.

"Stop!" Squall roared at them when their weapons began clicking at his friends while he clung on Rinoa. "They're with me!"

One soldier drew his gun down after a moment, and everyone else observed the same. He nodded.
"Copy that, Sir Loire. Is there anything else?"

Squall looked around his friends then back to the soldier. "Clear us a path."

He tipped his gun at Rinoa. "What about her?"

Squall adjusted her in his arms. "I'm bringing her to Dr. Odine."

"Shall I call for the medical aid?"

"No. I'll take charge of her."

He nodded and turned around to the army. "Clean this up. Make sure no one follows us in. The rest of you, come with me." He flicked his head at the gate and lead them inside.

"Wait," Seifer tramped to the soldier. "you're just letting us go? Even with a sorceress? You sure about this?"

The soldier turned back around. "The safety of Loires is our duty, regardless if sorceresses are involved." he said tonelessly. "We are bound with Esthar, not the Gardens."

They travelled through the city's skyway to reach the Presidential Palace of Esthar. Carrying Rinoa on his back, Squall strode along the smooth, colorful walkway leading to the front door where a familiar face was waiting. She smiled in greeting and ran to him.

"Squall!"

Squall smiled when she reached out, rather awkwardly, and hugged him around his neck. "Sis."

She placed a hand on his shoulder and angled forward as she examined Rinoa behind him. "It's been awhile since you came back, and you've brought a girl this time!"

"She needs help." Squall said. Further pleasantries could wait. "I need to see Dr. Odine."

Her smiled laxed. "She's a sorceress, isn't she?"

"WHOAH!" Zell clamored. "You knew with just one look?"

"She's glowing magic, you idiot." Seifer berated. "Anyone would know she's a sorceress."

"Excuse me," Quistis intervened. "are you Ellone?"

Ellone nodded. "Yes."

"So you're his Sis!" Selphie said excitedly.

Quistis' smile widened and held out her hand. "So glad to finally meet you. You're the only person outside of the Garden Squall talks about."

Ellone giggled and shook it. "Pleasure's all mine."

"You don't look anything like Squall, ya know?" Raijin quipped.

Fujin kicked his leg. "TACTLESS."

Ellone laughed softly at Raijin's howl. "There's a whole story behind that. But perhaps we can
discuss that inside."

"Gladly. Would love to hear more about you." Irvine replied amorousely. Selphie shot him a glare.

The interior of the receiving area was as huge as expected from a palace. Seifer thought "building should be the right term instead, only without a receptionist and it felt more homely, if not empty in its vastness.

They followed Ellone into the elevator which was big enough to fit more. The guards who escorted them stood by the foyer and disappeared behind the elevator door.

Ellone whirled to Squall. "Dad saw you fight at the Great Salt Lake. That was why he sent out a unit to help."

Squall scoffed dryly. "He couldn't be any faster."

Zell pulled his collar and stretched his neck the other way. "Did it suddenly get hot in here?"

"Tension." Fujin whispered.

"Come now, Squall." Ellone sighed. "That was as fast as he could send for you."

DING

The elevator opened to a large empty lit room where a table stood at the center furbished with a vase of blue flowers. Beyond it was a another metal door.

"Just, call him Dad. Okay?" Ellone appealed. "It wouldn't kill you, and it would mean so much to him."

Squall diverted his eyes to the room and adjusted Rinoa on his back. "Can't promise anything, Sis."

Ellone pressed her lips together and forced a smile as she watched everyone get off. She followed them to the next room.

Sunlight streaming in from the large windows greeted them and the lone occupant shifted on his lounge chair. He looked over his shoulder and jumped up, wearing a smile that reached from ear to ear. Irvine scanned him from head to toe and recognized the same attire he wore every time he appeared on national news.

"Whoah..." he mumbled to himself when it hit him that he was face to face with President Laguna himself.

"Hey, tough guy!" Laguna spread his arms and reached for Squall. His brows met when his eyes fell on Rinoa.

"Dad, let him settle in first." Ellone said.

"Ah, yes." Laguna dropped his arms and looked around his office. He pointed at the sofa. "She can take this one."

Without looking at Laguna, Squall gently laid Rinoa on the furniture. Selphie sprinted to her side, knelt, and held her hand.

"You're so cold, Rinny." Selphie lamented.
"It's an honor finally meeting you, Sir." Irvine reached for Laguna's hand, who shook it cheerfully.

"Thanks! Same with you… uh…"

"Oh," Irvine lifted his hat. "Irvine, Sir."

"Do you know where Dr. Odine is?" Squall interjected.

Laguna's face fell. "Oh." He straightened up, walked to his desk and faced Squall. "Lunatic Pandora, last I heard."

"How do we get there?"

"Just a car ride would do. Maybe we can ask Kiros and Ward to take us there."

"Where are they?"

"Not sure. We'll have to call them to find out."

"Can't we drive the car ourselves?"

"Squall." Ellone held his arm gently. "Slow down. You just got here. Just, let Dad take his time."

"Oh, no, that's okay. She uh…" Laguna scratched the back of his head. "She looks like she needs help right now." He glanced at Rinoa and stared at her for a moment. His eyes narrowed. "Do I know her?"

"We can figure it out later." Squall said.

Laguna shook his head back to focus. "Yeah. Yeah, you're right. Hold on, let me call them." He fished his phone and dialled.

Ellone sighed and turned around, offering an apologetic smile to everyone in the room. Laguna began talking to Kiros on the phone.

Zell held his hands together on his back and stalked carefully on Squall's side. "So, buddy, you okay?"

"I think the right question is, how long had this daddy-issue been going?"

Squall glared them over his shoulder. He walked away and stood by the sofa.

"I take it Squall didn't mention anything about Dad in the Garden, huh." Ellone said despondently.

"He barely mentions anything personal, actually." Quistis said.

"INTROVERT." Fujin added.

"He's all business, especially when he became the Commander."

Ellone smiled. "I heard about that. He called me that day to tell me he was promoted. Even if he doesn't admit it, I know he's very proud of himself as I am."

"I can hear you, you know." Squall said.

"Sorry."
"Why aren't you in the Garden with him?" Irvine asked.

Squall leaned his hips against the armrest of the sofa, crossed his arms, and his eyes wandered at the floor.

Ellone took a deep breath. "Well, for starters, I have this ability to bring people back to their pasts. Any people I know and have connected with."

"Really?" Selphie chirped. "Can you bring me back to mine?"

Ellone nodded. "I can if you want me to."

"What does that have anything to do with being SeeD?" Seifer asked.

"If I attend Balamb Garden, or any Garden for that matter, they'll think I'm a sorceress."

"But you don't talk like a sorceress."

"Yes. But Gardens will take any kind of precautionary measures just to make sure." Quistis replied for Ellone. "It does sound dangerous for someone like her."

"Then why risk enrolling puberty boy in the Garden?"

"I could ask the same." Squall said bitterly. "Ellone, enlighten them."

"You know it's for your own good." Ellone replied.

"Right."

Laguna put his phone down and was about to tell them the car was on its way, but stopped himself when he read on their faces the seriousness in their discussion.

"It was during the sorceress war." Ellone said. "Ultimecia and Adel had their first battle in Lunar Gate here in Esthar. They wrecked havoc across the nation, and Esthar was in complete shambles. We lost our mother because of it, and Dad knew he had to do something about us. When the war ended and Esthar began rebuilding itself, he knew that entrusting Squall to Balamb Garden would be best for him. So he would be surrounded by SeeDs trained to fight sorceresses, and it would do him good if he knows how to fight them too should another war arises."

"How long did you plan to make him stay at the Garden?" Zell asked.

"Just as soon as he graduates and becomes a SeeD. Which he did when he turned sixteen, but…" Ellone shrugged. "he didn't want to come home anymore. And who are we to stop him?"

"The Garden basically raised me, you know." Squall said sardonically.

"It raised all the SeeDs in this room." Quistis corrected. "But if I had a home to go back to, I'd return in a heartbeat."

Squall scoffed and looked away.

"So, where were you this whole time? Just here in Esthar?" Selphie asked.

"Yes. With Dr. Odine. Dad asked for his help to figure out my condition."

"Did they find anything?" Squall asked calmly.
Ellone shook her head. "But…" She glanced nervously at Laguna. He gestured an arm toward the group as if giving her his permission. "Well, I was able to communicate with Adel."

Squall's head snapped back to her while everyone expressed their surprise in their own ways.

"Dr. Odine was able to retrieve her after the war, wounded and barely alive. He decided to bring her in Lunatic Pandora secretly to do further research. During one of our sessions, he warned me not to enter one of the rooms. It had a large steel door with no window to peek through whatsoever, and you'd just know he was hiding something inside. But even when I kept my distance, I heard her in my head. I don't remember how it started, but she was kind to me, just talking to me about her coven, her town, her friends, and assuring me nothing's wrong with my condition. She always thanked me for talking to her every time. And then one day, she asked me to do something for her. She asked me to protect the sorceresses. To help them. I asked her why and how, but she said something about the Lunar Gate. And then, I couldn't hear her anymore." Ellone hung her head. "I told Dr. Odine, but he only scolded me and brought me back to Dad. He told him he couldn't help me any longer."

"We never heard of anything like that." Seifer said sourly. "A sorceress, and Adel at that, was being nice to you? Why didn't you say something in the first place? Why let the Gardens kill sorceresses? Did you know how many times we almost died because we defected?"

Squall wanted to retort at Seifer for talking to Ellone like he did, but he wanted to know the answer too.

"I can't tell anyone else outside of Esthar. How can I? My brother is in Balamb Garden, training to be a SeeD, and I grew up in a world torn by sorceresses. I've met just one friendly sorceress, and I wasn't even sure if she meant well. She was gone before I could know. But I do know the reason I couldn't join my brother in the Garden, and that's because sorceresses are believed to be dangerous. How would I know which side would bring more peace?" Ellone said.

"She saved my life." Squall said, pertaining to Rinoa. He dropped his arms to his sides and faced Ellone. "I was left for dead in Timber, but she found me, cared for me, and kept me safe. I wish the story ends there. Do you know why I left the Garden? Why I escaped?"

When he didn't get a response, he continued. "I fought the Garden because they were doing research on her by torturing her. And I blame myself for it. She was captured because I didn't do anything. I didn't say anything. And it was all too late before I finally did. She was hurt, and I could no longer hide my betrayal from the Garden. And now I learned to do better. Because the way I see it, sorceresses are not what they told us they are. And just recently, I was told they are doing this research to find a cure for another sorceress."

"What sorceress?" Laguna asked, alarmed.

"For an Edea Kramer, Cid's wife." Quistis replied. "Apparently, she gained sorceress powers after the great sorceress war."

"Cid has a wife and she's a sorceress? That's messed up."

"My point is, right and wrong are not what separate us from our enemies." Squall said, hoping to give them some clarity, especially Ellone. "Our standpoints, our perspectives that differ from the other, those are what separate us. Both sides blame one another, but there really is no good or bad side. Just two sides holding different views. It's only up to us how and when we choose a side."

"But, the peace treaty." Ellone said, her voice growing anxious now. "We still have a peace treaty
to uphold, right?"

"Not anymore." Laguna added before anyone could retaliate. "The word is out. We all saw the news. Squall is being hunted down worldwide because he escaped with the sorceress. And I sure as hell won't ditch Squall because of some ruse of a treaty. To hell with the treaty! I chose a side, and we already broke the treaty long before we opened the gates for you."

"Thanks, but would have been great if you came to help earlier than that, ya know?" Raijin said.

"If we cross outside the borders of Esthar, we will pre-empt an inevitable world war. Can't risk that one unprepared."

"If I may also add, Sir, they're also on the hunt for all of us." Fujin said. "There's no turning back for us now."

Laguna smiled. "Then you are all welcome to stay here in your new home."

Everyone glanced at each other excitedly, except for Squall.

"I bet the Gardens also think we're under Rinoa's mind-controlling spell." Quistis said solidly.

"Ha!" Seifer blared. "You did too! Remember how you made a funny joke out of it?"

Quistis rolled her eyes. "I knew it wasn't true. But we were in an interrogation room, remember?"

Seifer blinked a few times. "You brought it up again in my cell!"


"... You double-crossed me!"

Their moment of reprieve was interrupted by a loud gasp from Rinoa. Selphie cried her name and grabbed Rinoa's hand while Squall ran to her side and examined her.

"Where's the car?"

"They should be here in a minute." Laguna said, swiveling around to check outside his window.

Squall turned to Ellone. "Can you talk to her? Like you did to Adel?" He sounded pleading now.

"No. But don't worry, Squall. She still has the strength to fight." Ellone assured.

"She'll make it?"

Ellone forced a smile after a moment and nodded with too much force than he needed to see. "Yes."
ESTHAR BOTCHED TREATY

"A report just came in from Balamb regarding the group of SeeDs who escaped with the sorceress. They were last spotted today at exactly two in the afternoon in the Great Salt Lake fighting SeeDs from Trabia Garden who were dispatched to arrest them. One survivor who wished to remain anonymous managed to escape and reported that the sorceress began attacking them indiscriminately with a flare spell while they remained defenseless in their vehicles. Ten members of the army were wounded with no further casualties. Among the outlaws was confirmed to be Esthar President Laguna Loire's son, more known as Balamb Garden's Commander Squall Loire who allegedly lead the group of young outlaws in the attack.

According to the witness' statement, Esthar opened its gates and welcomed the young outlaws into the safety of the nation's walls, leaving the international council questioning Esthar's ties with the treaty and its true intention to support the sorceress community. A hearing is said to be scheduled with the President along with the leaders of Dollet, Centra, Deling, and Shumi Village, and the Garden Headmasters of Balamb, Galbadia, and Trabia, to determine Esthar's international relations.

That's it for our news update here on WNN."
"What does the President say about this?" Seifer asked, turning his head to Laguna.

Laguna shrugged. "I guess they'll just hear from me at the hearing."

"And what if they don't listen?" Ellone asked worriedly.

"They will." Squall replied. "It's only a matter of when they will declare war against Esthar."

"I hope it doesn't come to that." Laguna said, trying to be optimistic. "Gotta convince them somehow."

Rinoa's small whimper pilfered Squall's thought on the subject. She was still pulsating with her red glow, albeit growing weaker. He reached for her hand to check her strength through her grip.

He looked over his shoulder. "Sis."

"I can't link to her, Squall." Ellone said apologetically. "I never interacted with her."

"We're almost there." Laguna assured his son. "Just a few more minutes."

Squall turned back to Rinoa. He hoped she still had more.

Laguna found himself staring at the sorceress. "I seriously think I saw her somewhere."

"Did you ever visit Timber?" Squall asked nonchalantly.

"No, not in Timber." Laguna replied, still surveying Rinoa. "Somewhere else some years ago. Many years ago."

Zell shifted his eyes uneasily between the father and son. "If sorceresses are immortals then that would make more sense."

No one answered.

"Are… they immortals?"

"No. No they're not." Squall said, recalling the records he found in Balamb Garden's library.

"What more do you know about her?" Laguna asked.

Squall paused for a moment. "She was left in Timber by her father during the great sorceress war, where a coven found her. Both of her parents are dead."

"Did you catch her parents' names?"

"Fury Caraway and Julia Heartilly."

Laguna sat up, mouth slightly agape.

"And before you ask, yeah, the singer."

"I see." Laguna managed to breath.

Ellone observed her father's sudden change in behavior.

Laguna looked away and cleared his throat. He peeked through the window. "Ah, we're here."
The limousine parked beside the domed entrance and Seifer didn't wait for the driver to open the doors for them. Squall hoisted Rinoa on his back and placed her arms around his neck.

They received salutes from the men guarding the area as they made their way to the door which promptly opened for them. Ellone and Laguna lead them through more doors until they reached a large blue room filled with electronic controls and wide monitors.

Zell gulped as he looked around. "This is too nerdy for me."

"Can't agree more." Irvine said. "Brain can't take it."

"Vo's there?" A voice called from the other room.

"Dr. Odine?" Ellone called back.

"Ellone?" The voice called back. A short old man with a huge red collar came trudging out of the room, his smile quickly fading as soon as his eyes met the group. "Prezitent?"

"Need your help, Doc." Laguna nodded at Squall. "We got a sorceress with us, and she's kinda dying."

Squall shot him a glare. "She's no-"

"No, no, no, I vill not help you!"

"Dr. Odine, please." Ellone pleaded, taking steps closer to Dr. Odine.

"Vy should I? He'z a ZeeD! He can't help a zorceress! Doesn't make zenze!" He shook a finger at Laguna then at Squall with widened eyes. "Zee treaty! I don't vant to involve myself vith any political trouble!"

"You will now, if you deny us help!" Laguna declared.

"Zo vat? I didn't vote for you!"

"Then I'll have you kicked out of Esthar. Goodluck finding a good spot to sleep in D-District Prison!"

Dr. Odine huffed a resigned sigh. "FINE! FINE!" He shook his head, still at disbelief for giving into their whims. "Follow me." He gestured them to follow him inside then proceeded to mutter profanities directed at no one under his breath. Laguna adjusted his collar and whirled to give the youth a thumbs up for his work. Zell and Raijin reciprocated it in unison while Irvine mouthed a "good job!"

Further in, they stopped by a small lit room with a cushioned tube in the middle. Dr. Odine faced Squall wearing a callous look.

"You may place her here zo ve can analyse her status vile ve discuss vat you came here for."

Squall took a step back and clung more tightly on Rinoa. Odine pushed a button at the side to slide the glass case down on one side.

"Zere's nothing to worry about. Zis vas made to work safely on zorceres." 

"It's okay, Squall." Ellone assured.
Squall took a deep breath and turned around to place Rinoa gently on the bed. Before he slid his arms away from her back, he stared at her for a second before willing himself to look away. But he found himself gazing right back at her when he stood up and watched as the glass case separated him from her.

"Initializing Analysis." The female voice from the machine recited.

"We should hurry." Squall breathed.

"Zis von't take long," Dr. Odine said. He turned to another wall on controls and pushed several buttons that activated a white light inside the case that overpowered Rinoa's red glow.

"What is there to analyze?" Quistis asked.

"Her vitals, her nature as a zorceress, and how much magic energy ztill left in her."

"Why? Is there something you can do to revitalize her magic energy outside a coven?"

Dr. Odine turned on his back, concealing his face. "Coven? Vat coven?"

"She needs to get to a coven so she can recharge and live! You studied sorceresses, didn't you? I'm sure you know that by now."

"Dr.?" Ellone implored. She could sense he knew something that he refused to share.

Dr. Odine turned around, his eyes whipping between Ellone and Quistis.

"V-ve can uze my invenzion!" He said as his antsy hands reached for his metal drawers. "I call it zee Odine Bangle! Ve can test it on her, and--"

Zell took a step forward, his fist leveled on his chest. "C'mon, spill it Doc!"

Squall crossed his arms, observing the exchange in the room. He smirked. "There's nothing to spill, Zell. Doctor's probably not even competent enough to answer our questions about sorceresses. I mean, a bangle? Don't make me laugh."

"BOGUS." Fujin said.

"Remember that Adel records you were hanging back to give me? Found many holes in them. Too many, actually. Could only conclude that attacking after the Red Moon Festival was the most ideal time to attack a coven. Almost cost me my job, and to just a smaller extent, my life. We failed and we didn't know why we failed, because your paper was not helpful at all. Useless, just as its author."

"Don't blame my paper!" Dr. Odine yelled. "It has all zee extenzive knovledge about zorcerezes! Vat you read vas zee fake one."

Squall narrowed his eyes. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Dr. Odine trudged toward a drawer, unlocked it with a key, and took out a thick, hardbound book. "Zis is zee real paper. And you failed zee mizion not becauze of zee holes in my paper." He huffed, glaring at the group, and placed his thin arms around the thick book. "Ven zee moon is aligned vith zee red star, giving it its red color, it's called zee Lunar Cry phenomenon. Zis actually makes zee zorcerezes more poerveful, giving zem a vole night to recharge. But nobody knew zat, not even zee zorcerezes."
I withheld this information from the ZeeDs, only disclosing to the Headmasters that it is not advisable to attack covens when the moon is red. It became a festival because it was only on that day that the sorcerers were safe, because ZeeDs never attacked them. Because I told them so.

Squall growled and pushed Dr. Odine by the neck with his arm until they bumped into a wall. "You knew the sorceress would be more powerful after the Red Moon Festival, and you deliberately misled us?"

Dr. Odine tried to pull Squall's arm away from his throat, but it was too hard and firm. "I... didn't want you... to win!"

"You almost had me KILLED!" Squall pushed harder. Dr. Odine began to choke.

"Squall, son..." Laguna called sternly.

"Only your... schtubility... will kill you." Dr. Odine said between wheezes. "You... will never die... in zee hands of a coven. It's against... zeir code... to kill."

Squall released him and pushed his hair back with his hand. Dr. Odine knelt and coughed the strain off his throat.

"But... the great sorceress war. Many died because of sorceresses." Selphie said.

"Zat vas all Ultimecia." Dr. Odine pulled himself up with his arms. "She vas a different story."

"Oh, good, because we looove a good story, don't we guys?" Seifer said, turning around to his friends.

"It's a long one."

"Try us."

"No!" Dr. Odine glared at them and swayed an arm sideways. "You don't deserve it!"

Seifer and Irvine hooked their arms on each of Dr. Odine's and jammed him against a wall.

"Start talking." Seifer hissed as he tried to control the small scientist wiggling against their grasp.

"What do you know?" Irvine asked.

"I refuze!" Dr. Odine spat back.

Seifer smirked and looked over his shoulder. "Hey Raijin! Dr. Odine's gonna be your sparring buddy! Show him what ya got!"

"What?" Raijin gave him a horrified look. Realizing that Raijin was too gentle and innocent for words, he winked at the brute as an assurance that it was all a ruse. "Ah! Right! Yeah, ya know? Need to do some stretching, ya know?"

"Go for it!"

"Alright! Alright! I'll talk!" Dr. Odine yelled back. Seifer and Irvine took one look at each other and mutually agreed to place him down.

Once free, Odine ironed his sleeves with his hands and scowled at the two. "But first, we must—"
"Oh, for Hyne's sake." Seifer and Irvine quickly hoisted him back up.

"Dr.," Ellone strode toward Squall. "I didn't want to do this, but…"

Dr. Odine's eyes widened. "No! Don't! You're risking zeir zafety!"

Ellone reached an arm toward Dr. Odine's forehead just until her fingers were almost touching his skin. Radiant golden strips streamed out of her fingertips and into Dr. Odine's head, stunning him. His eyes froze on spot, and his mouth closed tight.

She lifted another arm and directed it to Squall, her stream of light flowing straight to his forehead and producing a deafening white noise.

"I'm sorry, Squall."

Squall covered his ears and his eyes shut tightly as he slowly dropped to the ground.

"SQUALL!"

Squall opened his eyes at the building sound of explosions and whizzing around him. He slowly pushed himself up from the grainy surface just as a scream shot from a distance. He surveyed the crimson color that blazed the unrest sky and he quickly clambered up to look around the place. The familiar ruins and the shape of the slopes told him he was in Centra Ruins. He checked at the sky again.

The moon was red.

Around him were outdated Garden tanks rolling their wheels toward the shore where an orphanage had been. Hovering above the sea were two overgrown sorceresses. One was muscular in built with tattooed white skin and red hair. The other was slimmer donned in a red dress which was draped by her white hair. She appeared more intimidating with her long horns and black wings.

Adel and Ultimecia.

Adel gathered her energy on a spell in one hand and flung it to Ultimecia, throwing her back. She plowed her spiked fingers through the water to halt her her fall before running along the liquid surface and thrusting a large ice shard toward Adel.

The place began whirling around him and the blur changed its color to a calmer blue. He wasn't familiar with the area, but in whatever consciousness he was in, he knew he was in Lunar Gate. A sorceress was sitting on the ground, her head resting on a rock, seemingly sleeping. She was surrounded by five lifeless, bloodied bodies of sorceresses.

"Ultimecia." Another sorceress called from behind him in an audible, almost breathless whisper.

She lifted her head and slowly turned around the other. "Adel." She then looked at Squall, wearing a malicious smile. "Odine."

The sky fast forwarded to a red night, and Squall's eyes froze over Ultimecia's. Her blue eyes
turned violet, her auburn hair whitened, and her horns and wings began appearing.

He was moved to another place again. It was one of the more desolate areas of Esthar, close to the Great Salt Lake. He squinted at a body lying motionless in the distance and he was compelled to run toward it. Once he had a closer look, he realized it was Adel, battered, bloodied, and wounded.

He took another step forward, and the ground waved to another location with another body in front of him. Taking Adel's place in the fields of Balamb was Ultimecia, just as near-death as the former.

"Dr. Odine!"

He looked over his shoulder as a response to the call and when he turned back, he was on an aircraft far away from Ultimecia. He watched from behind the windows as he hovered above the ground Cid and another female walking closer to the sorceress. After a moment of inspecting her closely, Ultimecia grabbed the woman and pulled her close to her body. As the woman tried to squirm herself free, Cid stepped back and ran away. Slowly, Ultimecia began to fade into the woman until completely vanishing. The woman, on the other hand, laid still on the ground. When Cid finally returned with SeeDs, the place began spinning again.

He was facing an elongated room where Adel was laid inside a tube. He felt something heavy in his hand and noticed it was a clipboard with a thick document.

Quickly scanning through it, he read how Ultimecia was successful in her plan to absorb all the energy of the Lunar Cry in Lunar Gate, killing all her fellow sorceresses who went to share it with her. As a result, she had developed a very dangerous ability to manipulate time, and "Hyne forbid she mastered it." He hypothesized that further exposure to the Lunar Cry would give her the power to summon the "Apocalypse" spell. Adel fought her and was able to because she had a bond with her knight, who ended up as one of the casualties of the war. He found it interesting that the only spell that helped Adel against Ultimecia was the Holy spell, negating the dark energy Ultimecia thrived in, and effectively putting an end to the conflict. Ultimecia wound up in Balamb and possessed Edea Kramer's body to survive. Adel was found in Esthar, drained and without a knight, and was taken into his laboratory for closer examination.

He looked up from the clipboard and from his peripheral vision stood a young girl.

"Dr. Odine!"

"Ellone! Vat are you doing here?"

Ellone fidgeted shyly. "Was just tawking to my fwend. She was showing me pwetty things."

He turned back around and surveyed the thick metal door. "Things like vat?"

"Wunar Gate!"

He whipped back at Ellone, and she was wearing something different this time. Her rounded eyes were staring at him, begging for him to listen.

"Wunar Gate! We have to hewp the sowcewesses in Wunar Gate!"

"Vat-"

Ellone grabbed his hand. "Wunar Gate!"

He pulled her back the other way. "I'm taking you back to your father!"
"NO! Wisten to me!"

"I told you not to get anyvere near zis room again, but you failed to listen! No more!"

He pushed a door open and he was in the windy outdoors of Winhill, without an Ellone. With him were a few men in hard hats building a tunnel somewhere close to a coven. One of the men approached him.

"Where to next, Doc?"

"Island Clozest to Hell, Island Clozest to Heaven, and Timber."

"All leading to Lunar Gate?"

"Yes." He replied and trudged closer to inspect the tunnel. Involuntarily, he struck the open hole with a hammer, suddenly hitting a wooden plank. He was in Timber this time.

He shakily stepped back and studied his work on the sealed tunnel. The sorceresses had escaped. They should have seen their way to the Lunar Gate where they would be safer.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. When he opened them, he was back in his office at the Lunatic Pandora Laboratory. There was a knock on his door, and he called back for the visitor to come in.

Cid was wearing a warm smile when he entered, his eyes wrinkled behind his round glasses. "Good afternoon, Dr. Odine. I am honored and humbled not to be denied with my request to see you."

He nodded. "Please, have a zeat."

Cid took the one closest to his desk. "So, I heard you've been keeping hush-hush about your latest research."

"I never divulged much about my vork."

"But it did helped us a lot to battle sorceresses. Your theory about the red moon? Fantastic!"

He smiled and nodded. "Zank you."

Cid nodded and dropped his eyes on his lap. He drew in a breath and peered at him. "I know you're very busy with your project, and I must be going soon as well to attend Balamb's rebuilding efforts, so I'm gonna tell you what I came here for." He twiddled his hands uneasily on his lap and faced Dr. Odine. "Balamb just gathered a research team and I'd like to personally invite you to collaborate with us for our sorceress project."

He smiled. "I zank you again. Put I'm zorry to zay zat my place is here in Esthar. But I can help in any vay I can as long as I am able."

Cid chuckled. "That's a shame." His smiled disappeared for a few seconds, and he wore it again. "Perhaps you can start reaching out some help now. Your study about Adel will be very valuable and hasten our own work to develop our SeeDs' combating capabilities."

"I don't know vat you're talking about."

"The cure!" Cid leaned forward with his palms upright, wearing an unrelenting stare. "The cure, Dr. Odine. The cure will save us time and missions! If we find this cure, we can rid the sorceresses of their powers! Just imagine how many lives we can save!"
Cid persisted on his appeal, and his voice began to fade away in his own grit to remain steadfast.

Squall found himself in the influence of Dr. Odine's thoughts, emotions, and actions from the lapsing catena of past events, yet this time he was sure his instinct to distrust Cid and deny his request synced with the doctor's. He shook his head firmly.

"No."

Without even a gasp for air, he jolted backward when a force pulled him away from the place, into a bright tunnel, and knocked him back into his body.

"Analysis complete."

"Squall!"

He heaved with a loud grunt and felt the shock run inside his body against the cold floor. Squall opened his eyes, abruptly sat up and groaned when pain stabbed his head.

Laguna knelt by Squall. "You okay, son?"

Squall nodded and peered at Dr. Odine in front of him. He was dropped on the ground while Seifer and Irvine still stood on his sides. He too was clutching his head from the aftereffects of Ellone's magic.

"Aah! My head!"

Ellone bowed slightly at the two. "I'm very sorry! I could have been gentler, but we are running out of time."

Squall was glaring at the scientist. Ellone showed him only what he needed to see, and he was well aware that whatever contempt he held against Dr. Odine must be set aside for all the things he did. May it be purely for the commitment for his research, or his loyalty for Esthar. But his efforts from his discoveries saved sorceresses, and in a bigger extent, the world from what Cid could do with Edea, or with Ultimacia, had he given him his research.

He understood it all. He felt Dr. Odine's empathy, fear, and pure curiosity all in one brisk rundown of the past, and the overwhelming sensation of still being Dr. Odine numbed him of all other emotions he must hold for the present. None of it left, except for whatever urgent grievance weighing heavily in his chest. Ellone was right. They were running out of time.

"Edea." Squall muttered under his breath. "Edea is Ultimacia."

Quistis gasped and looked at the other people in the room who were just as lost for words.

"The cure."

Dr. Odine heaved. "Vateffer are you talking about."

Seifer and Irvine were about to lift him up again until Squall held up his hand. "Please, Doctor."
Dr. Odine sat up and leaned his back on the metal wall, his legs sprawled. "Like I said, I don't know vat you're talking about. Zere is no cure."

Squall's face softened. Somehow, he knew it was fabricated. A myth that Cid believed for the longest time, yet killed and sacrificed many for. "Huh. Figures."

"I don't know how Cid azumed I have zee zoluzion for his vife. Zere is no cure to rid zorcerezes of zeir powers, even ven a non-magic being is pozezed py a zorceress. Zorcerezes must get out of zee body at vill, and zat is impozible for someone like Ultimecia vo vill stop at nothing until she gets vat she vants. However, zere is a cure for zorcerezes to keep zem from dying."

"A knight."

"Correct. But Cid cannot know zat. You understand, don't you?"

"But Edea could be in Balamb Garden right now with Cid!" Quistis said.

"Zat is vy I did not interfere ven I learned zat he put her under cryogenic sleep."

Laguna shook his head. "Why didn't you tell me, Odine?" He asked, losing the balance in his voice.

"You were under a treaty!" Dr. Odine pushed himself from the wall and pointed a finger at Laguna. "You still are! And how vill you believe me? How can I prove it? Ve don't understand zorcerezes!"

"But we know the truth now." Squall cut in.

"But I have so many questions!" Laguna protested.

"And I'll answer them all later." Squall stood up. He held out a hand at Dr. Odine. "You're coming with us to Lunar Gate."

Dr. Odine stared at his hand with mistrust for a moment and glanced up.

"I must ask you to svear first. Vith your life. To never reveal zee locazion of zee Lunar Gate."

Squall shrugged. "Easy enough."

Dr. Odine nodded and took his hand. Squall pulled him up.

"How far 'til we get to this… uh… place?" Laguna asked.

"Lunar Gate." Ellone corrected.

"Ah. Lunar Gate. Sorry, it sounds uncharted. Never heard of it. Come to think of it, I didn't even know it's part of Esthar territory."

"I already told you about it before, Dad." Ellone smiled wearily. "You just never remembered."

Laguna scratched the back of his head. "Ah. Heh. My bad."

"How are we gonna get there?" Zell piped.

"The car, or…"
"I designed a specialised aircraft that is undetectable under radars." Dr. Odine said as he pressed some buttons on the monitor. "I used Esthar's technology for testing, so guaranteed the Garten vill never see us. I rode it when I built the tunnels, and when I visited Lunar Gate, and..." He paused, suddenly losing his newfound agility. He turned around to glance at Rinoa.

"Oh."

Squall's brows bumped together in a scowl. "What?"

"The analysis is not complete. It was cut short because there was too little energy to analyse."

Selphie looked at Rinoa and gasped. "She lost her light!"

"What..." Squall ran to her bed and felt around it for the button. "Open it!"

Dr. Odine quickly pressed some keys on his keyboard. "Wait—"

"Open, damn it!"

The case slid open and Squall swiftly raised her. He shook her lightly. "Rinoa."

Rinoa slumped limply in his arms as he shakily brushed her hair away from her face and called for her name again. And again.

No...

Squall scooped her and began cursing the Garden, the gods above, and himself under his breath.

Laguna spun to Dr. Odine. "Where's this aircraft you were talking about?"

Dr. Odine pointed to his left. "This way. Quickly."

They exited the room and followed Dr. Odine to a wide, dim hangar where a red aircraft stood in the middle. Dr. Odine pressed a button to release the recline where they all entered, and Selphie immediately hopped on the controls in the cockpit before Dr. Odine could ask which one of them knew how to fly a ship. Pushing more buttons inside, Dr. Odine opened the ceiling as the swaying ship hovered and flew out of the area.

"Head southeast." He instructed Selphie when she successfully steadied the plane.

"Gotcha!"

Squall took one of the seats and sat Rinoa beside him. His eyes were fixed on the windows as they whirred by the clouds, glancing at Rinoa once in awhile to check if she was still breathing. His brows wrinkled when her head dropped on his shoulder, and he promptly adjusted his awkward position to make her more comfortable. He wasn't certain if her coven, if they make it, would still take her in after the betrayal she did for saving a SeeD like him. But he had no choice. He had to try. He would force them if he had to.

Ellone sat in front of him and reached for his arm, rubbed it, and smiled weakly. Oh how the dispirited look in his eyes broke her heart. She wished she could do something to make it better, but she was no sorceress, nor a coven that Rinoa needed.

"I'm sorry." she said.

Squall's eyes returned to Rinoa. Her eyes were shut this time, and her breaths made not a whisper of
sound. He inwardly cursed himself.

"I should have known there's a coven in Lunar Gate."

"You already told us, back at the palace." Squall said. "We just… I just… didn't see right through it."

Ellone released a breath she didn't know she was holding. "She'll make it. Okay Squall?"

"I… I don't know."

"I know Dr. Odine would have said something if she can't."

After a moment of considering it, Squall nodded silently. It didn't matter. None of it mattered anymore. They just needed to get there in time.

Several agonizing minutes had passed until Dr. Odine pointed to a town with half-built cottages on a small piece of plantless land. After Selphie made a successful landing, Squall wrapped his jacket around Rinoa, swept her back into his arms and followed Dr. Odine as they exited the aircraft. Squinting into the distance as they approached, a crowd of sorceresses thickened, hissing at their direction. He could make out some familiar faces, especially of the young sorceress who threw ice shards back when they ambushed Timber. They were all bent forward, their hands crooked on their sides, ready to jump and strike.

He felt his group stiffen as he was with each step. He adjusted Rinoa in his arms as they marched closer and closer, and the hisses grew louder. Raijin wanted to ask what their move was, but the silence from the others was discouraging. Dr. Odine sauntered past through them and held both his arms up.

"What are you doing?" Laguna hissed.

"Letting zem know zat I come unarmed and in peace."

One sorceress with silver hair tied together glared at Squall, her pupils shrinking into thin slits. She hurled a demi spell at him as she hissed and, catching what she was about to do, Squall turned around and bent down to shield Rinoa. He groaned as he fell on his knees when it hit him, feeling a chunk of his strength taken away with the spell.

"HEY!" Seifer quickly unsheathed his gunblade and aimed for the sorceress.

Laguna drew out his machine gun. "CAST THAT ON ME!"

Dr. Odine's eyes widened when everyone started taking out their weapons. "NO!"

"We don't mean any harm!" Ellone cried in desperation. She sprinted forward until she was only a few feet away from the nearest sorceress. She held out her hand and shut her eyes, searching for the energy that would link her to any of the sorceresses. She opened her eyes again. "Listen!"

The sorceress flung an arm to claw her and Ellone yelped as she shielded her head with her her arms. Zell, Fujin, and Irvine dashed to her side and prepared for battle.

Just when their weapons were about to clash, a taller sorceress in blue sari stepped in between them and firmly held the other sorceress' wrist, while her other hand gripped the barrel of Irvine's rifle.

"Irvine!" Selphie shrieked behind them.
When the sorceresses began hissing again, the other snapped her head and shot them a glare until their faces slowly softened, but still distrustful of the unwanted visitors. She held her gaze at the owner of the wrist she was holding until she let go of her offensive stance and gently pulled her hand away.

Ellone staggered with her quick sharp breaths as she turned around at the interfering sorceress. Irvine tried to wrest his weapon away when the sorceress gave him a calm but rigid look.

"She…” Ellone gulped. "She trusts that you will not fire at them when she lets go."

The sorceress glanced at her then back to Irvine.

Irvine nodded. "Yeah." He retreated his hand from the trigger and held it up. "There. I'm not going to shoot."

Without tearing her green eyes away from him, the sorceress released her hold. Her gaze landed on Ellone and smiled.

"Ellone. How you've grown."

Ellone gasped.

"Why did you come here?"

Eyes still gaping at her, Ellone pointed a finger toward Squall's direction. The sorceress walked past them and to the group until she reached Seifer who was glaring back at her.

"It's okay, Seifer." Ellone said in between labored breaths. "Let her see Squall."

Seifer lowered his gunblade and stepped aside, his guard still up.

Squall was hunching over Rinoa and glared at the sorceress over his shoulder. Ellone ran to their side.

"Rise, SeeD."

"Squall, I'm going to translate what she said okay? Just as she says it." Ellone advised. "Rise, SeeD."

Squall looked at Ellone, and after a moment, he stumbled up. Laguna darted and pulled him by the shoulders. They both turned around, and Squall huffed.

The sorceress held her arm forward and coursed a cure spell to him. Feeling more robust, Squall stood straight and pulled Rinoa closer to his chest.

Her eyes fell on Rinoa and slowly placed a hand on her head. "Rinoa…"

Squall inhaled a sharp breath.

"Angel…"

So they were still taking kindly to her. Squall took a staggering step forward. "Please. Take her. Help her. I would do anything."

"Of course, you may leave her with us. We will take care of her." Ellone said.
The sorceress gently took Rinoa from his arms and cradled her in her strong ones. Magic began to
glow from her palms and she smiled.

Ellone smiled as well. "Thank you."

Now that she was taken from him, Squall began breathing heavily. He watched as Rinoa began to
take slow, steady breaths in the sorceress' arms. He didn't like being torn away from her.

It’s for her own good. It’s for her own good.

"Rinoa will have to stay with us to recover. It will take some time." Ellone said.

"It will take some time, huh." Squall muttered. He lifted his hand and looked at his ring, the one
she adored back in the cabin. "Can I do one last thing?"

"Of course."

Squall slid the ring off his finger. He reached for Rinoa's necklace and looped it through the silver
chain.

Don’t forget me.

He took one last look at her. Had he always longed that much to touch her face? To stare at her
eyes? To hear her voice again? Had he been falling for far too long in this mess he called a life that
he failed to realize it would all lead to this? Crashing down with nothing but endless regret.

But if he hadn't gone to Timber that fateful night, had life been much easier with him, he would
never had met her. Never would have known that someone like her most worthy of existence, of all
good things. Worth fighting for.

He gave the sorceress a feeble nod, trusting she would make sure she was safe. The sorceress
nodded back with a soft smile.

Seifer placed a hand on his shoulder. "Ready when you are."

Squall nodded. "Yeah."

Seifer looked at the others and nodded at them, prompting them to leave their posts and head for
the ship as the other sorceresses watched. Selphie gave Rinoa a quick pat on her head and sniffled
before following Irvine behind. Squall forced himself to turn around and began walking away.

Ellone was following behind. She looked over her shoulder to the sorceress and smiled. "You're
welcome."

The sorceress smiled and nodded back.

As she regained her first sight of light, Rinoa turned her head slightly to the blurry vision of Squall
leaving and slowly disappearing into the dusk.

"Stay..." she said in the faintest of whispers.
"I FAILED!" Cid cried, sliding his hand down against the cold surface of Edea's containment. "I failed again, my love. I FAILED!" His wails bounced against the walls of the chamber as he slowly dropped to the ground. "We were so close. We had them cornered! THAT SORCERESS BITCH!"

He drowned in the air her filled with misery over yet another failed mission of the Garden. The incompetence of SeeDs. The wasted time and resources, leaving him there, yet again, in the limbo of disgrace.

Then a soft mumble passed through his ear.

He gasped and paused on his lament and attempted to discern if he did hear a voice.

"Who said that?"

"Cid…"

It was a woman's voice. A soft one that he craved for the longest time.

"Edea?"

"Cid… Where am I?"

"I'm right here!" Cid sobbed, glancing up at her motionless figure. "I'm right here my love!"

"I want to be with you. To hold you."

"I want to hold you too!" His cried grew desperate.

"I want us to be free."

"I wish we could be, too." He broke down.

"Free me, my love. Free us."

Cid fumbled up and headed for the control panel. He wiped his tears from both eyes and typed a code.

White smoke blew through Edea's icy case. Cid ran to her and watched as the the blizzard melted around her, slowly unveiling her skin. Soon thereafter, she dropped in Cid's arms, coughing and rasping for air. Her eyes squinted at him.

"Why?" she whispered.

"Edea!" Cid howled. "Edea, I'm so sorry!" he pulled her close in an embrace.

"It was so cold. And I was lonely."

"I'm sorry!"

"Why do you hate me?" she stammered. "Don't you love me anymore?"

"I will never do that again! I have never stopped loving you!"

Edea limply brushed Cid's hair from the back. "Promise me."
"I promise! I promise!"

"CID!" a male voice boomed from the elevator.

Cid jumped at the Large Shumi lumbering closer to him. "YOU-PATHETIC-FOOL! WHAT-HAVE-YOU-DONE!"

Slack-mounthed, he couldn't find the right words to respond.


"I-I…"

"THIS-IS-MY-GARDEN! I-WILL-NO–"

Edea threw an ice shard into his neck. Norg choked with a gurgling sound as his stunned body fell backward with an echoing thud. His blood began to pool around him.

Cid swiftly turned back to Edea. "I'm sorry my love. I should have released you earlier."

Edea gently brushed her fingers along his cheek. "It's alright, my love. We're both free now. We can do anything."

Cid cackled through his sobs. He sniffed again. "I will do anything. Anything for you."

Edea hummed tenderly. "Take me to Lunar Gate."

*Lunar Gate?* Cid asked himself at the back of his mind. He never heard of a Lunar Gate, and was not sure where of how to find it.

"B-but my love. I don't know where Lunar Gate is."

"Esthar." Edea murmured. "Lunar Gate is in the far end of Esthar."

"Esthar?" Cid shook his head. "But, no one has ever breached the walls of Esthar yet! How can my Garden possibly invade a nation?"

Edea hushed Cid with a thumb on his lips. "Don't worry about Esthar." she whispered. "You have me. But first," she gasped for air and coughed.

Cid stared at her in anticipation. "Yes? What is it?"

Edea breathed weakly. "I must need your help to stay strong. My body has gone weak."

Cid shook his head. "But I…" he shrugged. "I haven't found the cure yet."

"You don't need cure." Edea said. She smiled. "I just need you to be my knight."

Cid's brows wrinkled. A knight? Wasn't that a thing of the past, for princesses and royalties?

"Please, be my knight?"

He nodded anyway. "Anything for you, my love."
The heavy gates of Trabia Garden opened for the five oncoming vehicles from Esthar.

As soon as they parked, soldiers quickly vacated the trucks, drumming the stiff cold soil of Trabia with their footsteps and stood in formation, casting a line from the limousine's door to the lobby of the Garden.

Behind the closed door, Laguna cleared his throat and adjusted his collar, slightly bouncing on his seat. "This is it."

His darker companion in the backseat reached for the door. "Just as we practiced."

"Yeah." Laguna said. "Just as we practiced. What would I do without you, Kiros."

"You still have Ward." Kiros said, nodding at their larger friend. Ward smirked and bowed.

Laguna let out a long puff. "For Esthar."

"Yeah." Kiros said as he opened the door. "For Esthar."

The three men stepped out of the vehicle and the Estharian soldiers promptly clicked their heels together. Laguna was compelled to give them a salute as recognition for their heralding as he passed by. When they finally made it to the lobby, a female SeeD greeted them and lead them to the elevator, and then to a hallway where a large door awaited at the end guarded by two male SeeDs.

"The officials are already inside." the girl said, beaming and bowing at them. "As agreed, no media is involved, and all other substitutes for it are strictly not allowed. So if you have phones, cameras or any recording devices, I will have to ask you to surrender them before entering the room. We will return them as soon as the session has ended."

"Yes, yes, of course." Laguna fumbled his pocket for his phone and handed it to the girl. He
usually made jokes out of such requests, like his habitual need to check on the kids once in a while (and this time, he did have kids left back in Esthar, more than he should actually worry himself with), but the statements he rehearsed for this hearing had taken up all the space in his memory.

Kiros caught the girls' evident worry for the President. "Please apologize Mr. Loire for suddenly staring blankly into space." he raised his voice slightly on the last four words. "Many things often go through his mind. Just as expected from a man with a nation to lead. He concerns himself too much with the problems of his people."

The girl gave him a discerning smile with raised brows. "I completely understand. Things like what?"

Ward coughed behind him and nudged Laguna with his elbow.

"Wha?" Laguna looked back and forth between his friends. "Ah, yes. Leg cramps."

Kiros slapped his face with his palm.

The girl nodded and tried her best to keep her smile from fading as she gently placed their gadget on the cushioned trays. Without any more exchange of words, the guarding SeeDs pushed the door open for the men, revealing more men in suits gathered around a podium in the middle of the room. Laguna took another deep breath and marched forward, bravely aware that his friends took each step with him.

Five men and a Shumi sat on the long table elevated at the front, shuffling and stacking papers in their hands. His eyes quickly fell on Cid who was swift to divert his look from him to the other men present in the room. Too bad, he had always planned to shoot him with daggers for his unjust attempt to kill Squall. And also for the atrocity that he was in all his being, but mostly for trying to kill his son.

The man in the middle looked up from his papers to him and leaned closer to the mic. "Good morning, Mr. President."

Laguna nodded back. "Good morning, President Deling. Gentlemen." He was handed a book and asked to place his hand on top of it. He raised his other hand in an angled position and repeated the oath dictated to him. After swearing to tell them nothing but the truth, the book was retrieved and he rocked himself gently sideways on his spot.

President Deling clasped his hands together and dropped them in front of him. "We trust that you are well aware why we are gathered here today."

"Yes, I am."

"To reiterate the statement that we released through the letter that we sent you, your recent actions have breached the treaty that all men in this room has signed in our joint efforts to ensure the safety of the world from sorceresses. From the intel that we have gathered, with neither a denial nor confirmation from your side, you have taken in, and is currently harboring, outlaws from Balamb Garden. These outlaws are former SeeDs who have sided with a sorceress."

"Correction, President Deling." Laguna placed a hand on the surface of the podium. "They helped one of their friends escape an unwarranted sentence to be detained in D-District Prison."

"Are you referring to a man named Seifer Almasy?"

"Yes."
"Are you aware why he was given such sentence?"

"Yes." Laguna resisted from hanging his head. He puffed his chest out. "He helped my son, Squall Loire, to escape Balamb Garden when the SeeDs came after him for rescuing a sorceress."

"Can you define your concept of 'rescuing' in your statement?"

"Saving from a dangerous situation."

"Judging from your perception of this issue, then am I correct to understand that the sorceress, who was placed in the confinements of a Garden, of Balamb Garden at that, the best equipped of all Gardens to seal a sorceress away from the vulnerable world, was actually the one in danger?"

"That is correct."

A few other men gently pushed themselves up on their seats.

"Then we are correct to summon you here for defying the treaty for taking the sorceress' side?"

Laguna narrowed his eyes and tilted his head slightly to a side. "Aren't you supposed to ask me why I believe the Garden posed a danger on the sorceress, rather than the other way around?"

"You are not asking the questions in his hearing, Mr. President." President Deling said, quelling Laguna's voice. "You have sided with a sorceress, hence the whole sorceress population, and that's all there is to that. I fail to see any other explanation to justify your actions."

Laguna's eyes fell on his hand, debating if he should tell them about Cid's own agenda to find an imaginary cure for his wife. He peered at Cid who was studying him behind his oversized spectacles with inconspicuous eyes. Cid may have not realized it yet, not that he had any way to begin with, but he knew the truth. He swore under oath to be honest and truthful, and he could very well tell them like he should.

But it would seem like they didn't want the truth. They didn't want to know that a member of their panel was also helping a sorceress, kept somewhere in the Garden under his protection. The only difference between him and Cid was they caught him red-handed. They caught his son, and they had evidences against both of them. Cid, on the other hand, was very good at keeping secrets.

After all, they were right. At the end of the day, he helped a sorceress, brought her back to her coven so she could recover and grow stronger, a notion they would extraneously consider as dangerous to the general public. And even if he thought it was the right thing to do, it would not change their minds. Even if he told them about Cid. Without any proof, he would appear too defensive, and he couldn't afford to make everything worse than it was for Esthar and everyone involved. Especially the sorceresses. Vinzer Deling had always wanted his neck, and there was no way going around him. He was quick to impale him with a stake as soon as Esthar was placed in a bad light.

President Deling leaned closer against the table. "Mr. President?"

Laguna snapped back to the row in front of him.

"Are you taking the sorceress' side?"

"I heard you."

"Yes, or no?"
Laguna's lips slowly crept upward. "I'm taking my son's side."

"Your son's side?"

"Yes."

"Does your son know the gravity of the situation after pulling a reckless action to defect from the Garden?"

"My son is a smart, intelligent boy. More so than all of us combined here in this room."

"Of course you are inclined to be biased about your son."

"Absolutely." Laguna whipped his head to a side. "He's my son! Perhaps you placed the wrong man on this podium."

"If you are proud to be a father to Squall Loire, then did you make sure he knew where his impulsive decisions would all lead to? That it may start a war?"

"My son spent most of his life in Balamb Garden. I entrusted his growth in that place, but I admit that I don't know what kind of things they taught him in there. And that was my fault, to leave him to spend much more time in that place than in Esthar with me." He eyed Cid who was starting to twiddle his thumbs together. "I'm not just talking about him. I'm talking about his friends who grew up with him in the Garden as SeeDs. Who risked everything to stick with him. Friends who were loyal to a fault. These people, they're just kids, and kids don't lie. Kids can't stomach the atrocities we adults commit ourselves. These are honest kids." Laguna paused, scanning the men before him. "As a father, I will not tolerate what my son had done, only if it is, or was, beyond reason. If it's wrong, it's wrong. But if it only appears to be wrong, but he was on a more honest side, more honorable side, then I'm on the same side as his."

President Deling hummed against his throat. "Are you saying that we are choosing the wrong side?"

Laguna's chuckle bounced his head slightly. "My son used to say there are no right or wrong sides. They are what they are, just sides to choose from. Rest assured that Esthar's side doesn't have any skeletons inside its closet, given how much you have already investigated us, as you claimed."

"Are you pertaining to anything, Mr. President?"

Laguna shrugged. "Just saying."

"We are here to discuss your case. Don't turn this to a different direction."

"Just imploring that you should look at both sides of the coin."

President Deling leaned back on his chair. "This is getting nowhere, Mr. President."

"I didn't invite myself here. Let me remind you that you called for me."

"You are begging for a war."

"War is something that should be deliberated more seriously." Laguna breathed in and cranked his neck backwards. He turned back to the panel, eyes piercing through President Deling's. "Are you sure you want to start this war? You can investigate first, ask both parties involved. But I bet you won't do that. You wouldn't interrogate Mr. Kramer like what you're doing with me now. You have
SeeDs to pride yourselves with."

"SeeDs and Gardens maintain the peace in this world."

"And I don't want a war either." Laguna slid his hands inside his pockets and reeled back and forth on his heels. "I'm just a father caught in the middle of protecting my son and fulfilling my political responsibilities. But as a servant of my country, if you ask me, I urge you to look deeper into this case before you can justify this war you're talking about."

"We just did. And it all points to you helping a sorceress and breaking the treaty. That's enough grounds for war."

"This is the problem with treaties like this. We become too biased and objective with our oaths that we lose our better judgement."

"The treaty was signed for a reason. Sorceresses destroyed us once. The treaty makes sure it is not to happen again."

"What if it is just one sorceress? Who are we to judge that all sorceresses are dangerous? What if many of them are innocent and didn't want what happened? What if they lost families as well because of the war?"

"Who are we to judge?" President Deling said, brows knitted in a frown, the first actual emotion Laguna had seen from him that day. "Mr. President, we are just people who lost many loved ones from the wraths of sorceresses, and you're refuting the sacrifices we have made with our losses. Let the sorceresses deal with their own, and let us do the same. Let us protect our people from these deadly creatures."

"With all due respect, Mr. Deling, I lost my wife because of the war." Laguna clenched his jaw, almost choking at the painful memory of Raine. He lifted his shoulders. "A sorceress did that. And it made me hate sorceresses too. Hell, I entrusted my son to Balamb Garden so he would learn how to defend himself and fight should another war arises." He briefly pointed at Cid at the mention of Balamb Garden. He turned back to the panel. "But a sorceress saved his life. Twice now. That changes many things. One sorceress took one from me many years ago, and I can never forget her for that. But another sorceress saved my son. My son." He pressed his chest with his palm. "That means much more to me."

President Deling shook his head. "I'm sorry, Mr. President. But that doesn't mean anything to the treaty as much as it evidently does to you. All we know is that you broke the treaty. You formed your alliance with the sorceress. For the lack of a better word, that's treason."

Laguna finally hung his head, almost nodding. He turned to his side and looked over his friends behind him. Their brows bumped together upward and looking right back at him. Kiros folded his arms uneasily against his chest and quickly dropped them down on his sides again. Laguna turned back to Galbadia's President.

"If you refuse the possibility of true peace, if you refuse to explore all possibilities and still choose to hate, then there's nothing more that I can say or do."
Ellone carried another pot from the kitchen to the dining table with Zell following behind her with a plate of hotdogs. They carefully placed the dishes on the table, and Ellone brushed her hands together as she surveyed their lunch. She called for Selphie who was fiddling with her phone on one of the chairs.

"Yup?" Selphie replied without looking up.

"Can you get the others? Lunch is ready."

"I'll do it!" Zell jumped and ran out of the room.

Selphie looked over her shoulder at Zell and smirked. She turned to Ellone. "He'll do it."

Ellone looked around. "Have you seen Squall?"

Selphie turned back to her phone. "Nope. Still in his room. Probably still sleeping, like always. You want me to text him?"

Ellone blinked at the girl and shook her head. "No, I'll get him."

"Woohkie." Selphie replied as Ellone left her as well.

She rode the elevator to reach his floor and knocked on the first door. "Squall?"

She heard a grunt from the other side.

"It's lunchtime." Ellone called back and waited for a response. When she didn't get any, she tapped the door gently. "I'm coming in, okay?" She waited for any sound of protest and when it didn't come, she let herself in.

Squall sandwiched his head between his pillows and his blanket nearly covered the rest of his body. Ellone smiled and shook her head. Even in sleep, he'd seclude himself from the rest of the world. She looked around and commended Squall's good habit to keep his room tidy, something he thankfully didn't take after Laguna. She took a remote control, pointed it on the windows and pressed the button for the curtains to slide to either side and let the sunlight flood the room. Squall groaned and turned away from the glaring light.

"You missed breakfast." Ellone said, keeping her tone gentle.

"Not hungry." Squall said, his voice muffled beneath his pillow.

Ellone sighed and sat on the edge of his bed, his back facing her. "You really should get more sleep at night, you know? Life begins at day." Ellone turned to look at her brother who was purposely ignoring her. "What do you think, Squall?"

Squall groaned again.

Ellone leaned closer. "Can't hear you."

"Whatever."

Ellone jumped on his bed, now laying on top of him. "Wake up, wake up, wake up!"

Squall groaned louder, as if it could wish her away. "Ellone, sto--"

"This is awfully sooooooft…" Ellone gushed, bouncing her back against his side. "I get it now.
Even I wouldn't leave this kind of bed."

Squall was whining now. "Argh! Fine!"

Ellone rolled her eyes up and smiled. She sat up and watched Squall slide free from his self-imposed bounds. He folded his knees, propped his arms on them, and glanced at Ellone who smiled at her small victory.

She tilted her head and inspected him. "Don't tell me you stayed up last night working on that thing again."

Squall indolently scratched his head and took a deep breath. He raised his brows to pull his eyes open.

"Even the Moombas are staying up for you." Ellone pulled back for a second and leaned closer again. "You know, this is not the best way to unmiss her."

Squall flashed her a look. "What are we talking about again?"

"That thing and Rinoa." Ellone smiled and peered at her brother. "If you can't sleep because of her, spending all night on that thing is not going to bring her back here."

Squall trilled in his throat and looked away to the window. He glanced back at Ellone. "You said there's lunch?"

Ellone flashed a bright smile. "Yes." She bounced up from the bed and reached out a hand for Squall. "It's a new recipe I've come up with. Zell helped me make it. Taste-test it for me?"

Squall grinned and took Ellone's hand. She pulled him up and off the bed before prancing to the door. "Be seeing you downstairs!"

"Yeah." Squall called back in a murmur. He gazed again through his window at the bright skyline riddled with tall and slim Estharian buildings that splashed colorful images of (apparently) famous people and redundant products. Somewhere beyond it was the last place he visited outside the city's bounds where he left a good piece of himself.

"Be seeing you..." He whispered.

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Much later that afternoon, he found himself in the shop, doing "that thing" again.

Squall spent an hour under his prototype linking wires and tightening screws, candidly wishing there was a special type of tool to fix heads. And if there was, he'd start with Laguna's before working on his. If Dr. Odine hadn't invented one yet, maybe there was a way to design one. Why not erase some memories too while he was at it and spare him the sleepless nights? Since they returned from Lunar Gate, there was a constant need to find something to do and clear his head with, no matter how much his body was pleading for bed. He'd often wonder if Rinoa had already linked him to knighthood and was reeling him back to her, but that only gave him more reasons to think of her and the temptation to visit Lunar Gate grew stronger. But would she really make him her knight? Why would she? She rejected him for a reason.

So, it really wasn't the knighthood that kept him up at night, leading him back to that magical screw.

He felt a light kick on his leg and he stiffened at the sudden invasion.
"Squall."

He slid out and lifted his goggles from his eyes, glaring at Seifer. "What?"

Seifer leaned his back on the metal leg of the prototype and cocked his head at the door. "Ellone's looking for you."

"Again?"

"Yeah. Again. Just like this noon. And morning. And yesterday night. And--"

"Yeah, yeah, I get it." Squall groan and pulled himself up.

A four-legged red-furred creature with oversized paws approached Seifer and stood up on its hind legs. "Rghhh!"

Looking around, he saw three more working at the rear parts of the towering mech, their red spiky heads poking out. "I'm starting to get jealous of the Moombas. It seems to me you have found your new set of best friends."

"I didn't ask them to be here," Squall said. If he had to be honest, he'd very much rather work alone. "They just kept coming in, so might as well ask for their help."

The Moomba who stood by Seifer faced Squall and began jumping. "Laguna! Laguna!"

"Huh?"

"They kept calling me 'Laguna.'" Squall said. "Must be sensing my dad's blood in me."

"Ha! And you almost punched me for calling you Loire." He surveyed Squall's helpers. "Do they have names?"

"No." Squall said.

Seifer raised an eyebrow. "You sure?"

Squall frowned and drooped his shoulders. "Kinda gave them some."

"Aha! Knew it." Seifer said. "Care to introduce me to your minions?"

Squall pointed to one. "That's Noctis. And Gladdy. Ignis, and that clumsy one is Prompto."

Just then, "Prompto's" wrench slid from his large hand. Squall tucked his lips to a side and hummed against his throat.

"Where the hell did you get those names?"

"I don't know."

Seifer shrugged and sized up the prototype when "Noctis" scampered back to the machine. "Almost finished, huh."

Squall removed his gloves and brushed his greased shirt. "Yeah."

"This must be a stupid question to you, but is that a robot?"

"Yeah."
"Huh." Seifer glanced at him, grinning. "You're really taking this war business seriously. What's so special about it?"

Squall motioned his screw over the mech. "Has it's own mechanical nervous system, should technically be able to think on its own and respond quickly to attacks, and working on making it undetectable under radar."

"Whoah, like Dr. Odine's ship?"

"Yeah."

"Heh, nice." Seifer nodded in approval. "How do you control it?"

Squall tossed him a watch with an elongated display that shaped half of the wrist. "Touchscreen controls. Should be easy to navigate."

Seifer examined the watch in his hand. "Selphie will flip when she sees this."

Squall shrugged. "Still a prototype."

Seifer looked up at the mech. "What do you call it?"

Squall followed his gaze and studied his work. "X-ATM092."

Seifer clicked his tongue. "Yeah... that's a little hard to remember."

"Designed after Dr. Odine's ship, will also be called after it."

Seifer chuckled. "Seriously? Even I can come up with a better one."

"Whatever."

"Ragnarok."

Squall thought for a moment. "It stays X-ATM092."

"Ragnarok sounds cooler." Seifer smirked. "Easier to say, too. Admit it, you may be the genius behind this thing, but I came up with the better name for it."

"How about we take it to voting?"

"I'll win." Seifer said, brimming with confidence. "Are you gonna dupe these? At least make one for each of us?"

"If we have the time." Squall tossed his screwdriver into his toolbox. "Dr. Odine finally agreed to help in producing more of these, enough for the whole army. But for now, we'll manage what we can get."

"How long before you submit Ragnarok to the laboratory?"

Squall's eye twitched at the name. Granted he didn't come up with it, but damn if it wasn't good. "Maybe later." He scanned the whole thing. "They must have wrapped up the hearing by now. Nothing good comes out of anything if you are put on the hot seat."

Seifer folded his arms against his chest. "They'll come for Esthar very soon."
Squall pulled the goggles off his head and turned around.

"And then, I mean, why not Lunar Gate too?"

Squall paused.

Seifer chuckled. "So, your little project's almost finished. How do you plan to distract yourself after?"

Squall glared at him.

Seifer shrugged. "Everybody can see through your bullshit, you know. Everyone knows Rinoa's on your mind."

Squall silently fixed his toolbox.

"So she can't leave her coven to visit you here." Seifer plodded closer. "Why not visit her in Lunar Gate? You seem to be in brushing-elbows terms with the sorceress. Pretty sure they won't kill you, at least."

He wanted to retort something like "It's none of your goddamn business," but Seifer seemed to have hit the right spots. Going defensive won't do any good but make this conversation longer than it should be.

"I'm not…"

Seifer leaned closer. "What?"

Squall sighed and furrowed his brows. "I'm not… sure she'd want to see me."

"Really? Are you like Ellone now? Reading minds?" Seifer motioned crooked hands around his head. "Do you take after your sister?"

"She's adopted."

Seifer was floored. "WHAT?!"

"Rest assured I don't have her powers. I thought you knew that by now."

"That's mind-blowing. Really."

Seifer slumped on one of the foldable chairs in the shop, ignoring the repellent air in the place with Squall's need to be by himself. He didn't want to talk about it, but being deluged in his thoughts for too long never made him feel so alone. Maybe it was healthy for him to have someone to talk to once in a while, though Seifer was probably the last person he'd choose for it.

"I just… I failed her."

Seifer rose an eyebrow and curiously peered at Squall. "Hmm?"

"Looking back, when we were still in Timber, I let the Garden capture her. You guys were in front of me, you didn't know any better when you placed her inside the cell." he sighed. "But looking back, I should've done something. Break her out of the ship if I only knew what could be waiting for her in Balamb. I knew it wasn't good, but…"

Seifer watched Squall staring his throes away on a wall.
"Didn't she forgive you yet?"

"I don't know…"

"Wanna find out?"

"No, I…" Squall shook his head. "She turned down my offer to be her knight. She said she wanted the cycle of indebtedness to end. Maybe all she wanted was to go back to her coven. End it there. And never see me again. I guess…” Squall raised his brows briefly. "I think I'd want the same thing if I were her."

Seifer narrowed his eyes. "Ya know, I didn't understand a word you said. You were talking gibberish again. But lemme translate what I think I heard. You can't face Rinoa because of past events that you can't change, even if you tried to reach out and help and, oh I don't know, just speaking from what I know, a'ight? Sacrificing almost everything and prepared to leave everything behind just for her." Seifer shot two bursts of mocking laughter. "You sound just as moronic as your dad. The future leaders of Esthar, ladies and gentlemen!"

"You asked, I answered." Squall replied irately. "Now get the hell out of my shop."

Seifer clammed his hands up and down to satirize Squall's retort. "Blah blah blah." He propped his feet over the table.

Squall groaned and was about to leave instead when his phone began vibrating in his pocket. He fished it out and read the screen.

It was Ellone.

He unlocked his phone. "Ellone."

"Squall, Dad just came back."

His heart skipped a beat, but he tried to maintain his composure. "Okay."

"He wants both of us here. Please come up here at his office."

"Okay, be right up."

"What'd she say?" Seifer asked, now alert.

"They just got back." Squall replied while still looking at his phone.

Seifer stood up. "I'm coming."

Laguna and his friends were sitting on the lounge chair of the office, surrounded by everyone else. Squall first caught a glimpse of Quistis who was holding her fist close to her mouth as she listened to the men. That couldn't be a good sign. The President turned around to look over his son and gave him a small, almost apologetic smile.

"How did it go?" Seifer asked and collapsed on the other couch, spreading his arms around it.

"Laguna did surprisingly great. Can't say the same about the council, unfortunately." Kiros said.

"War?" Squall asked.

Laguna shrugged. "Well, yeah. That's basically where the hearing was heading."
"Did you tell them about Cid?" Zell asked.

Laguna shook his head. "I tried. But they talked me off. They told me I was trying to change the subject."

"They will never listen, won't they." Ellone said despondently.

"They're Gardens conspiring with politicians. It's impossible." Squall said.

"They insisted that we wanted war." Kiros said.

"But that's what we've been trying to avoid!" Selphie said, stomping a foot lightly on the floor.

"There's no changing their minds." Quistis said, dropping her hand from her mouth and dangling her arm on her side. "Vinzer Deling did the interrogating, and they placed him there for a reason. They knew Galbadia will never live this opportunity down."

Irvine shrugged. "At least we tried, right? President Laguna tried to negotiate against it."

"I did the best I could." Laguna sighed and gazed through his window. "I knew this would come. And I know we'll be able to fight. But this is war. We will never be prepared enough. And the civilians..."

"We'll take the war away from Esthar." Quistis proposed. "Make sure it happens nowhere near the city. Esthar is a very big place with many upopulated areas. If they are really sincere on their worries about the war, they should agree on our terms to ensure the safety of Estharians. All of them."

"How are you sure the war will happen here?" Zell asked.

"It's obvious, ya know?" Raijin replied. "It's the whole world against us, ya know?"

"No more obvious place to do it." Fujin said.

"Is the decision final?" Squall asked.

"They claimed they were about to do a closed-door deliberation after I left. I hope they did, so the other members of the panel can hopefully convince them to reconsider the treaty." Laguna said.

Squall nodded. "We have to be prepared all the same. We tried talking, and that didn't work. Fighting seems to be the only option now."

"All this for a sorceress." Kiros said, shaking his head slowly.

"Who was brave enough to do something about this war." Zell plopped down on the other end of the couch Seifer was sitting on. "If it wasn't for her, we wouldn't even know that we were actually killing innocents."

"She was the change we've all been waiting for." Ellone added.

Irvine raised his hand. "I second it."

Selphie sighed. "I miss Rinny." she pouted. "She was the nicest girl ever."

Squall glanced uneasily at Selphie before looking away at the window. Darkness has spread across the star-sprinkled sky, and the city glowed with its lights that shone even thru the distance. He
never realized how much time he had spent again at the shop and failed to realize that another day was about to end. Another day without her.

He looked up the night and it waved back with a streak of light from the tail of a passing meteor. And if there was any wish he was supposed to make, he wished she still remembered him.

Rinoa gazed at the calming sky as a shooting star passed by, leading her to the faint glow from the farther stretch of the barren lands where Esthar City should be. Her lips formed into a small smile and she touched the rings in her necklace. He must be there, staying with his friends and pursuing a peaceful life away from wars and battles. She wondered if he was still a SeeD, considering everything that happened. And she hoped he wasn't anymore.

"Rinoa!" Vanille called from behind.

She turned around and pushed the wheelbarrow filled with logs closer to a cabin. Vanille was sitting on top of the roof, hammering a plywood in place. Using a gentle Aero spell, Rinoa drifted a log toward Vanille who placed it beside her.

"How many more do we need to fill that roof?" Rinoa yelled from below. "Do I have to get more from the supplies?"

"The ones in your wheelbarrow are enough!" Vanille called back.

Rinoa clapped her hands to brush the dirt off and scanned the town. Sorceresses glided, floated, levitated, and shot spells from all corners of the place. And each time they did, more materials were stapled into their shelters and building more. She glanced to check on the giant crates of their building and livelihood supplies lined up along one of the streets in their town labeled in Estharian symbols (she was told they were from a Dr. Odine of Esthar).

She was glad the tunnel in Timber lead them all here. Apparently, all covens were built with tunnels to lead all fleeing sorceresses in Lunar Gate should an attack occur. A coven from Winhill had arrived first after an ambush from Galbadia Garden years ago, and their settlement had provided sorceresses of Timber a good headstart to rebuild. They may not be as hidden among the thick trees in the middle of the forest, but she somehow felt safer in the Estharian territory, a sentiment she seemed to have shared with the other sorceresses.

Nevertheless, so much work was yet to be done until they could make it as close to home as it could get.

"I think this is enough for now!" Vanille said.

Rinoa looked up. "Yep! It's getting pretty dark, too! Maybe we should call it a day?"

Vanille jumped and floated gently down to the ground. "No dinner?"

Rinoa giggled. "Of course there's dinner." She always made sure she'd have her dinner before finishing a day. Even when she tried to survive in the middle of the woods without enough supplies for food, she made sure to eat three times a day and cooked for two. For herself and…
She stared into the distance again. Esthar wasn't supposed to feel this far, but when was he ever within her reach? In those days she spent with him, he felt too distant no matter how much she wanted to get closer, no matter how much they went through and gave up to do the right thing and survive.

Was it because she rejected him as her knight? Or was it simply because she was a sorceress and was born to belong at the other side of the world?

Vanille bended forward and playfully took a peek of Rinoa's face. "Hellooo…"

Rinoa jumped and turned to her. "Hmm?"

"You're looking at that place again."

"Oh." Rinoa shook her head slightly. "It's the glow, and the…"

"Soil?"

"Y-yeah! The… soil."

Vanille clamped her hands together on her back and bounced. "What's so interesting about it?"

"Well, uhm… It's uh… white." She mentally slapped herself, but it was better than nothing.

Vanille bit her lip and smiled. "Is that all?"

Rinoa's eyes fell on the ground. "Well… Esthar. It's right over there."

"Wanna go?"

Rinoa snapped her head in surprise. "Huh?"

"You know, drop by and visit him!"

"Oh. You mean Squall?"

"No, the Moombas." Vanille rolled her eyes. "Of course Squall! Instead of waiting for him to visit you, why don't you go visit him! I'll go with you!"

"I can't make you leave the coven!"

"Of course you won't. But I'll come anyway. Gotta make sure someone falls dead with you in Esthar when we run out of energy."

Rinoa laughed. "We won't be staying that long, if we ever do go. We still have so much to do around here."

"So you are considering it!"

Rinoa felt her cheeks burning. "I'm not sure he'd be glad to see me."

"Aww Rin, we don't know that!" Vanille chirped. "Fang said he was really sad to leave you! She might not read his mind like she did with that Ellone girl, but she saw in his face how badly he wanted to stay if he only could!"

"Then why do I feel like I'm the only one who wants to see him?" Rinoa's eyes moved to a side
she hung her head. "Maybe I've given him enough trouble already, and he just wanted me out of his 

hair." She looked at Vanille and forced a smile. "He just left me here. He didn't visit or leave a 

word for me. Maybe this is where our journey ends."

Vanille smiled back and locked her fingers with Rinoa's, swaying them to the sides in her effort to 

cheer her up. When she let go, she slid an arm around the other's and they began walking. "He did 

leave you that ring, right?"

Rinoa nodded. She remained silent as they took more steps and sighed. "I hope he comes back for 

it, at least. I don't know if he still does, but I hope he remembers that he left it with me."

Her free hand travelled to their rings again, her fingers brushing the curved edges of the lion 

around his, just as she did back in their small space by the fireplace in the cabin. That calm after a 

storm. That serenity before their painful journey they had to live through just because she was a 
sorceress who dreamed of peace, and that dream brought her to a terrible place.

And yet, even after everything, he voyaged, he endured, and he fought with her. 

She smiled and faced Vanille. "I hope he remembers me." Because she sure won't ever forget him.

Chapter End Notes

Damn the council for making me write lengthy speeches for Laguna. And before you 

ask, yes. I deliberately welcomed the participation of four Moombas and named them 
after the loveable bros of FFXV. Moombros. Lol okay I'll show myself out. But please 
do leave comments and let me know what you think! Thank you again for reading!
Eyes on Me

Chapter Notes

I had many different title ideas for this chapter, and I chose this because one, I was listening to the piano rendition of "Eyes on Me" while writing a good chunk of this chapter. Two, just keep reading and you'll see! I hope you'll enjoy this one!

Squall stood by the door as Dr. Odine pulled Ragnarok out of his shop with a towing device, the rolled blueprint clipped in his arm. When the extraction was complete, Dr. Odine shook his hand, made his way out, and waved his free arm without glancing back.

900 units. They both agreed to manufacture 900 Ragnaroks in what was promised to be six months. He was told there was a plant underneath the doctor's laboratory where he produced all his inventions. A target of five robots per day was slow by Dr. Odine's standards given its sophisticated design, but that was good enough for Squall. As long as he got to work and generate a few before war breaks out.

He headed to his room, pulled his shirt off and observed through the space between his blinds as Dr. Odine's convoy moved out of the city through the noontime rush.

Just then, another vehicle came in.

Squall leaned closer and peered at the large van. It came from Trabia's direction, but bore nothing of the Garden, driving straight to the palace gates. His brows furrowed, turned around and walked into his bathroom.

As he began dressing up after the shower half an hour later, he took glances of the van, now parked at one of the spaces on the driveway. Deciding he needed to find out what it was there for, he headed for the President's Office, surmising that whoever it was should be important enough to enter the premises in a van rather than ride the line carts usually used around Esthar.

Three Shumis stood by the door inside while Laguna talked to The Elder in a low voice. For him to leave the Shumi Village was an unusual and very vexing chance, and the secrecy of the meeting gave him unsettling vibes.

Squall slowly reached for a couch far from Laguna's desk and sat there. Laguna glanced at him briefly before returning to The Elder. His chin rested on his arms trussed up on his desk, his eyebrows wrinkled together. Squall tried to observe his father's body language, but Laguna was stiff on his seat as The Elder continued talking. He paused and languidly turned around at Squall with unreadable eyes. Laguna's gaze followed and landed on Squall, holding his uncharacteristically serious composure.

"Ah, the Loire heir." The Elder stood up and bowed. "Good afternoon."
Squall quickly stood from the couch and bowed as well. "Good afternoon. Please, make yourself at home."

Laguna dropped his hands on his desk and leaned back. "Elder, this is my son Squall."

The Elder face turned around, locked his eyes with Laguna and nodded. He nodded back and cast his eyes back on Squall. "Son, join us." He gestured at the other chair across The Elder.

Squall did as he said, his heart pounding against his chest.

"The Elder graced his presence with us here today to–"

"Please, President, we don't have much time. Perhaps we can skip to the important bit."

Laguna nodded. "The other nations are targeting Lunar Gate."

Squall's breath hitched.

Laguna massaged his forehead and closed his eyes halfway. "Cid is taking the lead, with Galbadia."

"Is that even possible?" Squall tried to maintain a solid tone in his voice.

"Apparently." Laguna took a deep breath and glanced at The Elder.

"Galbadia is arguably the most dominant nation on the other side of this war." The Elder admonished. "You may have the biggest army and the most advanced weapons, but Galbadia has a military and a Garden. Balamb is basically ran by their Garden, and together they make very powerful allies."

"Trabia tried to clean its hands from this war." Laguna cited. "But the rest of the council… well…"

"They threatened Trabia." The Elder finished. "If the Garden defected, like you did, they will brand them as traitors. And they will not be able to defend themselves as good as Esthar does."

"And you?" Squall asked.

"Our village has been a pacifist for years." The Elder said. "We only ever concerned ourselves with maintaining peace. We never involve ourselves in wars, but," he faced Laguna. "we are always in debt with Esthar for taking care of our own Moombas."

Laguna nodded once. "With pleasure."

Squall took a deep breath. He had a good guess why and how Cid took control. "Cid's wife is Ultimacia."

He mentally punched himself for blurting that out.

The Elder snapped his head at Squall and the other Shumis in the room shuffled uneasily on their positions.

Laguna rose from his chair and plodded to the side. "Oh boy…"

"Edea Kramer. Cid's wife. She was possessed by Ultimacia at the end of the sorceress war." Squall interposed, his eyes fixed on The Elder's. He already said something, might as well roll with it.
"H-how…" The Elder stammered. "How can you be sure?"

"I…” Squall hesitated. Was he allowed to tell him about Ellone and her powers? He didn't want to bring Ellone into the spotlight and accuse Esthar of keeping a not-so-sorceress by proxy.

"Dr. Odine told him." Laguna interjected. He shot Squall a look before turning back to The Elder.

"President, we have to be careful with who we impute." The Elder said. "Unless you have the evidence to prove this."

Laguna shook his head. "No. It was only a witness account."

"And records." Squall added. "Records kept in Cid's office."

"Do we have copies of them, or an access?"

Squall's mouth gaped, but no words came out.

"No…” he finally managed.

The Elder shook his head. "Without enough proof, this will escalate the present situation."

"I know." Laguna replied. "They already are waging war against us, either way."

"But if your claims are true, then it can mean another sorceress war." The Elder prodded. "Ultimacia is not just any other sorceress. She almost brought an end to this world before, and she could very well do it again. We may have ensured Adel's death, but if Cid's wife is Ultimacia, we will lose more than we had."

Laguna nodded. "I doubt that Cid will promptly expose his wife to these affairs, he's not that careless. Last I heard she's under a cryogenic treatment."

The Elder nodded and veered away from Laguna. "During the deliberation, after you left, I asked him what does NORG have to say about this. About everything. Even if he is the village's vagabond, he still is Shumi, and Balamb Garden's proprietor. Cid said NORG has taken his leave and left it all up to him." The Elder said, turning back to Laguna. "NORG may have turned his back on us, and may have many secrets. But he would never allow himself to lose even the tiniest bit of control of the Garden to Cid."

"NORG knew of the experiments Cid did with the sorceresses." Squall said.

"Experiments?"

Squall looked at Laguna apprehensively who nodded back. He faced The Elder. "Apart from ambushing covens, Cid ordered the capture of sorceresses. To find a cure for his wife. My associate, Quistis Trepe, saw the records in Cid's office herself. His latest subject was the cause of my defection from the Garden."

"If he is presently collaborating with a sorceress, then why is he collaborating with Galbadia in this war?"

"Possibly to get to Lunar Gate." Squall said. "You said it yourself. Cid is taking charge, and he wants to bring this war to Lunar Gate. When– I mean, Dr. Odine told me Adel was the first to see Ultimacia in Lunar Gate, absorbing all the powers of the Lunar Cry. The red moon. This gave her power close to omnipotence."
"But why would he choose Lunar Gate?"

"Because it is the most ideal place for sorceresses when the moon is red." Squall figured he would have to explain everything. "Sorceresses run out of powers if they are separated from a coven, or when they don't have knights of their own. The red moon recharges those powers, hence the Red Moon Festival. Dr. Odine calls this phenomenon the Lunar Cry. This will last them until the next event. The Lunar Gate happens to be the most ideal place for a coven during the Lunar Cry. It gives them more energy."

"Then Dr. Odine must have told Cid about this!"

"No, he wouldn't. He refuses to involve himself with the SeeDs." Laguna said.

"Unless…" Squall said, his eyes widened with dreaded revelation.

Laguna stared back. "Unless she…"

"What?" The Elder pressed.

"Unless a sorceress told him."

The Elder widened his eyes. As the three looked at each other, they knew what it meant. He shot the other Shumis a panicked look. "We must prepare the village. It's happening again."

Squall stood up. "We need to make our preparations as well."

Laguna strode to The Elder's side and shook his hand. "Thank you for the visit and the warning and I'll show you outside and you must go and survive."

"Yes, yes, you too." The Elder said hurriedly as they all exited the room.

"Uh…" Laguna stopped midway and whirled to face Squall. "I'm going to take care of the civilians, make sure everyone's prepared for the war, sorceress, anything. Gonna meet up with Kiros and Ward, and maybe Ellone. You better meet with the others. You're in charge of the battle plan now."

"What…"

"I dub thee Esthar's General. Or Captain. Or Vice President, I don't know. Just plan out the battle. I didn't enroll you in Balamb Garden for nothing. Okay? Okay, thanks! Bye!"

And he was gone.

Squall slapped his palm onto his face and groaned.

"Hey Zell! You're late."

Zell nodded at Kiros with a profuse "I know, I know." as he made his way to the palace's conference room. He slowed his pace and slowly pushed the door open, peeking through the small gap. The girls were already inside, and so were the boys (except for Seifer). Squall was busy addressing a question brought up by Irvine. Selphie pointed a finger at him and mocked a silent laughter. He shot her a glare and tiptoed his way to a free chair.

"Zell." Squall's voice slightly boomed in the room.
"Gyaaah!
"Ha! Foiled again." Selphie jeered.

Zell shrank in his chair. "Yes?"

Squall peered at him with sobriety. "You're in charge of the West Region with Quistis."

Zell let go a puff of relief. "Aye. When?"

"Are you asking when the war is breaking?" Quistis asked, a disbelief in her expression.

"Whoah, for real?!" Zell jerked on his seat, realizing she was talking about the war.

"Yeah. Also, the year is 5030." Irvine shot back with slight sarcasm. "Our Emperor's a dog."

Raijin snorted loudly.

"LATE." Fujin goaded, rationalizing Zell's ridiculous inquiry. Zell rolled his eyes.

The door burst open as Seifer entered with a pompous stride. He threw himself on a chair and propped his feet on the table.

"Feet down, Seifer." Quistis scolded.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Is this your table?" Seifer snapped back.

"You're rude."

Seifer grinned and cocked his head at Squall. "What's up?"

Squall peered back at him. "War is coming."

"I heard."

"They're heading for Lunar Gate. You'll join Fujin and Raijin at the walls."

"Is Ragnarok ready?"

Squall shook his head. "I don't know."

"What's Ragnarok?" Irvine asked.

"That robot Squall is working on." Quistis replied.

"WOOHHOO! ROBOTS!" Selphie cheered. "Can it blast things and people to SMITHEREENS?"

Squall's lip twitched. "Yes it can. And no. You can't blast people to 'SMITHEREENS.'"

"Unless needed, right?"

"We try not to."

"Even a little?" Selphie squeaked.

Squall blinked and thought for a moment. "Sure."
"I hope we can operate them remotely." Quistis said. "At least to buy us more time."

"We can." Squall nodded.

"What about the evacuees, ya know?" Raijin asked.

"Ward's in charge of them. They're on their way to Tear's Point. Ellone's following tomorrow."

"Tear's Point?" Irvine asked. "Why Tear's Point?"

"Esthar has an evacuation center at Tear's Point. They can rebuild there."

"You mean… like a backup plan. Right?"

"Yeah." Squall hesitated for a second. He nodded. "Right."

"You should be with them." Quistis said, her tone stern and toneless.

Squall cast her a questioning look.

Quistis stood. "You should be there. With Ellone and President Laguna. You three are the Loires. And the civilians will need you to start over."

"She's right, man." Zell shrugged. "The last time you went on a mission with us, you almost died. And it made a huge, huge worldwide mess."

"And I survived." Squall replied. "Time is changing."

Seifer waved a dismissive hand. "Just let him fight. He's leading this battle plan. And leaders should be in the front row."

Squall hung his head and nodded. "That's right." He lifted his eyes to his group. "I'm your leader. But it doesn't mean you have to follow me. This is war, and I will not ask that much from you. I can't hold responsibility for your lives. Don't ask me to. I won't hold it against you if you walk out that door, I'll understand. And I wish I can tell you that I want you to."

Zell looked around. "I don't think any of us is moving."

Selphie leaned forward the table, grinning. "Squall, just tell us you care about us, too," she whispered loudly.

Squall let out a soft chuckle. "If you're staying, just take care out there. And come back in one piece."

Seifer gave him a lazy salute. "Copy that, Commander."

He shook his head. "Not anymore."

"Oh yeah," Zell mused. "you're Rinoa's knight now."

Seifer grinned. "A knight, huh?"

Squall smirked. "Not yet."

Seifer nodded in approval. "Niiice."

"Oooohh!" Selphie jested. "I knew it!" He laid out an arm on Irvine, her palm facing up. "I win!"
Irvine groaned as he drew a few Gil from his pocket and parted from it on Selphie's hand.

"So what about the sorceresses?" Quistis inquired.

"I'll be flying to Lunar Gate in an hour." Squall replied. "Ellone will talk to their leader, on my behalf."

"Can't wait?" Seifer jeered.

Quistis rolled her eyes. "Stop asking stupid questions, Seifer."

"I have a better one," Irvine concurred, shifting on his seat to face Squall. "What's the plan, Squall?"

Squall nodded in acknowledgement and pressed a touchscreen button on the table, flashing a blueprint on the screen behind him.

He faced the group. "The battle plan is not going to be simple this time."

Xu made a firm salute as Cid made his way through the lobby.

"How was the trip, Sir?"

"Quite well, quite well." Cid affirmed. "And the Garden?"

"Everything is in order, Sir."

"Good." Cid nodded. "Please prepare the boardroom for a meeting. Invite squad leaders. And Nida, too."

"Yes, Sir."

Cid rode the elevator to his room, slid his tie off his neck, and tossed it on his chair with his vest. He picked the letters from his dresser and scanned them in his hands as he began with the buttons of his shirt.

"Cid…"

His sensations were suddenly drowned with the scent of white musk with the sound of her voice, and he closed his eyes to savor it. His body turned around, her lure pulling him closer and closer to his bed.

And there she was, wrapped in nothing but the thin white sheets draped from her chest. Her hair flew around her in the windless air, her lips wet and wanting.

"Cid…"

He slithered on the bed and closer to her, his eyes laying on her glinting purple orbs. Her fingers travelled to his buttons, loosening them one by one as his eyes scanned every curve and every edge
of her features.

"So… beautiful," he breathed.

"I've missed you," Edea allured.

"I've missed you too."

"Why did you take so long?"

"I'm sorry."

"I hope it went well."

Cid smiled. "Yes," Finally, he had something to please her. He ran his fingers along the silk that was her skin with featherly touch. "We will go to Lunar Gate."

Edea brushed her lips lightly on his. "Will we really?"

Cid exhaled a shaky breath, craving for her spice that flooded his senses. "Yes, my love."

Edea captured him in a heated kiss and slid her hand under his shirt, gliding her fingers along his skin and touched him where she could hear his delirious bliss.

"When?"

Cid wrestled to get his words out. "Tomorrow," he whispered. "Tomorrow we leave."

"Stay by my side," Edea said in an almost whimper. "Stay by me, and I can assure you glory."
"Even if I can, I'd never tell you what I saw."

"Already getting back at me?"

"Oh, Squall," Ellone said playfully. "Knowing the past that isn't yours is hard enough. Can't imagine about knowing the future. It hasn't happened yet! Can you imagine how that can literally drive you crazy?"

Squall shrugged. "Good point."

Ellone giggled. "So stop being so nervous. You don't even know how it'll turn out."

Squall sighed. She was right, nobody knew exactly how it would turn out. But what would he do when Rinoa pushes him away? When she becomes repulsed by his sight? How would he react?

He was quick to disembark when they finally landed, resisting his hands from quivering on his sides. They walked to the town where the sorceress in blue sari waited at the entrance. She smiled and bowed at them in acknowledgement.

"It's good to see you again." Ellone greeted. She bowed, and Squall followed suit. "She said it's good to see us, too."

"It's an honor." Squall replied.

"She said she's Fang," Ellone translated after listening to her thoughts. "Basically, she's in charge of the coven."


"She knows. Aaand she wants us to follow her." Ellone nodded at Squall and they walked further into the town. He was itching to ask about Rinoa, but the possibilities of what she would answer were deathly terrifying. And to face her again, no matter how much he wanted to, he would never be ready. Besides, the town was not even halfway done. Cabins were still missing walls, lights were lacking, and streets were coarse and unpaved. Rinoa could be busy working with the other sorceresses. Maybe searching for her could wait after they have settled the matter at hand.

Fang lead them inside her shelter surrounded by square patches of gladioluses and motioned them to sit on her wooden chairs. When she took hers, she rested her leg on the other and leaned back.

"Is it good news or bad?" Ellone began for Fang.

"Bad." Squall replied.

"Has anyone found them?"

"No. But they will, soon. War is only going to be days away. Galbadia and Balamb are leading the battle to Lunar Gate."

Fang smirked as if she had anticipated it.

"What do we propose they do?" Ellone asked.

"Evacuate the town, for now. Just until the tension dies down."

"She will do what she can. Timber's sorceresses just got here, and they haven't completely recovered yet."
"We understand," Squall replied. "But they will be armed with the same weapons that attacked Timber. Worse, they may have a powerful sorceress on their side."

Fang narrowed her eyes.

"She's asking which sorceress it was."

"Does Ultimecia ring a bell?"

She froze and stared at him with wide eyes.

"But know that this time, Esthar is on your side," Squall assured. "We will do what we can to help the coven to patch things up. First, we need to evacuate the town."

Ellone shifted her eyes between the two. "She wishes to talk to the sorceresses first. And let them decide how to deal with this war. But she will tell them your advice to escape, but she worries that they will not agree."

"They will stay?" Squall reproved, the image of Rinoa in the middle of the raging battle flashed his mind.

"She will ask them. She also asks that you don't worry too much. They are sorceresses and they can fight."

Fang stood up and glanced at the door.

"She's... going to talk to them."

Ellone and Squall stood up as well and followed her out. They watched as she rose from the ground, flew higher in the air, and landed on one of the roofs.

In the inner parts of the town, just behind a cabin, Rinoa waved a hand to cast a gentle water spell on their small tomato garden. She felt a hand tap her shoulder and she looked away from her chore.

"Fang is gonna say something!" the sorceress said. She didn't catch her name, but if she remembered correctly, it was Cara.

Rinoa followed the influx of sorceresses gathered in front of a cabin. Vanille suddenly pulled her to her side and locked her arm around hers. They gazed up to Fang.

Fang scanned the crowd with a firm expression. "My sorceress sisters, I thank you for answering my call at this very urgent moment. Friends from Esthar City came by to visit with a warning."

"Esthar City?" Rinoa breathed. She felt Vanille shaking her arm.

"Gardens and armies lead by Galbadia and Balamb will be arriving for war, and they are heading for Lunar Gate."

Audible murmurs spread among the assembly.

"As this is war, we don't know when they're coming, and I trust that they will strike at our most vulnerable hour."

Vanille shook her arm more vigorously as Fang talked. Rinoa looked at her as she jumped excitedly and pointed at Squall who stood with another woman by the entrance of the town. She felt her breathe stiffen after a short gasp, and her eyes fixed on him. He was looking up at Fang,
listening but seemingly never understanding from his lack of reaction.

"We are advised to leave this town immediately for a safer place, because they will bring the same weapons that destroyed our homes and took the lives of several members of our coven."

Squall tore his eyes away from Fang and turned to the ground. He then lifted his head and scanned the crowd, observing the sorceresses, or maybe looking for something. His eyes caught a glimpse of one who wasn't looking at their leader.

"I too am worried for your safety. But we just got here. We are rebuilding our lives that we lost in Winhill and Timber. I told them I'll ask you and let you decide."

He fixed his gaze at her, and she was looking right back. A smile formed on her lips with intricate wrinkles forming under her eyes.

"Do we leave? Or do we stay?"

"Let us fight!" One sorceress clamored.

"We've been hiding for far too long! Let us defend our home this time!" yelled another.

Squall nodded in greeting and reciprocated a brief smile.

"If you are going to fight, then I must ask you not to fight for victory, or for power and glory. Fight for home! Fight for our sorceress sisters! Fight for our friends who gave up everything for our safety! Fight for the innocent!"

Rinoa's eyes fell and travelled back to Fang.

"Fight with the gifts we are born with. We are finally given a purpose for what many would consider our curse. These magic are made to bring peace to this world. Prove to yourselves that you are not what they punish us for! Prove to them what we really are! That we are sorceresses! And this is our world, too!"

He watched her as she cheered with the uproar Fang garnered from her speech. Spirited, happy, and healthy.

"That wasn't bad," Ellone commended behind him, clapping her hands.

Fang jumped from the roof and drifted gently to the ground. Sorceresses quickly gathered around her to applaud her successful act to boost their morale and bravery. She smiled at them as she trudged through the cheering horde toward the Loires. The coven offered the siblings bread, wreaths of flowers, and pieces of jewelry (which they turned down politely.)

"Fang said they're thanking us," Ellone said, smiling back at the sorceresses.

Squall smiled as well. "Hmm…"

Vanille hopped in front of him and offered a piece pink rose. She beamed at him, patted his head, and chided something.

"Take care of Rinny, okay?" Rinoa heard her say.

He searched for Rinoa who was standing apart from the crowd. She giggled and shrugged at the coven's overwhelming payment of gratitude.
Ellone's attention shifted to the two as they gazed at each other, almost unaware of the muddle of the crowd. There was no way she could separate the two, not now. Not even ever.

She called for Fang who quickly turned her head to Ellone.

"I better leave for Esthar now." she heard Ellone say in her head.

Fang's forehead puckered. "Huh? Just you?"

"Yeah. Just me."

Fang arched a sly brow. "Oh. Cheeky are we?"

"Take care of my brother. Okay?"

"Of course."

Ellone smiled. She turned around and hopped away from Squall. "Gotta run now!"

Squall stared at her with cow eyes. "What--"

"Got a lot to do with the evacuation. You assigned that to me, right?"

Squall cantered toward her. She was getting closer to the ship. "You're not supposed to leave the city until tomorrow!"

"Lots to do." Ellone stressed. "I'm off, okay? You stay here and take care of the rest!" She waved a hand at him. "I'll be back for you in the morning!"

"Don't leave me here!" Squall was running now as Ellone boarded the ship.

"Have a good time, bro!" Ellone called back. "Don't worry, Fang will take care of you!"

Squall slid to a stop as the ship closed its door. It hovered from the ground, blowing sand and dust in its wake before it shot away.

He groaned and kicked the thin soil, pacing back and forth as the ship slowly disappeared in the starlit horizon. That was damn irresponsible, leaving him in a town of sorceress at night with no extra clothes, no supplies, and no one who could understand him. He knew what she was trying to do. With Rinoa around after not seeing her for two months, she was trying to be his wingman and trap him in a situation when he had a chance to spend time with her. She failed to see that the thought just made everything worse. Just how much influence did Laguna have on her?

Fang approached him from behind and placed a hand on his shoulder. He turned around and looked back to the ship, as if to tell her that it was where he was supposed to be. Fang chuckled and motioned her head back into the town. He sighed heavily and followed her, still furious at Ellone's stupid attempt to--

Fang gently pulled Rinoa closer to Squall, and he once again found himself… staring. She was moving restlessly in Fang's hold, her cheeks began to turn pink.

"Rinoa, I'm putting you in charge of providing Squall his due accommodation as he spends more time with us." Fang declaimed with a smile.

Rinoa shot her a look. "What do you mean?"
"He's spending the night in your cabin." Fang turned to her. "How's that?"

Rinoa widened her eyes and shook her head. "Wha– n– no–"

"No one will accept him, no one else can accept him." Fang interjects. She rolled her eyes up to give it more thought. "Well, maybe you. So you're in charge of him. Okay?"

"Uh…"

"Great!" Fang smiled at both of them. "Time for bed. Big day tomorrow." She patted Rinoa's shoulder and fled. Vanille gave Rinoa one last wink before towing behind Fang.

The two she left stared at each other and abruptly looked away as Squall rubbed the back of his neck and Rinoa twiddled her foot against the ground. After a few seconds, they looked at each other again, unsure of how they would go about it.

"Uhm…" Rinoa muttered. "My cabin's that way," she said, pointing at the path behind her.

Squall knew what she meant and nodded. Rinoa took this as her cue and began walking. He paced beside her, his eyes on the ground. She would steal glances of him while she maintained a safe space between them.

When they reached her cabin, she opened the door and let him inside. Dim yellow lights partially illuminated the living room from the kitchen where vegetables were placed next to a sack of flour. The interior still lacked it's finishing touches, but not bad for a rushed construction.

Rinoa patted her skirt nervously. "Uhm, you must be hungry," she said, briefly pointing at the counter. "Let me whip something up for you."

Squall watched her walk away, shyly turning at him before quickly turning back to the kitchen. She took out some carrots, eggs, and beat them together with the flour, hoping she could concoct something satisfying, while all he could think about was her voice. He never realized how long two months dragged on without a single sound of her voice.

"I think I can make us some carrot cake," she pondered. "It's something new I learned from Vanille. I'm not a big fan, but it wasn't too bad."

Squall carefully made his way to her, listening to the melody of her digress. Wanting to become useful, he began wiping the littered flour on the counter.

Rinoa gasped. "Oh, please," she held his arm gently. He stopped and peered at her. "You don't have to help me. You're my guest. I got this."

"I guess you don't want my help." Squall interpreted. Rinoa looked at him in surprise and quickly let go of his hand.

"I guess you don't want my help." Squall interpreted. Rinoa looked at him in surprise and quickly let go of his hand.

"Oh."

 Unsure, Squall drew his hand back. He pointed a thumb at the couch. "I guess I'll wait there."

Rinoa gulped. Her eyes followed him as he headed to the couch and slowly settled on it.

Squall glanced at either side of the couch before leaning forward and propping his elbows on his knees, staying like that for a minute as Rinoa observed him. During their time together, they were always on the run. She only ever saw him relax for the briefest times, but never like this. He
seemed to be himself with no one chasing after him to worry about except the haunting morrow of the war. But time could stand still, if they allowed it. And she planned to revel in the sight of him in clothes that were neither his uniform nor borrowed. There was something real about how he wore his white shirt and black leather pants because they were of his choice. She was looking at Squall in his truest self, dismantled of everything he had to put up in the battles they faced.

He lifted his gaze and she froze when he caught her eyes. Just two months ago, he thought he had lost her. Made it just in the nick of time until Fang revived her. She looked frail then. Beautiful as she had always been, but tonight, she was healthy and alive. And then in the next few days, they would be out there again, putting their lives on the line to defend Esthar and everything within its territory. Their home. Death didn’t seem too far, at least to him. He was sure he'd fight until his last breath if it meant winning it for her.

Could this be his last night with her? Maybe yes, maybe no.

Her chest lifted and dropped to calm the beating of her furious heart as she gazed at him. She loved the way he shyly looked at her from the other side of the room. Did he ever know that her eyes were on him too?

She cautiously made her way closer to him, hesitating at her every step as if she would break the floor and scare him away. When she finally made it to the couch, she slowly sat beside him, their eyes still with each other the whole while as if cupid just shot the arrow the first time.

And then she slid her arms around his neck. Just like that.

Squall jerked back at her sudden affection. She was gentle, but eager as she pulled him closer.

"Thank you." she whispered. "Thank you." She felt her voice cracking. "I've missed you."

Squall didn't know how to respond. His mind had suddenly gone haywire in many different places, but he knew what he wanted to do. Delicately, he wrapped his arms around her waist.

"Stay." she whispered. It was the only word she learned from his language, but it meant all she wanted to say.

Squall didn't realize he was stiff until his shoulders relaxed at the sound of her plea. Had she really asked him to stay? He tightened his embrace.

They remained like that with each other in their small eternity until Rinoa pulled back. She had never been this close to him before, and maybe it was her chance to indulge herself with the sight of him.

As he observed her with soft eyes, he noted how her teary brown orbs glinted beautifully even in dim places. And they were looking at him, studying what he had, and it was all hers. As long as her eyes belonged to his even if only for that moment.

She ran her fingers along her scar, the shape of his eyes, the edges of his jaws…

His lips.

When her fingers landed there, he was pulled in, and his crave burning.

In a swift moment of devotion, his lips found hers, his kiss soft and slow. And though she inhaled sharply and tensed in his embrace, she didn't tear away, losing herself in his sweet passion. As she closed her eyes, she dove right into the oblivion of yearning. It was just her and Squall and this
eternity in this night she would give anything for.

He pulled away so gently as though her lips were still with his. He ran the back of his fingers lightly along her cheek, brushing away a stray tear as he did. He drew her closer for another embrace and left a kiss on top of her head. He whispered through her hair, like a wisp in a daydream. And even when she thought it was goodbye, it sounded more like a promise.

"Stay," she said again, more loudly this time so he'd know how much she wanted him there with her. "Here. With me."

He closed his eyes at her melody and laid his back down on the couch with her still in his arms. She rested her face on his chest, listening to the fast beating of his heart, and her arms now around his waist, wishing it was possible to never let him go.

As she closed her eyes, she pondered that maybe, just maybe, she was foolish to not make him her knight after all.
The sunlight streamed through the open window and trickled into his eyes. He would have stayed asleep, notably without the usual irritating request for his presence from anyone in the palace whether it was for a meeting, breakfast, lunch, dinner, or a call for help to fix anything, physically or mentally wise.

Squall fluttered his eyelids slowly at the interruption of the morning. It was the first time he had slept in earlier than usual, and maybe he earned the few additional minutes he wanted for himself. But the ceaseless chirping of the birds were rousing him up.

Birds… rousing him up?

He shot up with a heave of first morning air, his attention at the window just above the couch. He looked around the room, or what was actually the cabin he stayed at for the night. Now illuminated, it definitely needed a lot of work– some of the sunlight still leaked through the gaps on the walls, the foundations of the ceiling still half-way done, and a door was lacking for each room. He made a mental note to help Rinoa around once he had settled everything with Esthar.

Rinoa.

She wasn't on the couch where he last saw her. Maybe she fell off? He looked down, half-relieved that she didn't, and half-baffled that she didn't either. Where was she?

He scratched his head as he stepped out of the cabin, squinting irritatingly at the morning. Sorceresses were already about, tending to their gardens, fixing their own shelters, and he even caught a whiff of something between baked bread and berries. Still, no Rinoa.

Squall plodded toward the entrance of the town, glancing to his sides and his back, hoping to see her.

"That's fine. Not sure if they're still ripe. You better taste them first."

Squall's brows furrowed.

"We will have to bake them anyway. They're no longer green. They'll spoil soon."

On his right, there were two sorceresses talking about food. Possibly fruits.

"Is that Rinoa's visitor?" he heard another say from the other side.

"Yeah, the guy from the city!"

"Why can't I move?"

"Wonder what he looks like when he's topless."

"Elena, close your mouth. I can see your drool coming out."
"Rinoa's so lucky."

Squall ran to another group of sorceresses to his left.

"Oh no, I think he heard us!"

"He doesn't understand us, silly."

"Rinoa rejected him, remember?"

He broke his jog in front of them. "Can you tell me where Rinoa is?"

The sorceresses' mouths parted and their faces froze, as if they've been slapped with petrify by an Iguion.

"Shit, am I the only one hearing this? Is he actually talking to us?"

"Please," Squall appealed. The sorceresses looked at each other. "I need to see her."

"We haven't seen her yet either," the bravest of them said meekly. "Are you her knight?"

"I…" he uttered. He wanted to yell "yes!" but "maybe" was a more accurate answer. Why else could he eavesdrop on them? Or talking to them, come to think of it. "I don't know."

He fumbled his pockets when his phone began ringing. It was Quistis.

"Squall,"

Phone pressed against his ear, he began looking around. "Yeah?"

"This may be a bad time, but we need you back in the city."

Where is she?

"Garden ships were spotted our way."

There was a pause.

"Squall?"

"Yeah, I'm here."

"Are you listening?"

"Yeah, uh, can you--" he spun around again, taking his chances to see as much a glimpse of Rinoa at the farther side of the town. He resisted a huff when he didn't. "– tell Ellone to come pick me up?"

"Done and done. I'm already here somewhere at the entrance of Lunar Gate. With a ship. President Laguna had already sent Ellone away with the evacuees."

Squall finally turned back to the direction of the city. True enough, he could make out a small figure of the red ship parked at the distance.

"Okay," Squall breathed. "I need to warn Fang first."

There was silence from Quistis' end. "Okay? And how are you supposed to do that?"
"I think…" Squall took in a few breaths. There was one good explanation for what was happening to him, but was it really that fast? No blood ritual, no incantation, no flashy magic? And then there was that kiss, how could he forget. One kiss that fleeted in time but made a permanent mark in him. It couldn't be that simple, can it? Was it really happening? Was it true? If he told Quistis, would it help make it true? "I think she made me knight."

"Hmm…" Squall could imagine her thinking, probably doing that little tick of placing her fist against her lips. "What kind of pact did you two exactly do last night?"

Squall groaned, resisting the urge to roll his eyes. "This is serious."

"It took two long months, no?"

"I don't know how it happened."

"I can only imagine how it magically happened overnight."

"I'm not even sure!"

"Sure?" Quistis repeated, stressing the word to tell him how stupid he was not to see. "How did you assume you have become her knight in the first place? What happened?"

"The sorceresses in this town," he replied, glancing around while sorceresses eyed him uncannily. One minute they were communicating, and they couldn't understand him the next. "I can talk to them, and they can to me."

"There you go!" Quistis almost shouted, squeaking at the last syllable. "Did you talk to her yet?"

"No. She left me in the cabin," Squall said, still looking around. "I lost her" was a more appropriate addition to his situation, but it felt too concluding. "I couldn't find her anymore."

"I'd really love to stay and give you more time. But the ships are closing in as we speak."

"Yeah." Squall took a deep, dragging sigh. "I know."

"We'll find her later. I'm sure," Quistis said, trying her best to appease him. "It can wait. Right now, I suggest that you find Fang and update her with our latest intel. Meet me here by the ship. Make it quick if you can."

"Okay." Squall replied before hanging up. He turned to the direction of Fang's cabin and ran its way.

Fang was slouched closer to her patches of flowers, watering them with a gentle sprinkle from her palms. Squall slowed down, bouncing on his steps as he did, glancing at her work then to her.

"Fang," he called.

Fang looked up and stood. She glanced behind him as if looking for something and drew a confused expression.

"Rinoa left me in the cabin."

Fang almost stumbled back. "What on– how in Bahamut's name in a box did you–"

"I don't know. I really don't know," Squall interjected.
Fang took a moment to survey him from head to toe. "What did you two do last night, eh?" she said with a sly wink.

He wanted her to take a wild guess, but he wouldn't like the answer. "Look, we need to talk."

Fang crossed her arms against her chest while rocking to the sides by her soles. "Yeah, and we are. And I'm really unspeakably floored that we can. Lots of things needs explanation. Let's start with how it happened."

"We can deal with that later," Squall replied hurriedly. "One of my colleagues called just now. Garden ships are flying their way to Esthar. You have to evacuate."

"Ah," Fang nodded once and strode sideways. "That's right. You were not a knight yet when I spoke to the coven yesterday." Fang caught Squall tilt his head. "We chose to stay and join the war from here in Lunar Gate. It'll be most ideal if we stay here. More power from the moon, more magic, better news."

"What?!"

"Look," Fang dropped her arms to her sides. "We can fight. I'm sure you know that by now, the things we can do with magic. You may have a few tricks up your sleeve, but we have ours too. There's a good reason why your mission in Timber failed, and that's because we can protect our home."

"But," Squall protested, images of sorceresses that laid motionless at the beginning of their ambush taunting in his memories, the pain they inflicted, and the destruction they left in the wake of the mission. He didn't lose anyone from his squad that day, but they took many from the coven. The thought of the same thing happening to this coven the second time, to Rinoa, was becoming unbearable the longer it played in his head. "You cannot let this happen again!"

"We lost because we kept running," Fang said with resounding resolve. "If you want to put an end to this, so do we. We want to do something about it. Much like what Rinoa did. She did something nobody was brave enough to do. Hell, she was able to turn the whole nation of Esthar to our side! That's a helluva big step. Running away didn't work out well for us, and so I knew, the moment they clamored to fight, that they wanted to take a different direction for the coven. And who am I to stop them?"

"You're the leader. You should know better!"

"But how can you stop a current like that? Even a dam can't stop a river that strong. I gave them a choice, and I can only guide them to the direction they wanted to go."

"I cannot promise I will be able to protect everyone," Squall said sternly.

Fang clicked her tongue at his statement. "What are you so worried about? Rinoa? Are you really that worried about Rinoa?"

Squall stayed silent.

"What's eating you up? She has a knight now!" She motioned her arms all over him. "Are you or aren't you?"

"I don't know." Fang raised an eyebrow. Squall sighed. "Maybe. Yeah."

Fang smirked. She knelt again by her gladioluses. "You know, I used to have a knight," she said
thoughtfully, brushing her fingertips lightly over the petals. "And trust me when I tell you that there is nothing to worry about." She looked over her shoulder to the plains leading to the city where a lone airship was waiting. "Does she know yet?"

"It can wait," Squall said, echoing Quistis' words. He followed her gaze. "Right now, we gotta move."

Fang sensed something thrown her way and she was quick to catch it over her shoulder. She glared at Squall for catching her off-guard before examining the communicator in her hands.

"Clingy, are we?"

"It'll be easier for me to give you updates from the frontlines," Squall said.

Fang nodded and waved it once at him. "Don't worry, they'll be in good hands."

"Garnet."

The young sorceress looked up from her small garden of tomatoes and beamed. "Hey! Rinoa! Mornin'!"

Rinoa smiled back. "Good morning." She already had eggs collected in a basket hooked on her arm and placed it down as she knelt beside Garnet. She eyed the tomatoes dangling together from its stems. "Do you mind if I get a couple of them?"

"No! Help yourself!" Garnet waved her hand at the fruits. "What are you making?"

"Omelet," Rinoa replied as she examined a few in her hand.

"Cooking for two?" Garnet goaded when Rinoa plucked two of the bigger ones. The latter smiled shyly, her cheeks burning pink. "Are you planning to make only an omelet?"

"Well, it's a safe choice," Rinoa said softly. "I have the other ingredients, but tomatoes would make a good addition."

Garnet giggled. "Well, they said red is the color of love. I'm guessing this is your way of saying 'good morning' to him?" she teased.

Rinoa's smile crept higher and playfully bumped Garnet with her arm.

"Rinny! Garnet!"

The two sorceresses looked over their shoulders at Vanille. They could read the urgency in her voice as she pointed toward Fang's place. "Fang is calling for us."

Rinoa and Garnet looked at each other, quickly abandoning whatever they were doing as they joined the flock of sorceresses gathering in front of their leader's cabin. Much like the night before, Fang positioned herself on the rooftop. Behind her, Rinoa caught a red ship in the air, fleeing to the city's direction.

"Our latest intel from the city arrived," Fang started when everyone settled. "Ships were found flying our way."

Through the murmurs that erupted, she continued. "Esthar is getting ready because it seems like war is happening sooner than we expected. Worse, the Gardens might be bringing a sorceress with
them. Ultimecia."

Collective gasps were heard from the group.

"But she's dead!" one of them said.

"Apparently, she's back," Fang said, her voice shed with semblant expectation and Rinoa began to wonder if she had known the possibility for a long time now. "So you might think that all is fair for both sides now: Them against the whole of Esthar plus a coven of sorceresses. Well, we are talking about a six-nation army of weapons, magic, and a formidable sorceress. You gave me your word, you want to fight. I will not take it against you if you flee--"

"Who said anything about fleeing?" one sorceress yelled. In her attempt to recall her name, Rinoa swore she was one known for her no-nonsense, hardened personality who bore the lineage of the clan of Highwind. "I don't know with the lot of you, but I'm gonna fight 'til the last speck of magic left in me! Abandon all will to fight, and you can abandon all hope of me welcoming your sorry ass back into the coven!"

Fang grinned. "That's a little harsh, Aran--"

"I will fight, too!" another sorceress declared. It was Rosa, the one who almost killed Squall back in Timber. She survived the ambush and was rescued by the fleeing sorceresses. And though it took her a while, she found it in her gentle heart to forgive and forget, however fierce she could be. "We will survive because we are sorceresses! And because we deserve to fight for our home!"

The coven cheered, each of them asserting their own pledge to join the battle, emitting glows triggered by the strength of their resolution. Distracted, Rinoa's eyes actively darted around the place, looking for the supposed "intel."

Fang shrugged. "Okay then," she yelled through the growing clamor. "I'm never really good with battle speeches, but I'll get straight to the point and make it easier for all of your to understand."

She paused. "We are a coven and we will work together and fight as such. Help each other, and help Esthar. Protect the coven, protect Esthar. It is also wise to keep in mind that our greatest asset in this battle is Rinoa."

Everyone turned to Rinoa's direction. She gave them a perplexed look.

"She has a knight."

Rinoa gasped. "Kn-knight?" Really? A knight? What had they done to warrant a knighthood overnight? Besides, she had always thought his offer was a wasted chance that only came by once. What changed his mind?

Was it the night they shared?

Fang's brows dove briefly and then one rose. "Our intel was Squall, Rin. He talked to me."

Garnet and Vanille clasped their hands over their mouths and squealed with glee.

"It's true!" one of the sorceresses yelled. "We were able to talk to him! He was looking for you!"

she pointed at Rinoa.

Fang chuckled and waved her hand dismissively at the ridiculousness of the couple. "You two made a pact and didn't even know it. How weirder can this get? Anyway," she motioned at the sorceresses to listen up. "Take them as our ultimate weapons. Rinoa has a knight, and it is Squall."
Protect them as much as you can. And Rinoa,

Rinoa turned to Fang.

"Please," she implored. "Help the coven."

Rinoa nodded. "I will. I promise."

Fang smiled. "And the rest of you, now is the time to make all the necessary preparations. Take care out there, and good luck."

The assembly dispersed, each heading to her own cabin. Fang floated down and landed by Rinoa who stayed. The latter took a deep breath. "Is it true? You were able to talk to him?"

"Yeah. Too good to be true?" Fang smirked. "He was looking for you, by the way. Couldn't believe it himself, either. But duty called and he needed to return to the city."

Rinoa's eyes fell. "I see."

Fang scoffed against her throat and nudged at her. "What kind of lover leaves in the morning?"

Rinoa looked up and sandwiched her burning face between her palms. "Oh. I was trying to look for tomatoes to make him breakfast."

Fang frowned, the scolding kind that made Rinoa smile sheepishly. "And what kind of sorceress doesn't maintain her steady supply of tomatoes?"

"I'm sorry!"

"Well, it can wait." Fang wrapped an arm around Rinoa's shoulders as they walked. "Who knows? Maybe he'd come galloping this way on his noble chocobo stead."

Rinoa laughed and shook her head. "That's silly."

"Surprises are full of silly things," Fang said. "I've had too many surprises in my lifetime, but a SeeD becoming a sorceress' knight? And they didn't know it yet? Yeah, that took the cake. You two are very silly people full of surprises, if I should say so myself."

"This is a very awful time, though." Rinoa's voice fell. If only she could arrange her own timeline, she wouldn't place this milestone in the period of war.

Fang suddenly held a thin white communicator in front of her, jolting Rinoa backward. She wagged it. "Take it."

Rinoa shot her a questioning look.

"It's from Squall. So he can keep in touch from the frontlines."

Eyes widened, Rinoa turned back at the communicator and gingerly took it.

"What, never seen a communicator before?" Fang said nonchalantly. "You're the sorceress with a knight, and you have to talk to your knight, because the knight will fight mostly for you. So I'm putting you in charge of it. See anything critical, like Ultimecia, and Ultimecia's no joke, you let me know."

Rinoa nodded. "Okay."
"I'm counting on you, alright?" Fang added. "No pressure or anything, but you're the all-powerful in the coven now. If anything, you and Squall are the best chance we got to survive this war."

Rinoa nodded again. She glanced at the communicator. "Will this work?"

"Hmm?"

"Talking to him. Through this thing. Will it work?"

Fang smirked. And somehow, Rinoa knew she knew more than she let on. "Who knows? Then again, you two are already full of surprises."

Squall watched from the ship's window as the town shrank in his view. One short reunion, and he was being ripped from her again, more painfully this time. He wished he had taken one last glance of her, but it suddenly felt like he was asking for too much.

It took a while to convince himself that last night wasn't a dream. But if it was, he wished he made it last longer. Replaying the memories in his head, he remembered Rinoa staying awake longer than he did, and he should have done the same. He woed sleeping sooner and he had kicked himself over and over for it. With the impending war, he knew they didn't have much time, which drove him to dive for the kiss…

He rose his fingers to his lips and brushed them lightly. Was that what made him her knight?

Or was it the promise he whispered to her after?

"Squall."

Squall whirled at Quistis' direction. She pointed at the black objects hovering high in the sky, heading to Esthar at a sluggish pace. Stopping beside her, he leaned forward and squinted to get a better look.

"The Gardens," Quistis whispered, unmasking her apprehension.

They made it to the palace twenty minutes later and hurried to the war room where everyone had begun their strategic deliberation. Laguna was slouching over, his arms mounting against the table, and his eyes scanning the map of Esthar projected on the surface.

Zell flicked his eyes at the approaching Squall. "Finally!"

Laguna looked up. "Ah, hey!"

Squall marched to his father's side and studied the map. "ETA?"

"Two hours."

"That's fast for a thousands-ton airship."

"They could be using magic. Gravity and Aero can do that."

"We already got our techs?"

Laguna nodded. "Yeah. Attached and ready with our ships."

Squall tore from the table and faced his comrades. Each of them had lost their usual vigor which
was restituted with undeniable fear. Not for their lives, but for everything that came with the war: loss, slaughter, pain… They knew this was all a mistake. A big mistake that was bound to happen just because old men who were only to sit back and watch wanted it. Looking at their faces somehow made their lives even more invaluable to him. Fighting the sorceresses back then when they didn't know any better was different– they didn't lose anyone because the coven stuck to their own code of peace. Whereas the Garden proved their own code with Captain Hewley, and they wouldn't be any different.

"Guys," Squall finally managed. It came with a small biting pain that almost made him choke. "For what it's worth, the sorceresses will fight beside us."

"The coven?" Irvine asked.

Squall nodded. "They decided to help up protect Esthar by keeping their posts in Lunar Gate. It's the best place for them to maintain a stable cycle of their magic, and we're suspecting Cid is bringing Ultimica there. We are to stay at our posts, but keep an eye at the West Wall. Seifer, Fujin, Raijin, make sure nothing and no one reaches the gates, and leave the rest of the wall to us. Don't abandon your posts unless I tell you to. I have to make sure nothing reaches Lunar Gate, or else it's going to be the end of us."

"Or end of you," Seifer said with a hint of gibe. "Sorceress' knight."

Squall's brows furrowed.

"No point denying it, bru!" Zell needled.

Fujin walked up to him, her phone held up front. On the screen was a thread of chat among the group, minus Squall. It would seem Quistis had delivered the news of his recent knighthood, followed by a string of expressed delight and "FINALLYs."

"CONGRATULATIONS. KNIGHT."

"I hope you used protection," Seifer jibed.

Squall shook his head, fighting the urge to punch his face.

"Hey, watch it!" Laguna scolded. "My son's too young for that!"

"Yeah Squall, cover your ears, ya know?" Raijin added mockingly.

"It's not like there were swords involved like in royalties," Irvine said. Squall could tell he wasn't being austere about it. "Right Squall? I'm curious, how long was the sword?"

"Guys, let's be serious now," Quistis said, tired of their badgering. "I think it's time we make our preparations for the battle. Equip your weapons of choice, stock up on spells, and cast necessary buffs. And let's defend Esthar."

Selphie made a salute. "For my new home!"

"For friends, ya know?" Raijin followed. Fujin nodded.

"For Ma," Zell said.

"For peace," Irvine declared.

Seifer cocked his head at Squall, a grin growing on his lips. "C'mon, put it in there. What do you
fight for?"

There was a moment of hesitation, but Squall found himself bowing in his acquiescence. "For Rinoa."

There was no turning back anymore.

Tanks and trucks trundled along the plains of the Great Salt Lake, advancing closer and closer to the unseen wall of the nation. Watching from behind its glass windows, Squall deduced that the first jeeps will crash the walls and reveal Esthar, both to the air and land units. This would explain why there were only three jeeps running at the frontlines. They would be their expiatory agents that will test Esthar's prime defense before they make their next move. He estimated that it would take twenty minutes to accomplish that tactic.

Pacing by the window with his eyes still on the plains, he rose his communicator to his lips. "Seifer."

"You seeing this, right?" Seifer replied.

"Yeah."

"Ready when you are."

Squall paused to scan the the grounds as the black vehicles from the Gardens grew. Opening the gates to release their own units and soldiers and take down the first batch of jeeps will preemptively reveal the walls. So he called for Seifer again.

"Seifer, activate faux walls."

"Gotcha."

Under the grounds of the East side of the plains, right below a small black camera placed to blend among the rocks, Seifer hopped on an Estharian hovering tank parked on a metal platform. He looked over his shoulder at Fujin, Raijin, and the other soldiers assigned under his command.

"Alright grunts, time to cheat our way to glory," he said. He should have done a better speech, perhaps something more encouraging that will rile up all those hate-blood in all of them who may or may not be pissing their pants right now. But he was never good at talking, not even better than Squall as most have mistaken him to be. Maybe unless it involved himself. Besides, they were going to war. There was nothing honorable about that.

With the sound of rattling metals, the platforms jerked and slowly rose closer to the surface. Eyes forward and anticipating, sunlight illuminated the interiors of his tank through the transparent shield and revealing the horizon beyond him.

Now in plain sight of their enemies, the Gardens' side accelerated toward Seifer's emerging group, shooting bullets that bounced against their protective magic and heavy-duty exteriors.

The jeeps swerved to the sides to make way for their own tanks. Once fully out on the ground, Seifer pushed his gears forward and zoomed toward the tanks.

"Sect A, take east. Sect B, take west. Sect C, follow my lead!"

On his mark, they heeded his orders.
From the walls, Squall watched as Seifer's unit swarmed the Garden vehicles like ants on cubes of sugar on the eastern area. He rose his eyes to the sky where the whaling ships fired their engines and began to propel faster their way. He knew what was to follow— the ships would launch their missiles and batter Esthar's land defense, with every piece of ammunition they had in their arsenal if needed. Squall turned around and headed out to the open rooftop of the wall where a ship was waiting for him. He went inside where Selphie was sitting at the cockpit with Irvine.

"Smithereens?" Irvine asked.

Squall nodded.

"SMITHEREENS!" Selphie cheered and the lifted the ship with the quick movement of her hands over the gears and the buttons. The higher the went, more ships appeared behind and followed them toward the storming aircrafts.

Squall's communicator crackled from which he could hear the drumming of bullets. "How's everything up there?"

"Gardens are speeding," Squall replied. "We're flying our way to the forefront. Hold our fort on terrains. I'm getting Quistis."

"Rain or shine. Seifer out," Seifer replied.

Squall changed the channel. "Quistis."

"Squall."

"Launch camouflage."

"Copy."

From inside the control room of the West Wall, Quistis pressed a button by the thin microphone on her panel. "Launching camouflage on your mark."

Standing beside her and watching the screens riddled on the wall, Zell pressed a few keys and hovered his hand on a larger button.

"3, 2, 1…"

A small ball of metal sharing the same color of the sky catapulted from the wall and burst in a thick line of smoke. Ten more were launched behind it, creating a longer line of smoke. Twenty more were shot until the wall was covered with smoke from a good distance. The plan was still to confuse the opposition on the proximity of the wall and provide cover for Esthar's aircrafts when they approach the battlefield.

"We're pervading the camouflage," Squall said as the airships flew through the smoke, placing them in a blind path. Ensuring that the ship was following a straight track, Selphie held a firm grip on the steering wheel. "Entering the visible zone in ten seconds."

When they emerged, Squall found the aircrafts to be closing in unrelentingly. He detected movement on their sides and realized that they were barrels of guns pointing toward Esthar.

"I'm calling it!" Irvine yelled. He lifted his communicator to his mouth. "Activating operation 'SMITHEREENS.'"
"YEEEEY!" Selphie cheered. She flipped a clear cover open and flicked the switched. Guns emerged from the ship's side, lining up until its rear ends. Squall watched the other ships follow suit, gradually revealing their artilleries.

They fired when they were within each other's range. The ones behind them flew forward to block Squall's ship from the oncoming projectiles, so Selphie pulled the wheel and swerved to a side where she could shoot from an empty angle. The fusillade from the collective gunfire from Esthar's air force managed to break a hole on the protective spell wrapped around the leading Garden ship. Squall had guessed correctly, yet again, that Dr. Odine's technology of concentrating the basic structures of protect and shell magic proved more effective than the spells Gardens used. Without the more potent magic of sorceresses, it would have to do.

However, the shortcomings in their shields made up for the fatality of their spell-infused armaments and weapons. Those were what really worried him the most.

"Squall, this is the West Wall, you there?"

Squall hastily held up his communicator in his reflexive response to Quistis' hurried and alarmed voice. "Quistis."

"Squall, we've spotted an aircraft on its way to the West Wall, and it's flying fast!" Quistis called back through labored breaths. "We've given signal to fire from this side. Zell and I are on our way up to the ship pad. We're tailing it!"

Shit. Even when barricaded by military force, one still managed to get through. And to the West Wall, at that. Lucky guess? Probably not.

"We're heading your way," Squall called back.

"It's just one ship!" he heard Zell say from the other line. "We can take it!"


"What?" Quistis asked

"They can't possibly know where Lunar Gate is that easily."

There was a pause. "Are you suggesting that Ultimecia is in that thing?"

"I don't know," Squall replied. "Whatever it is, make sure it doesn't reach Lunar Gate," Squall said, concluding the transmission. "Selphie."


Squall fiddled with his communicator again to change the channel. He needed to warn the coven.

"Fang," he called. He wasn't sure she'd understand him through electronic signal, or if it only worked face to face. Why was he being unsure about it all of a sudden? He hadn't thought of it when he handed the communicator to Fang (which she likewise took). Maybe it would work, one way or another. If she couldn't understand him, then maybe if he made panicked sounds with his voice, she'd get the message.

Then again, did the knight-sorceress pact have limitations? Wasn't it all dependent on the supposed unseen bond?
"Squall?"

His breath hitched and his eyes widened.

That voice.

No. He was certain it wasn't Fang's. It lacked her hardened, almost-delinquent tone. This one sounded all too different, yet so familiar because he often yearned for it—meek and soft, with grace that could only belong to one person.

Could it be...?

His lips trembled, wrangling for her name. But he wanted to take it on a different direction, to test the waters and confirm his assumptions.

"Yes. It's me."

"Oh. Okay. Uhm..." There was demurral in her voice, the kind that feared disappointment yet there still was a little of disbelief. "this is Rinoa. Can you... understand me?"

Something stirred in his chest, a feeling of liberation from invisible constraints that held on inside of him for far too long. And when it made its drop, he could only release a soft chuckle.

"I know," he said. "And yes. I can."
The Battle for Esthar

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

While the coven made their preparations for the battle, Rinoa wanted to run. She desperately wanted to run to the city the moment she heard the first cannonade of gunfire. Knowing what Squall was up against was the tipping point of her urge to run to him and make sure he was safe. If only there was no one and nothing to leave behind. The coven was meant to stay in Lunar Gate and she was bound to remain in her post, as he was to his. She only found solace in knowing that he was trained and meant for war. If he could fight a coven of sorceresses, then he could manage a battalion of non-magic army whose weapons were almost of equal level as Esthar's.

Almost.

The skies of the palace stole her eyes with a wall of flashing blasts from both sides suffused by ashen smoke Esthar launched earlier. She inhaled sharply at a particularly large explosion, worried it might be from the their side.

"They're getting closer!" She heard Fang yell from behind. "Get ready to leave town! We're taking this war far from home!"

She jerked at the sound of crackling transmission from the communicator in her pocket. She fumbled to fish it out and almost dropped it when it emitted another string of buzz.

"Fang."

Rinoa stared at the thing in her hand. And blinked. She lifted it slowly it slowly to her lips, doubtful at her ability to respond. But there was not shred of doubt in her mind that it was…

"Squall?"

He seemed to have paused from the other line, and her grip tightened around the communicator. He called for Fang, and that was because the call was meant for her. But how could she tell him that she gave it to her and made her in charge of coordinating with him? Would he understand her if she did?

She took slow steps toward Fang's direction, ready to hand her the communicator, still unsure how they would talk to each other.

"Yes. It's me."

Rinoa gasped and lapsed on her steps. He just talked to her. And she understood him! She understood what he said! She felt her lips curling upward and wider at every breath. She allayed it as she stumbled on her next words praying to the gods and back that he would understand her too.

"Oh. Okay. Uhm, this is Rinoa. Can you… understand me?"

"I know," he replied, his tone suddenly changing. He sounded calmer, maybe even blithe if she had known any better."And yes. I can."
She let out a soft laugh and released tears with it. She sniffled. "Hey."

"Hey."

"Where are you?"

"On an airship, flying over the Esthar walls."

Rinoa nodded, wiping her tears with the back of her hand. "Are you safe?"

"Yes, but--" he hesitated. "There's a Balamb plane flying to Lunar Gate. We're following it before it reaches you."

"I'll tell Fang. We can stop it just below the--"

"No, no," Squall interjected. He was more stern now. "We're tailing it, and we can stop it. Stay in Lunar Gate."

Rinoa narrowed her eyes. "Are you serious? We can stop it from here!"

"It's a Garden plane!" he sighed long and low. "Rinoa, just, stay there. Don't go anywhere near it."

"I can fight, okay Squall?"

"No."

"I can!"

"It may have Ultimécia in it."

That was her cue. She began running for Fang. "Then the more reason we should fight!"

"Let us deal with it, and you stay there!" He heaved. "Please, Rinoa. Just stay there."

"I'm telling Fang now," she said, ignoring him. "I'm in this war with you. We started this. We started this together! It may not look like it, but I know what's happening, okay? I know why there's a war, and I'm not going to pretend that I have nothing to do with this. I do, and I want it to end. I want to make it end. I know you do, too, just as much."

There was a pause. She could tell he finally realized there was nothing he could do to stop her. "When you tell Fang, let me know where you're heading."

"Why?"

"I'll come to you."

Rinoa nodded firmly. "Okay. I will."

"I'll wait for your call."

"Okay."

Fang was watching the skies with her lance in her hand when Rinoa reached her. She snapped her head toward the latter, her concentrated eyes changed to dread when they fell on the communicator in Rinoa's hand.

"Fang, Balamb plane is coming this way, and Ultimécia may be in it."
Fang dipped her head toward the communicator. "Squall told you that?"

Rinoa nodded. "Yes."

"So it works."

"Yes, it does."

"Very good." She cocked her head at Rinoa. "You collaborate with your knight, and make sure you do well at it, you hear me?"

Rinoa nodded. She followed Fang's gaze into the distance and spotted the plane in question with a familiar red ship flying behind it. Just then, five more of Balamb's planes tailed for it. When she realized the red one could be Squall's and he was in danger, she gasped and took instinctive steps forward. Fang placed a hand on her shoulder, prompting Rinoa to turn to her.

"What do we do?" she asked with apparent distress cracking in her voice.

"What do you think?" Fang shot back. She turned around. "SISTERS! THERE'S OUR TARGET!"

Fang pointed toward the distance where the planes began gunning each other. A new one emerged from the Esthar walls, shooting the Garden planes.

"LET'S GO!"

At Fang's cue, the coven began drifting from the ground and toward the ships. Rinoa followed and pulled her communicator back up.

"Squall!" she cried.

Of course there would be Balamb planes bound to attack them.

And why not make them five?

"Take a dive," Squall ordered Selphie.

"Finally!" Selphie pushed the wheel forward and pulled it just in time before they could plummet to the ground. Squall looked back and saw two of their chasers crossing each other's path and almost crashing. Another one flew forward and began at shooting them.

A bluish Estharian ship shot out from the walls and released its fury to the enemy planes. Its entrance was promptly followed by a crisp cackle from Irvine's communicator.

"Yo."

"Irvine," Quistis called back, her voice breathless against the cacophony of bullets clashing and wheezing around her. "Where's Squall?" she said quickly before Irvine could interject a worrisome "Where are you?"

Squall whirled to the controls when he heard his name just as Irvine tossed his communicator him.

"Quistis, where the hell are you?"

Just then, the Estharian ship rolled midair before regaining its balance.
Squall narrowed his eyes. "Is that you?"

"I'm gonna throw up," Zell's faint voice said from the other line.

Selphie let out a half-relieved laugh. "Wimp."

"Squall, Galbadia's troops are penetrating the walls," Quistis said.

Squall ran to the window. True enough, the streets of the city began to swarm with uniformed contingents coming from the outside of the walls. Those who managed to slipped past Esthar's soldiers and built-in weapons were running further into the city, creating a thin funnel toward Lunar Gate. How they were able to penetrate the walls, he didn't know. But it was certainly a disquieting sign.

"You better have a backup plan."

He did. And it was a crazy plan, considering how early it still was. But he did have one.

"Ragnarok."

"What?"

"You make sure nothing and no one gets too close to Lunar Gate. I'm getting Seifer."

"WHAT THE HELL DO YOU MEAN, SQ-"

Squall switched the channel. The fastest ones from the opposing side were quickly reaching the edge of the city without anything pushing them back from the grounds.

"Seifer."

"Can this wait?" Seifer replied. The gunshots in the background had become significantly louder. "Now's a really bad time."

"A plane that may or may not carry Ultimcia is heading to Lunar Gate. It has brought five more planes with it. Quistis and I are going after it. And there are incoming land troops to be dealt with."

"So what am I supposed to do about that?"

"Get Ragnarok."

There was a pause. "Am I hearing this right?"

"Abandon your post," Squall said, stressing his words more firmly so Seifer would know he was serious. "And get Ragnarok from Dr. Odine."

"Riiight. Gotcha. This should be a breeze," Seifer replied with slight sarcasm.

"Leave Raijin in charge of the faux walls. Bring Fujin with you."

"Ah. Raijin? Ya sure about that?"

"I trust Raijin," Squall said. Though Raijin was too soft for his own good, it was true. He trusted the big man who had a good sense of judgement to know something wasn't right from the start and chose to join their side without condition. He was almost compelled to suspect that Raijin was a Galbadian spy, if not for the fierce loyalty Seifer and Fujin earned from him.
"Right. Okay. Lunatic Pandora Lab, right?"

"Yeah."

"Got it."

"Squall!" Rinoa cried from his communicator.

"Rinoa."

"We're making our way to your ship!"

"What?!" Squall ran to rear side window where he saw the coven gliding closer and closer to their ship. "I thought you were only going to stop the ship!"

"Fang is leading us there!"

That wasn't true. Rinoa was flying further to the front. "GO BACK!" he admonished. He had to resort to screaming for Hyne's sake.

"Squall, the ships are changing their course," Irvine said over his shoulder. From the window, Squall spotted three of the planes aiming their guns to the sorceresses. "Good for us, but still not good if you ask me. They're flying their way to the coven."

Quistis' ship tilted and fired at Ultimecia's ship. It turned around and began firing back when the sorceresses began hurling spells at it, damaging its shield with one hit of Fire. Or Firaga, by Garden standards. Squall saw Fang point at his ship and Quistis' while shouting at the sorceresses. Rinoa was quick to cast another layer of shield on his ship, while two others did the same with the other.

"They're making us invincible!" Selphie cheered.

"Just keep firing at Ultimecia!"

Seifer took a quick glance at Raijin's gliding tank before shooting back at one of his relentless pursuers in a jeep. Despite the latter's size and weight, he was able to evade the SeeDs and the soldiers quite smoothly.

"Raijin!" he called.

"Ya?" Raijin called back.

"Squall wants us to fetch Ragnarok from the lab. He's putting you in charge here, okay?"

Raijin's eyes turned apprehensive. "You're leaving me and Fujin here?"

"Nope," Seifer said. And for a split second, Raijin's face relaxed. "Just you."

"WHAT?!"

Seifer swerved his tank and fired at the side of a jeep. "I'm taking Fujin with me."

"AFFIRMATIVE," Fujin assented.

"This is crazy, ya know?!"

"You'll be fiine!" Seifer dragged on his last word. "Squall said he trusts you! He really did!" Seifer
said when he saw Raijin shaking his head. "He said, 'Seifer, my man, I trust Raijin. Hell, I'd trust Raijin with my life!'"

"He didn't say that! Squall would never say something like that! I don't believe you, ya know!"

"You bet your ass he did!" Seifer shot back. "Now quit whining and clear us a path! And make sure nobody from our side dies!"

"Don't leave me!"

"Raijin, you'll be fine," Fujin cooed. "They need more help from the other side. We'll be in bigger trouble if we don't leave."

Seifer smirked.

"Argh! Fine, ya know! It's unfair, ya know!"

"Good," Seifer said. "Now, stay alive, a'right?"

Seifer and Fujin turned around and headed through the city, which wasn't faring any better. Though their tanks had blocked the bigger weapons and vehicles from the entrance, the infrastructures were not spared from the destruction of the invasion by SeeDs and soldiers from the five armies of the world. Both of them did what they could to ease some of Esthar's fighters from their respective battles, knowing (and regretting) that they couldn't do more now that they had to make it in time before the infiltrators find their way to Lunar Gate.

"Squall!" Seifer called from the other line. "More are getting through!"

There was no answer.

"Squall! Ah!" Seifer tilted his tank sideways to get through a narrow alley and bouncing back down when he made it out. "Damnit!"

"That's where they're going!" Fujin called. Seifer looked up and saw SeeDs and soldiers accompanied by men in motorbikes zooming and running toward the open desert fields. Despite the built-in weapons around the city, nothing could stop the volume of the these armies, and many were able to march through unscathed. He didn't see how they managed to get through the walls, even after Squall's careful planning, but he had a strong feeling that Ultimecia's plane may have lead them there. Stupid SeeDs and soldiers didn't even have the gall to question that.

The pair followed the flow of the army, shooting the motorbikes that got in their way, and easily plowed over the imbeciles who tried to put up a fight against two tanks with nothing but their weapons and their defective grit.

When they finally made it out of the city, Seifer turned toward the laboratory while Fujin whirled her tank, geared it to reverse, and began firing at the groups that dared to follow them, whose number grew thicker.

And thicker.

"SEIFER!" Fujin cried.

"Just keep firing! We're almost there! Almost there!"

A bigger four-by-four emerged from the city, toppling down the steel borders with Kiros on the
wheels, Ward on defensive at the back, and standing in command was Laguna and his machine gun. He fired at their chasers, delaying their pace at the pair of tanks.

Fujin's eye widened at the President laughing and going ballistic with his bullets as his gun ratata'ed around him.

"COME AT ME!" he yelled as a battle cry. "COME AT ME AND I'LL SHOW YOU WAR!"

"Laguna," Kiros called calmly. After firing his last shot at a Trabian, Laguna turned around and Kiros pointed at the tanks. "Seifer and Fujin."

Laguna smirked and nodded. "Right! Let's cover the kids!"

Kiros turned the wheels and drove beside Fujin. Laguna waved his machine gun at the two. "HEY!"

The other two gave him a sideway glance.

"We got you two! Don'cha worry!" he hooted. "Where are you going?"

Seifer and Fujin turned over their shoulders to look at each other before turning back at Laguna.

"Oh, right, you can't hear me!" Laguna yelled. "Just go ahead! We got this covered!" he added and motioned his free arm at the front.

"WHAT?"

"I don't know what he said either," Seifer said. "But I think he wants us to go ahead."

"He's the President, though!" Fujin said worriedly.

"He's Laguna friggin' Loire," Seifer asserted. "He's Squall's father. He's like an immortal being. He's gonna be fine."

Fujin turned her tank back around and zoomed forward to Seifer's side as they quickly made their way to Lunatic Pandora.

They hastily exited their vehicles and went inside the laboratory using the access cards Laguna provided them earlier during their stay (a "privilege" for saving his son's ass). They marched straight into Dr. Odine's office where he seemed to be completely untouched and oblivious of the present chaos outside. He looked up from an unrolled blueprint on his desk and scowled at the two.

Seifer cocked his head at him. "Hey, what's up Doc?"

"What are you doing here?!" Dr. Odine spat back.

"RAGNAROK." Fujin replied.

"Vat are you talking about?"

"The X-ATM machine--" Seifer rolled his eyes and waved his hands on the side of his head. "--whatever." When Dr. Odine still gave him the confused look, Seifer gestured his hand his way. "The robot! The robot, damnit!"

"X-ATM092!" Dr. odine corrected. "And it's not ready yet!"
"Doesn't matter. War's outside, by the way—" Seifer hitched his thumb behind him and looked around. "—just in case you didn't notice."

"COUNT?" Fujin asked.

"I only have five!"

There was a whistling sound of blowing steam from the other room and Seifer glanced at its direction. "Is that it? The Ragnaroks?"

"You cannot possibly win this war with only five X-ATM092s!" Dr. Odine shouted back as he stomped behind a marching Seifer who was heading to the room. He halted his steps when he was greeted by a stagnant Ragnarok standing before four others. Seifer's eyes marvelled at the machinery as his hands unconsciously reached forward and slid down along its red metal surface. It was bigger than what he remembered of Squall's prototype because of an added feature he seemed to have forgotten: manual controls.

"We'll take our chances," Seifer intoned, still at awe at the new and improved Ragnarok 2.0.

They were hit.

Squall thought lady luck was on their side when they were able to take down three of the planes defending Ultimecia's. But like the mythological Hydra, six more arrived and aimed at their plane, one blasting a firaga-bomb that penetrated Rinoa's shield and shot one of their wings, plummeting them to the ground.

"AAAAAHaaaa!!" Selphie cried as her grip tightened around the stirring wheel and pulled it back desperately.

Squall fell and groaned when he slid back to a metal wall in the cockpit as the plane fell forward.

"I LOVE YOU BABE!" Irvine shouted through the whizzing noise of their freefall. "I JUST WANT YOU TO KNOW THAT BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE! I LOVE YOU VERY MUCH!"

"WHAT?!!" Selphie shouted back. "YOU THOUGHT THIS ISN'T TOO LATE! THERE WERE BETTER MOMENTS TO DO THIS, AND YOU CHOSE NOW TO DO IT? YOU'RE UNBELIEVABLE! AND I LOVE YOU TOO!!!"

Outside, Rinoa watched in horror as Squall's plane began to fall and gasped as she caught it with a float spell, grousing at its weight. Vanille rushed to her side and threw another float spell.

"Okay," Rinoa breathed when she finally found enough strength to bring its balance back.

Inside, Squall's body bounced up from the halting force and fell back on the floor.

Selphie's eyes widened at her frozen hands around the wheel while Irvine felt his face and his body with mouth slightly agape. "I'M ALIVE! WE'RE ALIVE!"

Squall groaned and sat up, massaging his forearm before examining it for wounds and bruises.

"Seatbelts, mate," Irvine called over his shoulder and Squall growled at him. When he turned back to check on Selphie, she slapped him.

"Fujin was right! You're an IDIOT!" she scorned.
Still in shock, Irvine blinked a few times. "Babe–"

Selphie clasped his face between her palms and pulled him close for a kiss. Irvine's eyes widened the whole time even after she pulled away and slapped him again.

Slowly and gently, Rinoa and Vanille lowered the plane safely to the ground as the other sorceresses surrounded and shielded them from the hostiles. Rinoa quickly flew toward the ship when she heard an approaching vehicle from her side. She cast a protect spell just at the very last second, and the impact of the recoil pushed her farther from Squall's ship and onto the ground. Rinoa pushed herself up with her arms as the vehicle, a jeep, began propelling her way, crushing her communicator under its wheel which she now realized fell from her pocket.

Eyes widened, she hissed and growled at the jeep. "That was my only way to talk to him! WHY DO YOU HAVE TO DESTROY EVERYTHING!"

Indignant, she threw blizzaga spells the jeep easily avoided as frustration began boiling insider her. Rinoa was ready to hurl another ice spell when a burly robot bumped it with the side of its arm. Gasping as she watched the jeep tumble and roll away, she turned back around to her savior and saw Fujin inside the robot. She nodded once and gave her a salute before turning around and sprinting toward the crashed ship. She intended to follow, but she was blocked by another group of SeeDs.

"Don't think I'm not going to fight this time!" Rinoa said as she gathered a ball of thundara in her hand.

Squall pushed the button for the exit from the cockpit which opened only halfway outward. He kicked it a few times until it finally hinged forward, welcoming the black smoke from the burning turbine inside. Squall covered his nose with his arm and turned around to his friends who were also covering their noses and squinting. Selphie and Irvine nodded before they all jumped out.

Outside, Squall looked up and watched as Quistis' ship was assisted by sorceresses as they went after Ultimecia's ship. From the walls, more Esthar's planes emerged, shooting down the growing number of enemy planes.

"Squall!" Quistis' panicked voice called from the communicator. "Squall, where are you?"

"We're okay," Squall called back as he tried to catch his breath. The supposedly fresher air of the Estharian plains was beginning to reek of burning oil and gunpowder. "We're okay. Rinoa stopped the crash."

"Okay. Okay," Quistis breathed. "Zell finally got ahold of Ultimecia's ship in his crosshair."

As she talked, Squall watched their plane go autopilot. In true Estharian technology (rather, Dr. Odine's technology), once locked on a target, a plane will automatically trail on it with a straight path for a better aim. Zell capitalized on the opportunity and launched what seemed to be one of the plane's torpedos. Pacing beside the fleeing pane were two sorceresses who timed the torpedo with an ambush of thundaga spells. The shield should not have been able to withstand the blast, but it only confirmed his suspicions about the airship shielded by a powerful sorceress spell when it was able to deflect a good percentage of the explosion from the attack combo.

But that didn't stop the smaller percentage to damage the tail, almost chipping it away from the craft. The plane began hurtling down at a frightening speed while Quistis' ship fled away.

"GRENADE! COVER!"
Squall turned around and caught sight of a shell flying toward them. Just then, a giant, mechanical hand caught it in its palm and threw it back at Centran soldiers who ran away for cover before it exploded on the ground.

Before him, Ragnarok stood, hosted by Seifer who was controlling it manually inside. He gave Squall a smug grin before sliding his glass cover open and tossing three familiar watches at him. Behind Seifer were three more robots stomping their way.

"Touchscreen controls, man," Seifer said and slid his cover close again. He (rather, his robot) ran back to the battlefield.

Selphie giggled and snatched one of the watches as she began to hop on one of the Ragnaroks. "Woohoo! Touchscreen controls!"

Squall handed the other one to Irvine.

"Quistis will need this more," Irvine said. "Going to hold on this for her until I see her again."

Squall frowned. "You sure?"

"I'm better off in a distance, free with just myself and my rifle," Irvine shrugged.

After finding her balance, Selphie began walking and attacking.

Irvine gazed at her and chuckled. "She loves it. Good job."

Squall nodded. "Thanks. Don't get killed."

Irvine tipped his hat. "Will do, Commander."

Squall nodded back as he watched Irvine enter the robot. He headed to his after wrapping the watch around his wrist, preferring to use its touchscreen controls. He activated its auto-mode and began sprinting to the warzone with his Ragnarok following behind.

He lifted his communicator. "Rinoa."

It responded with a white noise.

"Rinoa!" he repeated. "Rinoa, can you hear me!"

Still no answer.

Squall swore and glanced around as he hurried farther into the plain. His gunblade unsheathed, he swung it to the SeeDs, trying in his might to knock them out at best. They were young, just as much as he was, and he refused to take their lives just because they were misguided. Unless they were hell-bent on cutting his head clean, then he might need to bend his own principles. That part became easier the moment he lost contact of Rinoa, and it was a bad day to piss him off.

"Squall!" Zell called from the other communicator.

"What?" Squall replied irritatedly.

"We're landing beside Ultimcia's ship!" Zell said. "Just thought you might wanna know!"

His Ragnarok mirrored his movement as he lurched at another soldier. "On my way!"
"Where are you?"

"Where do you think, damnit!"

"Hey, chill! Just asking, man! Oh, we're getting out the plane now. See ya!"

Squall grunted and swayed his sword, its edge almost grazing against the neck of a familiar face. His heart stopped at the look the SeeD was giving him, as if his life was flashing before his eyes now that Squall was at the brink of chopping his head off. He couldn't remember his name, but he saw him regularly in his classes back in Balamb. He was one of the chatty ones who was fond of spending long hours in the library reading books and telling his friends all about them.

Damnit, why couldn't he remember his name?

"S-squall," the SeeD stuttered, his chest breathing in unsteady rhythm.

Squall lowered his gunblade slowly and the SeeD released a breath of relief as he closed his eyes.

"Get out of this war," Squall growled. "You don't belong here."

The SeeD nodded shakily and then shook his head, shutting his eyes more tightly as he did and pursed his lips. He looked back up at Squall. "M-more are coming. They're making their way through the walls. B-better strengthen your defenses before–"

A bullet shot through the SeeD's chest. Squall stumbled to catch him and saw a female Galbadian SeeD from a distance holding up a smoking pistol. She was riding on another jeep which was bigger in size compared to the ones they encountered earlier. She aimed at his head and began shooting again, which was deflected by a protect spell cast by a silver-haired sorceress.

"Never leave a man do a woman's job," the sorceress said, eyeing the female SeeD. She turned to Squall and smirked. "Remember me?"

How could he forget? She hissed at Ellone and almost clawed at her face just two months ago.

"You can thank me later," she added as she ran to the jeep and jumped at a considerable height with a polearm in her hand.

Squall quickly stood up and hopped into his Ragnarok, keeping the SeeD's last words in his mind. He took one last glance of the lifeless SeeD and pressed his lips in a thin line. He pushed the sticks forward, and he began running.

The first thing that hit Cid Kramer when their plane crashed was the cold metal that cleaved his side, cutting through Hyne knows where. And then there was the burning air that began to scald his unit in an agonizingly slow rate.

His visions blurred. Rather, the vision in his right eye blurred, and his left refused to open. Whether it was from the pain or the smoke, it didn't matter. He didn't care. He was suffocating and he was going to die as soon as the fire found its way to him.

With what was left of his vision, he saw her, barefoot and standing before the exit of their aircraft.

"It is futile!" he'd like to scream, but he lost his strength to fight for his voice. Futile because the flames had melted most of the edges, effectively sealing them shut inside. "We're going to die! We're going to die here!"
Without much of a glance at the predicament, Edea flicked her hand to her side and the door bursted open, relieving the interiors of the asphyxiating smoke.

"Edea," Cid mouthed as she turned to him. She rose her arm and lifted him from the ground, and off the sharp metal that snared him down the floor. He screamed as it slid against his flesh and heaved for air once he was freed.

She turned back around the outdoors and walked at a glacial pace toward the warzone with a levitating and half-alive Cid in tow.

Fang's breath hitched and her eyes widened at the sudden weight of energy around her. She planted her lance on the soil and held on it for support as she gasped for air. She glanced at Balamb's fallen ship and saw the unwanted guest, walking in her usual coquettish fashion, wearing that familiar grin.

Even in another woman's body, she knew who it was.

From the other side of the field, Rinoa felt it too.

Just barely escaping another attack from a soldier until an Estharian soldier came to her aid, Rinoa halted her fall with her arm on the ground. The air suddenly felt heavier, placing a weight in her chest. She looked around and her sorceress instincts, if there ever was one, lead her attention to the Balamb ship where an unfamiliar sorceress was approaching. From her peripheral vision, she could tell the the others from the coven paused from their own fights.

*Don't let your guard down. Don't let our guard down.*

The sorceress warped from the ruins of the plane to an area closer to Fang. The latter struggled to straighten up, glaring at the other.

"Ultimecia."

Ultimecia's smirk grew through Edea's lips. "I'm home."

"You are never welcome here."


Fang's brows furrowed deeper and her eyes narrowed. She twirled her lance in one hand and stood in a her fighting stance. "Our territory, Ultimecia. And we don't really do well with visitors."

"Are you going to battle me again, Adel? Or is it Fang now?"

Fang shrugged. "I really don't mind, either way."

Ultimecia rose an eyebrow. "You and what knight?"

Fang threw flare spells at Ultimecia, one after the other, catching her breath as she did. With each magic she cast, it dissolved at the slightest touch of Ultimecia's shield she wrapped around herself. Her ninth one finally took a toll on her energy, and she had to seek the sturdy support of her lance once again.

Ultimecia smiled, baring her teeth. "Looks like someone forgot to bring hers."

Fang's eyes traveled to the nearly-unconscious man floating behind Ultimecia. "I see you have yours on a leash."
Ultimecia chuckled. "Oh Adel. Even in a different form, you never changed."

"Fang!"

Fang snapped at Vanille who was gliding to her side. The former's eyes widened in horror and held her arm out.

"Stay away!"

When Vanille paused, Ultimecia chucked her with a pain spell. Vanille let out a pained screech as she flew farther and landed on the ground with a loud thud.

Fang quickly flung a cura spell her way just as Ultimecia tossed a ruin spell at her, pushing her out of her sight as well.

Ultimecia chuckled and turned around to watch the great chaotic war growing more and more intense by the second. She sighed. "I'm getting tired of this war dragging on and on for too long." She faced Cid, brushing her glowing fingers lightly along his bloodied chin. "Time to serve your purpose, love."

Cid's eyes quickly opened, his pupils dissipating and the sky-blue color replaced by bright yellow. A dark violet hue began to crawl from his eyes to his skin, and four red horns grew out his head. His features slowly molded akin to a lion's with white mane instead of golden brown. His body stretched and grew in disproportionate sizes, his fingers and feet turning to claws.

"I just love how much you grieve for me," Ultimecia remarked as she watched his transformation. "Let it consume you and bring you power. Then this war will be ours."

"WHAT THE HELL IS THAT!" Selphie yelled, panicked at the growing size of the beast towering somewhere close to the town.

"I dunno, babe," Irvine replied. He was running now toward Quistis who was dealing with a soldier who blocked her path to Balamb's plane. He opened the cover on his robot and called for her. She looked up, her eyes sizing up Ragnarok.

Wasting not time to explain, he tossed the watch to her who promptly caught it in her hands. "She's yours!"

Quistis glanced at the watch and back at the leaping Irvine. "What about you?"

Irvine switched glances between her and the beast. "I'll work better without a robot," he replied, loading his rifle with bullets. "Imma find myself a good hiding place and be your sniper. Give me a good clearing for its soft spot, and I promise you it'll be over."

"When you find Zell, take him with you."

Irvine nodded. "I will."

With that, they separated and Quistis rode on the robot. While testing its controls, she accidentally punched a soldier from Dollet with the arm.

"Sorry!"

Quistis pressed the communicator. "Squall, I'm aboard Ragnarok. Irvine advised that we give him a clearing to its weak spot. He's camping somewhere inside town. Awaiting your orders."
Squall pushed one of the enemies aside and aimed the mechanical hand to the monster. To test its endurance, he fired two missiles, both of which vaporized on its shield.

Why was he not surprised.

"Looks like it's going to take a while to take it down," he said as he began running.

"More smithereens!" Selphie said excitedly.

"Please tell me Ragnarok works on her too," Seifer said.

That was a stupid question.

"Forward?" Fujin asked.

"Yes. Forward. Attack what you can. And remember, we're up against something that came from Ultimecia. This will be no different from other sorceresses. Use what you know."

"I bet the sorceresses can take her," Quistis suggested.

"Yeah, what about Rinoa? What about the other sorceresses?" Selphie asked.

The monster swayed its arm, whirling a forceful wind that threw soldiers and SeeDs off the ground. It released a reverberating roar as the sorceresses began gliding and surrounding it, albeit still struggling from the weight of Ultimecia's energy.

"Looks like they already know who the enemy is."

After catching her breath, Rinoa twirled and flew midair to avoid two other SeeDs who were dashing to her. As she shot blizzard spells, she saw five robots heading to the beast. Without thinking, she glided closer to the group, intending to assist them defeat the new threat.

"Everyone!" she called at the coven for each sorceress she passed by. "Find your spirit! Something bigger is going to destroy our home! Follow me and let's help the Estharians!"

Hearing her plea even from a distance, Fang smiled briefly and willed herself up. Despite being burdened by Ultimecia's indomitable energy, the sorceresses regained their strength to fly and follow Rinoa while the armies around them began heading for the monster as well. She flew to Vanille's side who was groaning at the sore from Edea's spell and pulled her up.

"Can you fight?" Fang asked.

Vanille thought for a moment and Fang saw the resolve in her eyes when she nodded.

"Good." Fang pointed at whatever it was that once was Ultimecia's knight. "That's our new target. Kill that thing, we can make Ultimecia vulnerable. The others are on it."

"Where's Rinoa?"

Fang nodded at the gathering sorceresses. "She's leading them."

Eyes forward, Rinoa flew by the robot coercing the others toward the beast that ramified a Shockwave Pulsar with a roar. She quickly threw a shell spell at the robot which was first to absorb the impact while deflecting it with Impulse magic.

Squall caught a glimpse of his buffer and took a double-take when he realized it was Rinoa. She
was too occupied throwing glowing spells at the beast to notice him, but he realized how her magic was effectively causing bents on its shield. He timed one of her hits and fired a missile, scoring a thundering howl from the beast.

"Target the spots a sorceress hits," Squall incited.

"I'm no Irvine, but I'll try," Quistis replied.

Rinoa seemed to have observed it too and faced the other sorceresses. "Impulse magic works! Summon your best Impulse magic on it!"

"We can't possibly cast something as powerful as yours!" one of them claimed.

"But it will still take damage! Just do it!"

Farther from the battle area, Zell rolled and groaned at the pain on the side when he was thrown by the wave from… whatever it was. He pushed himself up with his arms on the ground and strained to stand. From the distance, he could see the flurry of darkened skies wheeling above the battle grounds. The soldiers from both sides and the sorceresses looked like ants and flies compared to the size of that thing.

Zell limped forward, his leg and arm sore from the throw. His side of the plain was deserted, it would seem like everyone forged toward the beast. When he passed by a wooden crate, he felt a sudden pull from the back of his shirt and he fell, once again, back on the ground.

"Okay, before you punch me—" Irvine interjected quickly and defensively when Zell broke around with a firm fist lifted just inches from his face."—just wanna say that it's because Quistis told me so, and I've been looking all over for you, and I'm glad you're okay."

Zell let out a puff of relief and lowered his hand. "What was that about, man? You didn't need to pull me down here! No one's around!"

"We can never be too sure," Irvine replied, mounting his rifle back on the crate and his eyes on the scope.

"What are you doing? Am I missing something here?"

"Just, shush. I need complete quiet to concentrate."

Zell pouted and slumped beside a suddenly very still Irvine. He fidgeted and looked around a bit until he decided he couldn't handle the unsettling air and faced Irvine once more.

"So what's the plan? Stay here until kingdom come?"

Irvine didn't reply. He was like a statue in his position, as if he was frozen by the kiss of Shiva.

Through the magnification of his scope, Irvine watched as the attacks from the sorceresses and robots were slowly revealing a glowing yellow orb just in the middle of its chest. "Just an opening, guys. Just one good opening," Irvine murmured.

Zell shrugged at the lunacy of his friend. "Doesn't make any sense. You don't make any sense."

Still looking through the scope, he caught Rinoa aim relentlessly at its limbs.

She threw a blizzaga spell that penetrated its shell and landed on one of its arms, freezing it in place on the ground. When it was able to manage a crack by pulling and forced itself free, it retaliated by
swinging at Rinoa with a ball of flare in hand. Rinoa shielded her head with her arms and steeled herself for impact when a large shadow loomed over her that came with a loud CLANK. She looked up and gasped when she saw Squall inside one of the robots, his back parrying the attack meant for her.

"Hey," he said.

Still in shock, she blinked a few times. "Hey."

They paused and gazed for the fewest of seconds until the arm was lifted from Ragnarok and they turned back around to fight.

"Squall! You okay?" Fujin called.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Squall replied. "Its arms are its strongest offense. Their size and constant activity covers the clearing Irvine needs to shoot that spot on his chest."

"You mean that glowing thing, right?" Seifer affirmed.

"What do we do?" Selphie asked.

"Its shield is weakening," Squall observed after shooting another missile over another round of Rinoa's Impulse. "We can hold its arms back down."

"Ah, yes, with five robots that's mighty possible," Seifer said sarcastically.

"Worth a try," Quistis said with approval.

"I'll get the right side!" Selphie said.

"Okay. Quistis and Fujin will join Selphie. Seifer and I will take left," Squall said.

"Does gender have something to do with this?"

"No. But weight does."

"Oh."

"But you're right," Seifer jibed. "You alone can take down the right arm. You're already aplenty."

"I'M GOING TO BLAST YOUR GUNBLADE WHILE I EAT YOU ALIVE!"

"—aplentiful of personality."

"Go!" Squall barked. "Now!"

Selphie, Quistis, and Fujin ran to the right arm and hung on it as soon as their mechanical hands caught it. Squall and Seifer did the same with the other.

"Now try to pull it down and plant your feet to the ground!"

"What for?"

"Just do it!"

Though the lion hybrid became slower from moving its arms, it was unabated in freeing itself from the weight of its constraints. They found their opportunity when it bent down, probably to regain
its force and balance for another roar, a moment they used to staple the feet of their Ragnaroks to the ground.

"Now type these letters."

"Okay, now I gotta ask," Seifer said. "What is it for this time?"

"The code for its built-in bomb."

Seifer shrugged. "Sounds important."

"Hit it, Squall!" Selphie said.

"N, H, I, V, L, H, E, M," Squall recited while typing on his panel. "And when you're done, jump out as fast as you can."

"Are you jumping out now?"

"Yeah," Squall called back as he opened his cover and leapt out.

"Ah, shit." Seifer quickly typed in the code and followed suit, so did the other three.

The beast roared loud as it tried to wiggle its arm free from the sturdy ploy of the robots, slightly shaking them but never able to pull them off the ground.

"Rinoa!" Squall yelled above him. Rinoa was hovering somewhere close to the blast zone and she turned her head from the monster down on him.

"GET AWAY!"

Rinoa's eyes widened when she saw the rapid blinking of the red lights from the robots and faced the other sorceresses. "FLY!"

Heeding her warning, they all dispersed as far away as they could from the monster. Just when they reached a considerable distance, the bomb set off with a deafeaning BOOM, engulfing most of the area and everything (and everyone) in it in flames. The beast roared a loud and agonizing cry at the damage, losing much of its energy from its shield.

"Aha." Irvine smirked and pulled the trigger, his bullet unfazed by the thick hostile air as it wheezed straight to the beast's chest. It released another howl, and another as it faded through its eventual defeat.

Limbless and damaged, the beast collapsed on its side.

Squall bent forward and propped himself with his arms against his knees as he caught his breath. The smoke had gone thicker around them under the darkening skies, and he briefly wondered what time it was. He glanced at his wrist where the watch was wrapped safely and unscratched. Now useless, he quickly slid it out and tossed it aside.

"Squall!"

He turned around at her voice and saw her running toward him.

"Squall!" she called again.

"Rinoa," he whispered. And he began to run for her too.
Rinoa willed herself to glide and she started running afloat the ground closer and closer to him. She could feel her lips smiling and a soft laugh escaped them when she saw the ardent look in his eyes as he quickly narrowed the distance between them. She was almost there. Only a few more steps and her arms could reach him.

And she may very well have.

If only everything around her didn't suddenly and utterly freeze.

Chapter End Notes

You heard that right. Everything just suddenly FROZE.

Would love to know what you think by posting a comment at the space below! I hope you enjoyed this chapter! 'til the next one!
Rinoa staggered and almost fell on her steps when she felt the jolt of the time stopping.

"What…?"

She glanced around. Everyone seemed to have abruptly frozen in place doing what they were supposed to do before the anomaly struck them: Seifer was pulling Quistis up from the ground, while Selphie was jumping midair on their victory over the beast. The sorceresses were still in shock from the explosion that detonated from the robots, while some were helping Fujin heal. She turned around to Squall whose arm was reaching forward to her as his legs were running in their earnest to reach her as quickly as she had also wanted.

"I see you're one with a knight," a voice from behind her said. Rinoa gasped and hurled a spell as she twirled around. The sorceress laughed ominously.

"Who's there?" Rinoa called back, her voice shaking. She knew who it was, her undeniable gut-feel told her. There was no one else who would cause such malignity.

"I am everything," the voice said. The sound lead Rinoa to turn around to the corpse of the beast and there she was, standing in her revealing red velvety dress that left almost nothing for a wanting man's imagination. She emitted the same magic energy that burdened her earlier in the battle, a warning sign just before the lion-like beast emerged out of nowhere.

"Ultimacia."

The sorceress's smile grew so gracefully it flowed with her black hair that floated around her head like curious snakes.

Rinoa felt her heart beating faster and she braced herself from faltering to her fear. She narrowed her eyes, and her mind running with so many things to say, to spit back, to recount with for the disasters she brought upon the world and everyone in it, including the ones of her kind. Including her. But her lips were only able to stumble with the word "You…"

Ultimacia extended an arm toward Rinoa. "And you," she returned. "You with a knight and great powers, wasted on these imbeciles."

"What, are you going to start recruiting me?" Rinoa asked sarcastically.

"Oh, and with a sharp tongue at that," Ultimacia added.
"They are not imbeciles," Rinoa argued. "And I'm not wasting my battles if I choose my enemies."

"Do you find me your enemy?" Ultim西亚 challenged.

"If not for Adel, you would already have put an end to everything in this world! Of course you're my enemy!"

Ultim西亚 mocked a tired sigh. "Oh, I wish you didn't say that," she said, slowly pushing the hem of her floating skirt away and revealing a ground with no beast but an bloodied aged man with no arms. "I would have almost forgiven you for what you and your knight had done to mine."

Rinoa gasped and covered her mouth at the sight. The beast, the one they fought and decapitated, was a man?

"He served to protect me," Ultim西亚 said with an apish tone. "And died doing so. Tell me, is he also an enemy?"

"What have you done to him?" Rinoa asked, stock-still and staring at the man with wide eyes.

Ultim西亚 chuckled. "Me? I only gave him more power to fulfill his duty that he avowed with undying passion. See, my dear? I only gave him what he wanted and asked." She shook her head and bowed as if in mourning. She then lifted her eyes back at Rinoa, wearing a devilish grin. "Even giving his wife's body a boost."

Rinoa tightened her fist on her side so hard it started shaking. "You don't deserve his loyalty," she hissed.

"If you are so against it, what does he deserve then? Happiness? Contentment?"

"Peace," Rinoa replied.

Her arms spread to her sides, Ultim西亚 laughed loud and long. "Foolish girl!" she cajoled when she regained her composure. "Even when he had given you nothing but hatred and grief, you wished him something so shallow and naive as peace that he doesn't even deserve!"

"Everybody deserves peace, even the SeeDs, even your knight," Rinoa countered indignantly. "Even someone as beguile as you!"

Ultim西亚 warped from her spot and in a split second, she was standing inches away from Rinoa, her fingers wrapped lightly but dangerously around the latter's chin. "I'm a sorceress," she hissed. "I don't need peace. I need power."

Rinoa flashed her an equally steely look. "And I didn't ask to be a sorceress," she spat back. "I never wanted to be one of those who will end up having to fight for my home. But I was born one, and I can't change that. But that will never stop me from dreaming of peace!"

When Ultim西亚 lifted her free hand and propelled her palm toward Rinoa's cheek, everything seemed to slow down. Rinoa averted her eyes to the oncoming slap from her side then back to Ultim西亚's enraged face. She carefully bent down to dodge it, stood beside Ultim西亚, grasped her arm, and used the speed she gained from the momentum of the timelapse to pull Ultim西亚 and throw her away.

Was this part of her newfound power with a knight? Not only to be immune from Ultim西亚's time manipulation, but also to be able to manipulate time beyond it?
Ultimecia regained her balance midair and halted her fall by digging her fingers into the ground as she slid backward. Eyes still down, she began to chuckle. "Are we playing dirty now?"

Rinoa's frown furrowed deeper.

With a flick of her hand, Ultimecia lifted Cid's lifeless body and revived him with a Life spell. He opened his colorless eyes and choked at the air his lungs should never have needed anymore. He let out a howl of pain.

"Too loud," Ultimecia said dismissively and cast Silence on Cid, muting his scream.

"What are you doing?!" Rinoa yelled back.

Ultimecia stood and pierced her eyes through Rinoa's. "You think I'd allow myself to fight you without a knight?"

Rinoa didn't want to fight. She didn't want to start another apocalyptic sorceress war like Adel and Ultimecia did ten years ago. Especially not with everyone else in the world frozen and defenseless.

When Ultimecia shot up in the air, Rinoa quickly cast a shielding spell at Squall before avoiding an oncoming Pain spell. After checking where Ultimecia warped next, she threw more shield spells at anyone in her proximity before dodging at another offensive spell.

"Fight me!" Ultimecia shouted from above and threw a blazing Flare.

Rinoa yelped and dashed from the ground, still casting shield spells at anyone and everyone she could reach. If she was going to be in an all-out war with Ultimecia, she had to make sure nobody gets hurt from stray attacks. When she was certain she had everyone covered, she finally threw an Impulse spell at her.

Ultimecia dodged the attack and growled. She shot Rinoa a dangerous glare, and cast an Maelstrom. Rinoa projected a Reflect with her palms and shielded herself with it from the Ultima, bouncing it back to Ultimecia albeit taking majority of the damage. Ultimecia's eyes widened and waved a Shell, somewhat shielding her from the damage but still throwing her farther upon its impact.

"Did you really think things will change if you save them?"

Rinoa watched as Ultimecia flew higher and closer to the clouds. She thought it was a preferable distance to take the fight away from the ground where everybody else was, so she shot up, wrestled to fly higher, and eventually feeling a pining magic protrude behind her back that quickly lifted her until she leveled with Ultimecia. She glided to her side, cautiously watching Ultimecia as she rounded from the opposite side while she observed her as well. Rinoa narrowed her eyes at the black feathers floating around her dropping from the giant wings that unfolded on her back.

_Had she always have those wings?_

Rinoa jerked her arm down, summoning a glowing spell of Ultima around her hand, and flung it to the other sorceress. Ultimecia popped Shell on each hand, caught the Ultima in a ball of magic between her palms, and threw it back at Rinoa who somersaulted midair as it passed to her side and almost hitting her neck.

"Your dream of peace makes you nothing but a waste of flesh!" Ultimecia shouted in their seemingly perpetual battle of one spell clashing against the other. Both needed to cast Curaga on themselves each time they were hit, but that didn't save their stamina from dropping. At least to
"I don't care if you think it doesn't make me worthy of my existence!" Rinoa cried back. "But if I'm going to die fighting for peace, then so be it!"

"Peace is an illusion! There will be another war because they envy us! They DESPISE us!" Ultimcia warped forward to attack Rinoa, who quickly willed her gleaming wings to dash to her side.

"Don't blame them for war and hatred! There is no hatred as immense as yours!"

"Did your SeeD knight say that? Were you so fooled by him that you forgot what he did to our kind?"

"It's not the world! And it's especially not the SeeDs! It's all you! You did this to us!"

Ultimcia paused and, though baffled, so did Rinoa. The former began chuckling and bowed down as she held her stomach to try and hold her laughter down. Seeing this as an opening, Rinoa threw another Flare that grew larger midair until it hit the back of Ultimcia's arm. Still chuckling, she twirled with the spell and catapulted it back to Rinoa who destroyed with with an Impulse.

"Cheater," Ultimcia whispered. Rinoa shivered at the way she said it, as if it was a threat in response to the challenge she started. Sure, she cheated – she attacked her opponent at her vulnerable state. But she only meant to finish the fight as fast as she could before it could hurt more.

Ultimcia lifted her hand and snapped her fingers. As if on cue, the stars and the moon in the visible sky suddenly began revolving around them in a frighteningly fast pace, bleeding crimson across the moon and the celestial sphere. And then it made its nauseating stop when the red star found its place just behind the lunar body.

The Red Moon.

Rinoa felt the surge of energy beneath her skin and her fingertips leaked magic in blue shimmer. She tightened her fists and glared at Ultimcia whose smirk was beginning to become taxing the longer she held it. Without thinking, Rinoa threw a Flare so immense that it recoiled from her hand, and she gasped. Watching as the spell shot like a bullet despite its size, she realized she had just induced an Ultima.

Ultimcia's eyes widened and took a side step in the air to escape the attack, but her leg was not spared. She roared in pain at the agonizing burn it left. Without mending it even with a Curaga, she quickly warped somewhere below.

Coming to a conclusion that Ultima was just as simple as casting Flare and causing considerable damage to Ultimcia, Rinoa instinctively threw another one her way.

Ultimcia grinned and warped away to avoid the attack before it reached her. Just then, time around them resumed and Squall's eyes widened as he watched the spell hit him.

"NO!" Rinoa cried when she realized what happened after Squall was blown from the ground. She started to hurry for him when her peripheral vision sighted Ultimcia on her side. She turned her head to look and gasped when she felt something cold pierce the side of her waist.

"A cost for the fallacy you call 'peace,'" she said softly to her ear as she quickly withdrew the ice shard from the other's flesh.
Rinoa lost her balance and began to plummet as she heard Ultimecia's chuckle fade above her.

While everyone else was celebrating their victory over the beast, Vanille began looking for Rinoa. And she did find her, somewhere close to the sky and falling. It wasn't hard to spot her or Ultimecia when they were the only ones floating visibly that high in the battlefield. She didn't know how she got there or why, but she knew Rinoa would die if she didn't do something. She called for her friend's name and quickly cast Float, bouncing Rinoa in the air and gently placing her down on the ground beside a suddenly unconscious Squall. She glided her way to Rinoa and quickly realized that she was faster at doing so. Good.

"I'm coming, Rinny! Just, hold on," Vanille pleaded, hoping that it would somehow reach Rinoa's ears and heed her. Still gliding, she noticed the color of the sky. Never had she seen it so red, not even from the countless red moon festivals she had in her lifetime. She looked up to where the sun should be and saw the moon in its place and crimson in color.

Zell noticed it too. He was standing by the crate as Irvine reloaded his rifle beside him. He shook Irvine's shoulder until he got his attention and pointed at the red moon.

"What the hell…?"

Hand still around Quistis' arm, Seifer glanced around and frowned. The battle wasn't over yet, it would seem.

"What the hell is going on?"

Quistis pushed herself up and looked around as well. "Oh no… Oh Hyne…"

Selphie shielded her eyes with the sides of her palms cupping around her forehead and she stared at the crimson moon.

"Lunar Cry…” Fujin said beside her.

Rinoa winced as she rolled herself to her unaffected side and pulled herself up. Once she managed to kneel and sit on her legs, she gasped for short breaths of air and gently pressed her palm on her wound, flinching at the throbbing pain. She released a sharp exhale when she glanced at her bloodied hand and shut her eyes tightly.

"Curaga…” she breathed. It helped relieve some of the pain, and maybe lessened the bleeding. But she knew it would take more than a Curaga to heal a cut this deep.

She began to look around, whimpering as she did, and spotted Squall. She released her tears at the sight of evident burns on his exposed skin from the Ultima spell she threw. It would have done more damage if not for the Shell she buffed him with, but the power didn't spare him from getting knocked out.

Using her arms, she crawled closer to his side, sobbing at her pain, his helpless sight, and her powerlessness to save both of them. When she reached him, she lifted his head and cradled him on her lap before wrapping her arms protectively around him. She glanced around, looking for Ultimecia and fearing for what she planned to do next.

And she heard her. Just above in the skies, there she was with her tortured knight floating behind.

"...Lowlifes. ...Shameless filthy wretches. You all deserve what is coming to you. Destruction. Death. You cannot gain power. I will not allow it in this new era I will build. An era of the moon!
This is your reality now, where life and death are at my mercy! Rest assured, you fools, that this is only the beginning! And you will know the true meaning of TERROR!

With one last frenzied shake, her knight hung his head. Ultimcia revived him again with Life, only succeeding at jerking his heart back at the slightest second. She grimaced when she failed again with another attempt.

"Useless," she said and threw his body away, mindless even after he crashed to the ground. She glanced at the group and her eyes fell on an angry blond man with a strong stature and a scar across his forehead.

"Perfect."

Her candidate for knighthood paused and dropped all the emotions from his face. He let go of Quistis' arm and stood, turned around, and made his way to Ultimcia in a zombie-like state.

"Where are you going?" Quistis called as she stood up. She sprinted after him. "Seifer! Where are you going!"

Seifer shoved her arm away without glancing when she held him by his shoulder to pull him around. He continued plodding forward.

"SEIFER!" Selphie called this time and dashed toward him. He thrust her away with a Fire spell and Selphie yelped as her body hit the ground.

Quistis growled and drew out her whip. She belted for Seifer's arm, wrapping her weapon's tip around it. He snapped a glare at her and dashed her way with his free arm forward. He swiftly gripped her neck, fervidly choking the air out of her as she gaped back at his soulless eyes. He chucked her aside like a rag doll and the left of her head collided with a rock.

Zell rushed to restrain Seifer in a firm chokehold. "Seifer!"

"STOP!" Fujin pleaded.

"She's making him her knight!" Rydia decalimed. She waved at the other sorceresses around her. "He cannot make the pact! Hold him down!"

Y'shtola quickly flung a Petrify at Seifer, freezing him in place.

Zell quickly let him go when he realized what spell the funny-looking sorceress cast on him. He flashed her a puzzling look, who gave it right back at him. They both looked up at Ultimcia.

All of them did.

Rinoa's closed her eyes and lifted Squall closer to her chest as her arms began glowing of Curaga. When his bruises and blisters began closing and healing, she leaned over until their foreheads were touching.

"Squall…" she whispered. "I'm sorry."
Wherever he was, there was no ground.

He was carried by a gentle force in a place where there was absolutely nothing to touch or hold, nor was there anything to hear. Weird, he thought, that something unexplainable existed. Maybe that was why it earned a spot in the dictionary:

Void.

He wanted to see what void looked like, but he was so much at peace that he refused to open his eyes. Peace in a time of war. Strange, very strange. Peace was something he could only find in her arms.

"Squall…"

Her whisper. Her voice. That was her voice. And it sounded… strained.

Squall's brows slightly furrowed together before finally lifting his eyelids.

So this is what void looks like, he thought. White. All white.

"Squall…"

He pushed his legs forward until his body was floating upright. He looked around, searching for her.

"Rinoa?"

"I'm sorry."

"Where are you?"

She began to cry. "I'm sorry I hurt you."

"What are you talking about?"

"Ultimecia, she tricked me," she sobbed. "She tricked me to attack you. I'm sorry."

She sounded weak and hurt. For the first time in the void, his heart began to beat fast.

"Where are you?"

"I'm right here with you."

"Where?" he sounded almost pleading. "Are you hurt? Did she hurt you?"

"Yes. And many more are, too."

There was a pause.

"But we can help them."

Squall shook his head. "I want to see you!"

"Don't be afraid. I'm here with you."

"Tell me what I have to do," he said. "I'm your knight."

"And I'll be right with you," she said.

A pristine white feather appeared above him, swaying on either side as it slowly floated down. Somehow knowing it was Rinoa, he reached for it and it began to flash a blinding light at his touch.

"I promise."

Rinoa lifted her arms as Squall gently floated away from her, like guiding a bird to freedom from his restraints. Blue strings of glimmering magic flowed from her fingertips and whirred around him like eager dancing wisps.

When he was positioned evenly across Ultimecia, Squall opened his eyes. He slowly lifted his predatory glare at the sorceress who eyed him nonchalantly, as if he was just another feeble opponent she could easily crush in her palms. She lazily tossed an Ultima at him, which did nothing but spark against Rinoa's shield around him. She widened her eyes and gritted her teeth at his unexpected invulnerability and angrily tossed more potent spells, all of which having the same futile effect as the last.

He swiftly unsheathed his gunblade and flashed at her side, attacking her with multiple slashes. Ultimecia blocked each with a protect spell, groaning at the strength he gained from junctioning his innate SeeD talents with sorceress' magic.

She succeeded at pushing him away by showering him with a Meteor spell and chuckled shortly before realizing that he simply avoided it when he re-appeared through the smoke to strike her. She parried his blade with Protect and roared.

"KURSE YOU SEED!"

The pain from Rinoa's side panged savagely that she clapsed it with her hand as she fell on the other, gripping the dirt on the soil to find as much as shed of relief in her fist. She caught for air and shut her eyes tightly, compelling herself to bequeath all the magic she could muster to Squall.

Skidding on her heels, Vanille looked around and finally spotted Rinoa.

"Rinny!"

She immediately ran to her side and pulled her to her lap. She examined Rinoa and quickly found the bleeding that soaked the side of her light blue dress. Vanille fervidly rubbed her palms together until they emitted a white glowing Curaga and hovered them just above her wound.

It was bad, very bad. But she wouldn't be the one to tell Rinoa that.

"Vanille..." Rinoa smiled, her eyes shifting between Vanille and Squall over her shoulder. "I'll be fine. The others..."

"No! You will not be fine without me!" Vanille insisted. "They have the rest of the coven to help them, I'm sure!"

Rinoa hated to admit it, but the tingling from Vanille's Curaga was making her feel slightly better. It wasn't closing the wound as much as Rinoa hoped it would. But it was giving her some relief, and that was good enough. "Thank you."
Squall was hit with one of Ultimecia's spells, and he was quickly cured with Rinoa's Regen. He swung his sword at her, giving her another cut along her defensive arm.

Rinoa smiled at his small victory. "We will win this. Right?"

Vanille looked up just as Squall dodged another attack. "Uh huh. We have a fighting chance. For one, she doesn't have a knight."

"She has the red moon," Rinoa whispered. The back of her hand dropped on the ground and laid the other on top of her chest.

"But there's a lot of us," Vanille said. "And she's alone."

From the other side of the field, Irvine cried for Selphie and knelt beside her. He lifted her in his arms and dropped a potion over her. "Selphie! Please wake up!"

Selphie winced and grumbled something.

"Oh, thank you," Irvine whispered in relief. He pulled her up to his neck in a tight embrace. "Thank you."

Fujin knelt by an unconscious Quistis and quickly felt for her pulse. It was weak, but it was there. She pulled out one of her Pheonix Downs and frantically looked for a way to make her drink it. She knew she had to lift Quistis' head, but it was a bad idea when she possibly had a concussion, evident by the blood on the side of her head. Seeing her predicament, Rydia glided to the two and cast Cura on Quistis just until Fujin could safely administer the curative. Quistis' breathing became steadier, but her eyes still wouldn't open. Rydia tilted her head to a side disapprovingly, upset by the limits of her magic. Even with the red moon, a sorceress without a knight could not possibly heal an internal wound.

Fang landed beside the group, her eyes immediately catching Seifer's odd position and impassive expression. Y'shtola promptly straightened up at the sight of Fang.

"She tried to make him knight," she explained hurriedly. "And attacked them."

Y'shtola pertained to the unconscious blonde girl being assisted by Rydia, and a brunette embraced by a boy in cowboy hat.

"What do we do?"

Fang looked at Y'shtola and then turned around at the fight above them. Though there was little juice left in Ultimcia as indicated by her sloppier moves and more furious face, Squall maintained the strength he had both from his training at SeeD and Rinoa's power boost. The fight was nearing its end, and the sorceress was going to lose. But losing wasn't enough, Fang learned that much ten years ago. They should seal her somewhere and make sure she doesn't reach someone else's body.

Without the right equipment, however…

"We have to freeze her."

Y'shtola shot her a surprised look.

"Blizzaga from everyone will freeze her in place. It will be enough to hold her still just until we can get Dr. Odine to seal her," Fang explained.
Y'shtola nodded and took a step closer to her until Fang held up her hand.

"You stay here and make sure he does too," Fang said, pointing at Seifer. Her eyes shifted to Rydia who was looking at her too, waiting for her cue. "Rydia, help those who need healing."

Rydia nodded and lifted her eyes back at the fight in the sky.

Squall dashed through Ultimcia's side, aiming a slash at her waist. His attack was repelled by her Protect, but some of the Thundaga infused on his gunblade made it past her shell and she growled in pain as she flew away. She swung her clawed hands at him and ripped the sleeves of his leather jacket, drawing blood from the scratch. Squall's brows furrowed deeper as he rotated his gunblade with his hand, evoking balls of fire in a circle and flung them at her. Ultimcia cried at the explosion that burned her exposed skin.

She crossed her arms upright across her chest and summoned a floating circle of encryption which stopped just below Squall and flared up. Squall roared in pain at the extreme burning damage and stumbled backward. Ultimcia laughed at how little the Regen did on him from Hell's Judgement. "You are just as FOOLISH as she is! You think you can win this war? Without her, you'd be dead long before you could face me!"

Still heaving from the damage, Squall flashed his eyes at her.

"You SeeDs killed so many of our kind without realizing that they have more power to stop me than you! Think of how many other Rinoas you have killed!"

"Says the sorceress who let her knight die," Squall retorted.

"I don't need a knight as much as she does. The red moon has bestowed me with powers in Lunar Gate twice more than anyone," Ultimcia said, coaxing hopelessness. "Time shall compress under my will, and all existence will be denied. Including yours, including hers!"

Ultimcia's eyes widened when she was jerked backward after an attempt to lunge at Squall. Her legs were hit with ice spells from all directions that slowly crept upward and crisping the hem of her skirt solid.

"Who cares?" Squall dashed too quickly to an unguarded Ultimcia and held the edge of his gunblade across her chest. "Go ahead and die for your dream. And I will die for hers."

Just then, her arms were also hit with Blizzaga. Ultimcia tried to wriggle herself free from her constraints and growled at Squall. "You! You're just like him! You will be bound to a sorceress who lives for power!"

Squall paused and felt the cold wind breeze his hair to a side as the silence fell for the first time in the battle. What he was about to do was something he had turned his back on and left for good in the past since he met her. Now he found himself in the same position then as a Commander of SeeDs on a mission in Timber, slayer of sorceresses. Slowly, he looked over his shoulder and quickly spotted Rinoa on the ground, wounded and resting on Vanille's lap.

She filled her eyes with firm resolve when they met his and nodded at him. That was all the permission he needed.

He turned back around at Ultimcia. "I was under no one's spell when I chose my sorceress," he said, towing his gunblade down and slicing through her chest. "And she was smart enough to spare her knight's life."
Ultimecia's howl of pain caused her energy to burst through the ice pillars meant to hold her in place. She began to plummet as soon as they shattered in pristine pieces, cursing at Squall who watched her fall with a stoic glare.

In her one last act of revenge as she made her descent, she pulled an arm up and pointed it at Squall. Her fingers began to gather red lights of energy, forming encryptions that grew bigger in size and numbers.

"Apocalypse," she hissed.

With her lance in hand, Fang appeared above her, her propelling Aero blowing through her sari and hair. Ultimecia gasped when the former raised her weapon and aimed at her chest.

"ADEEEL! YOU TRAITOOOR!"

"No, Ultimecia," Fang replied. "You are."

And she thrust her lance down, impeding Ultimecia to the ground where more sorceresses were waiting. They poured her with Blizzaga from their palms, sealing Fang's lance punctured through her chest and muffling Ultimecia's last breath when the ice crawled up and reached her face.

Squall caught his breath while he watched the coven entomb Ultimecia in thick ice. Lassitude quickly took over and he realized that her last spell on him was finally taking its toll. After inhaling a deep one, he collapsed midair on his back and Rinoa began to lower him with her feathery Float. Fang noticed the couple's struggle and decided to carry the now unconscious Squall in her arms before dashing down by Rinoa.

The latter turned her head against Vanille's lap and gave Fang a weak smile when she landed. "Thank you."

Fang nodded and kindly placed Squall by her side. Rinoa gingerly reached a hand a ran her fingers lightly along Squall's cheek, brushing a stray brown strand as she did. He was beat, more than she had ever seen him before. She wished he was awake so she could apologize once more for being caught in this war meant only for her to finish. And perhaps she ought to thank him for that, too. For helping them finally put an end to this senseless conflict that dragged on for a decade.

Perhaps they would have more time in the future. Soon. Hopefully soon.

She took a deep breath and finally laid her eyes to rest.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter is the last chapter. Thank you for reading! Please tell me what you think in the comments below!
The reverberating beep from the monitor pierced uncomfortably through his ears—fading... returning... then fading again.

The first thing Squall realized when he finally came to was the soft surface under his head and back. He was in an infirmary or hospital, somewhere that had medical services. He balled his fists, and the pressure of squeezing nothing against his skin flooded back to him like a new sensation. His body felt sore, though it was nothing too unfamiliar to him. He winced and slowly opened his eyes, squinting at the first sight of light then blinking.

"Squall!" he heard someone cry. It sounded like Ellone. That made sense. "Thank Hyne you're awake!"

Squall steered slowly toward the voice to see her standing and taking his hand.

"Sis?" he groaned.

Ellone smiled in relief and examined him while tenderly brushing his hair back. "How are you feeling?"

Squall's mouth pressed into a grim line. "Like hell."

Ellone sat on the bedside chair. "The doctor said you're healing quite well. We were beginning to worry you were in a coma, but the doctor said it was only your body needing sleep."

"How long was I out?"

Ellone's face fell. "Three days."

Three days? He had been sleeping for three days?

Squall gently placed a hand on his forehead. "That... long?"

Ellone nodded. "That doesn't matter, you're back with us now!"

Squall groaned as he pushed himself up with his elbows. Ellone swiftly held him on either side of his arms and propped him straight, gently leaning him on the pillow behind him.

Squall looked at her again. "What happened?"

Ellone smiled sadly and sat back down on her chair. He knew from the look she was giving him that he needed to brace himself for everything he missed in those three days. Three long days after the war. There would be no victory fanfare or dancing to music or confettis for heroes. No side ever won in a war. There were only more losses and deaths.
"We almost lost Dad," Ellone said. "If it wasn't for Ward who…-" she choked on her next words."-- he defended Dad's life 'til the end. But he wasn't able to save him from the impact of the crash. It damaged something in Dad's back, and he still can't feel his legs. Kiros is the toughest of them. He broke many bones, but he'll recuperate."

The last word left a tone that was more reassuring than convincing.

Ellone hesitated for a moment. "Quistis has a bad head trauma. She's awake now, woke up just yesterday afternoon. But she lost her motor in speech."

Squall didn't want to ask. "Is she…"

"Mute?" Ellone finished. When Squall stared at her for a moment waiting for an answer, she closed her eyes and nodded. "Yes."

"Oh." Squall turned away. Quistis, the aspiring instructor, their group's strategist, lost her speech somewhere in the midst of the war. It would ruin her.

"Selphie is healing from minor burns," Ellone said, gripping back on hope with better news. "The sorceresses offered their help, so we're expecting a speedy recovery. And Rinoa…"

Squall snapped his head up at the sound of her name.

"She's in the other room, still sleeping. She took a bad one as well, but her sorceress friend Vanille never left her side. She's healing well. Out of everyone, she held the strongest faith that you'll wake up."

"How did you know?"

"Fang told me."

Squall hummed against his throat and nodded. "Of course," he murmured. After another moment, he lifted his head up without looking at Ellone. "Anything else?"

He heard a faint sound of Ellone gulping as she struggled to speak again. She didn't want to be the one to break the news, but the sooner he finds out the better. That was how he had always preferred it, anyway.

"We… well… we lost Raijin."

Squall shut his eyes and hung his head.

Ellone took a deep breath. "I've been told that he was able to clear the frontlines. But a bomb inside one of the jeeps set off and… He was closest to it."

He shook his head and turned away, suddenly feeling something heavy weigh down in his chest.

"I ordered him to stay there," Squall murmured. "Should've brought him with us where we could see him."

"The Salt Lake was the safest zone during the war. It was something no one had ever anticipated. It's not your fault."

Squall sniffed and turned back around. Raijin finally found friends in them, a sister in Fujin, and a brother in Seifer. He was lent to them for a fleeting time, and it was over before they realized they could have been better at being the family he sacrificed everything for.
"I'm going to see Rinoa," Squall said, having the sudden urge to seek comfort. At least Rinoa was safe.

Ellone stared at him for a moment, half-shocked at his unexpected request, but immediately understood what he needed. She nodded and helped him stand from his bed.

Walking wasn't as hard as he had thought. He started with smaller ones until he was sure he could make wider steps. Though there was the anticipated tingling in his legs from being stagnant for too long, each step encouraged what circulation his legs needed to feel normal again. To "get back on his feet again," as Ellone would put it. She handed him the white shirt and black pants she brought for him so he could change from his hospital gown. She offered to help him walk, but Squall held his hand up and assured her that he could do it on his own.

Out in the corridor, Squall glanced around. The infrastructure was too white and plain, and lacked the monitors and electronic panels usually seen in an Estharian hospital. Instead, it was filled with idle patients and medical staff buzzing back and forth the area.

Ellone detected her brother's curious surveying of the place. "We're not in Esthar anymore."

Then there was only one place they could be.

"Tear's Point."

Ellone nodded. "It's not as advanced as the city, but it has everything we need. Just until Esthar City is back on its usual operation, we'll stay here with the refugees."

Trudging along, they reached a room and Ellone gently knocked on the door.

"Come in!" said a voice from the other side.

Ellone looked at Squall for a affirmation (and translation), and he nodded. When they entered the room, they were greeted by a Vanille holding up her hands over Rinoa's waist with a bright white light of Curaga. She beamed at the two.

"Heya!" she said, keeping her voice down.

Squall nodded at Rinoa's direction. "Are you okay?"

Vanille knew she was asking about her use of magic energy and shrugged. "Well, I haven't collapsed yet. The red moon seemed to have done its trick. I think I'll be good for three more weeks without a coven."

Squall nodded and surveyed Rinoa as she slept. She wasn't as pale as he had seen her before, but she had a few bruises on her arms and a shallow cut on her face as evidences of her onerous battle with Ultimemia. Unrewarded from the sorceress language, Ellone wandered to the window to pass the minutes and allow Squall to take his time on his visit.

"How is she?" he asked.

"She's fine. Wound is getting better," Vanille replied. "Shumis are really good at this hospital thing. She still has to stay in bed to rest. No hard work allowed, so I'm her nanny!" She giggled.

"Shumi?"

"Yeah, Shumis make their rounds in the hospital and make sure they monitor everyone. They're
pretty good with medicine too!"

"Can they understand you?"

Vanille shrugged. "But whatever they're giving us, it's working on Rinoa nicely. So no worries there!"

Squall took one half-emptied medicine bottle from the table and realized from the label that they had given her antibiotics. It had dosage instructions on the back.

"Can you understand this?" he asked.

"Well, the nice Shumi lady did some hand gestures," Vanille replied. Squall grinned, recalling the first time Rinoa tried to communicate with him. She also had to use hand gestures.

"That's good," he replied. He turned his attention back at Rinoa. "What happened to her?"

"Stab wound."

Squall's eye twitched at Vanille's reply.

"There's nothing to worry about, as far as internal wounds are concerned," she added quickly. "The Shumis were sharp to take care of the damage before it got too far. They stitched it up, but Curaga will do miracles."

Squall nodded. "Thank you."

Vanille smiled. "She best be staying in bed to rest though, just until she makes a full recovery."

"And you?"

She leaned forward and peered at Squall. "I could use some rest," she said, and then winked. "Wanna take over?"

Squall raised his brows and blinked. After a moment of seemingly giving it a thought, he shrugged. "Yeah, I guess I can."

Vanille's smile grew wider. "Great! We'll just finish up with her daily dose of Curaga before you can take your turn!"

"Okay. Then," Squall glanced over at Ellone. "Ellone and I will leave for now."

Ellone turned away from the window at the sound of her name.

"She should be awake by then. Bring coffee while you're at it?"

Squall nodded. "Is that all?"

"She'd love to get her hands on cupcakes too," Vanille replied. Then shrugged. "Well, anything sweet, actually."

Squall smirked and nodded. "I'll see if I can find a cinnamon swirl for her."

Vanille's face lit up. "That's her favorite."

"I know." Squall nodded.
When Ellone shot him a questioning look, he clarified for her. "I'll be back for Rinoa later."

"Okay," Ellone replied before heading out with him thru the door. As Squall gently closed the door, Ellone nudged his arm. "You hungry?"

Squall nodded.

"We can go back to your room and have something arranged for you."

"I'm not going back in there," Squall said with distaste. Three days were enough to feel cramped in his room.

"Let's hit the canteen then," Ellone replied. "They must have something you like there."

Squall towed behind Ellone as they made their way to the canteen where Estharian guards marshaled the long line of refugees. When they finally had their share of lunch after twenty minutes of waiting in line, Squall's hunger had already abandoned him. But being under Ellone's watchful eyes, he knew she wouldn't let him go so easily with an empty stomach. They took a free table by the entrance where Squall blankly fiddled with his porridge, the only dish he was allowed to eat for not having solid food in his three days of sleep. After taking one bite of her butter croissant, Ellone eyed Squall's tepid appetite.

"Don't you miss the food? Like, actual food?" Ellone asked. "You only fed on I.V. I thought you'd miss this."

Squall sighed lightly. "I'm just taking my time." He shifted his eyes up to Ellone. She was rubbing her finger clean with her napkin before sipping from her bottle of water. "Sis."

Ellone raised her eyebrows and looked at him. "Hmm?"

Squall rest his spoon on his bowl. "What happened to Ultimecia?"

Ellone patted her lips dry with her tissue and bit her lip. "Well, after she was defeated, the coven found a way to freeze her long enough until Dr. Odine could seal her and launch her into space. They're planning to man a station there, but--" she shrugged. "-- who knows what's going to happen about that one."

"So they finally saw the truth," Squall said nonchalantly.

Ellone nodded. "The Gardens and the other nations finally conceded to Esthar when they finally saw it for themselves and understood our point. Maybe except Galbadia. But President Deling was under the impression that if he refuses to cooperate in the armistice, it will be the world against him this time. And Galbadia Garden, their sole strong arm, pacified itself from attacking sorceresses."

Squall suppressed a smile. They were finally getting somewhere. "And Balamb Garden?"

Ellone's lacy fingers fidgeted around her cup. "Without a Headmaster, Balamb Garden closed down while the other Gardens absorbed their cadets and SeeDs. They are starting to reconstruct their program so that they are no longer obligated to purge sorceresses but they can still work as mercenaries for special missions."

Squall nodded. "That's good," he sighed. Maybe it was all good, except for one thing. "Is... Cid really gone?"

Melancholy passed through Ellone's eyes as she nodded. "Yeah... he was... far too gone."
"Even... Edea?"

Ellone nodded. "She died with Ultimécia."

"Oh," Squall replied. He was hesitant to hear the answer. Edea was the haphazard victim who found herself in the wrong place at the wrong time. He was beginning to think Ultimécia did it on purpose to hit Cid where it hurt, probably as soon as she found out he was leading the SeeDs of Balamb Garden to destroy her during the war. They were doomed from the start. Both of them were.

Squall shook his head and attempted on a lighter subject. "How's the coven holding up?"

"They suffered their own losses," Ellone replied glumly. It was an answer Squall was half-expecting, albeit his hopes that they fared better. "I saw some of their wounded, and some who were..." she hesitated for a moment. "Well, you know how it would be. They went to war, and without a knight, so..." Ellone's eyes fell on her hands for a few seconds then lifted her head again. "Their youngest sorceresses are safe with us here, though. Fang told me Lunar Gate is still under construction, so it's going to be a while until they can return. The coven decided to stay here in Tear's Point and help out with the healing before anything."

Squall lifted his filled spoon from his bowl and dropped it again to sink through the thick porridge as he looked away. It was hard to remind himself that it was over when too many lives were taken and ruined by the war. Many were still faced with arduous recovery, may they be the injured or those who had to deal with the losses. It was easy to say that they were rebuilding, but "rebuilding" was too optimistic of a word. It was a hard and painful process of finding their way to start again and bring back what once was.

"How's Esthar?"

Ellone pursed her lips. "Just as you had imagined after being made a warzone. It needs a lot of work. But," Ellone lifted her gaze and smiled a little. "Esthar is still strong with its people. They are hopeful Esthar will find itself again and bring their home back just as they remember it, if not better. Though they worry very much about their President."

Squall chuckled softly. "That part's easy."

"Huh?"

"You can act as substitute."

Ellone frowned. "No! Of course not!"

"The people will look up on the next Loire to lead President is still recovering, and I don't see a Vice President around. And you're the eldest of his children."

"I can't!"

"Of course you can."

Ellone shook her head vigorously. "I can't deal with Galbadia! What if they declare war again? What am I supposed to do? People are gonna DIE. You're better at this!"

Squall shrugged. "I can't even fix my life yet. I just woke up, remember?"

Ellone crossed her arms and waved them to her sides as her gesture of admitting defeat. "Okay, you
know what? Fine, you're right. There are still so many things you have to deal with. But when you are ready, you will have to take my place."

"Maybe we don't have to," Squall said. "I mean, he's still alive. Right?"

"Dad?" Ellone asked. When Squall didn't reply with more than a stare, she leaned over the table. "Wanna see him for yourself?"

Squall nodded.

Ellone smiled. "Okay." She flicked her eyes at his porridge. "Finish that first before we pay him a visit. A hungry you worries me a lot."

"You sound like my mother," Squall scoffed and lifted a spoonful.

"Oh she's worse," Ellone replied. "You may not remember her much, but I do. She's way worse, trust me."

There was no longer a Presidential Suite inside the hospital for the President of Esthar. The one hundred square-meter room was converted into a stockroom full of boxes of food and medical supplies manned by five Trabians and Estharians. Squall was yet to see for himself when Ellone told him as they made their way to Laguna's room at the lower floors.

"So, Trabia's helping out, huh," Squall said.

"Trabia Garden has been against the war from the start," Ellone said. "After the war, they planned to change the name of the Garden to Esthar Garden to seal their allegiance with Esthar, since the treaty had been rendered void. But Dad told them to keep it."

When they arrived in front of Laguna's room, Squall faced Ellone after she knocked on the door. "To be fair, Trabia is technically a part of Esthar."

Ellone shrugged. "They tried to be independent from us, and Dad only gave them that freedom. He's welcoming them back with open arms, but he wanted them to keep the honor of having established a Garden on their own."

Squall hummed against his throat as Ellone pushed the door open. He gestured after her before entering and immediately spotted the empty bed by the window. His eyes travelled to the the other bed in the room where a bandaged Kiros laid while Laguna was sitting on his wheelchair at the bed's side. Both men turned to the two and Laguna beamed.

"Squall! You're up!" Laguna guided his wheels around and rolled them toward Squall. The latter surveyed him and noticed how his feet were stepping on the footplates. They were much too relaxed that even his legs were slightly parting from each other. Laguna had completely lost control of them to fix them firmly in place. Squall fought the urge from shaking his head or turning away. He couldn't look at him like this.

"Dad," he said and his voice broke when he met Laguna's eyes.

Laguna's smile slowly fell at the sound of his son's strained voice when he called for him.

After a moment of silence, Kiros chuckled from his bed. "Laguna, it wouldn't hurt to take your son outside the room, right?"
"It might not be an ideal environment for the President," the Shumi nurse chimed in worriedly. Squall didn't notice her standing in one of the corners until she talked.

"Wouldn't want to remember this place with a sob story about a father-and-son's long overdue bonding," Kiros commented.

Ellone nodded encouragingly at the two and opened the door for them.

"Right. Okay. Squall?"

Laguna looked at Squall for affirmation before leading him outside.

Squall felt his legs weaken as soon as he spotted a chair and sat, propping his elbows against his knees. Laguna wheeled beside him and placed a hand on his back.

"Hey, you okay son?"

Squall nodded and eyed him again. "Are you?"

"Well, I'm alive," Laguna said too cheerfully. "And you're awake. I'm really glad you woke up. I couldn't be better."

The edge of Squall's lips briefly curled upward at his father's sincerity. "I'm sorry about Ward."

There was a sudden far-off look in Laguna's eyes which he quickly rubbed out with a forced smile. "It certainly wasn't the worst way to go. He'd crack something up and boast about it. Yeah..." He nodded. "We'll certainly miss him."

Squall nodded with him. "Yeah."

Laguna observed his son and after a wordless moment, beckoned him closer with his arms.

"C'mere."

Squall drew closer to his father and flinched when he was pulled into an embrace. He warily lifted his arms to reciprocate the gesture and patted Laguna's back. Now that was another first. He was sure he had hugged Laguna like this back when he was younger, but it was too long ago to remember. The rest of the moments in his life barely involved any kind of affection. Until he met Rinoa.

When Laguna pulled away, Squall almost smirked and rubbed the back of his neck. He cocked his head at Laguna's legs. "Maybe we can get those working again."


"Rinoa..." Squall repeated, her name fleeting sleekly through his lips.

"She's a miracle, ain't she?"

"Hmmm..." Squall mused. "You knew her mother, right?"

Laguna grinned and scratched his head. "Yeah. I knew her from my Galbadia days. Met her in Deling. Deling Hotel, actually," he recounted fondly.
His father didn't need to say more for Squall to see that there was something more to it. "Must be serious, huh."

Laguna chuckled and shook his head. "Not as serious as with your mom. But it was definitely something. She was only starting her career in singing then. We chatted over roses and glasses of wine, and it became one of the most unforgettable nights of my life. Cheerful girl, carefree, and I swear she looks just like Rinoa. After that night, I was not able to visit her again, or see her. Not to mention, forgetting all about plans on seeing her after I met your mother," Laguna's smile fell quickly. "Then one day I just found out she died in an accident, leaving a husband, Fury Caraway. Imagine my surprise when I found out she has a daughter, a sorceress daughter."

Squall looked away. "Feels weird."

"Yeah, it must be to you," Laguna affirmed. He tilted his head as if in thought. "Come to think of it, maybe that's why I never heard of anything about Rinoa."

Squall turned back around at Laguna. "Because she's a sorceress?"

Laguna nodded. "Yeah."

"She's... Julia's Ellone." Squall mused.

"Yep," Laguna replied. After a few seconds of needed silence, Laguna spoke again. "Wanna see her?"

"I already did," Squall said. "She was sleeping."

"She should be up by now."

Squall nodded lazily and peered at Laguna. "Should I?"

"Yeah!" Laguna cheered, his voice rising a pitch.

Squall stood and dusted his pants. He glanced around uncertainly. "Where can I get cinnamon swirls around here?"

"Try the kitchen," Laguna advised. "The stuff they make may surprise you."

"Okay," Squall replied and was already making his way through the corridor. He stopped and turned around. "Hey Dad."

Laguna's eyes perked up. "Yeah?"

"I think I owe it to you. For dumping me into that place."

Laguna scratched the back of his head. "Nah, it was my bad. I only wanted to protect you by giving you the best training in the Garden. And I did it without thinking. It was too late when I realized they actually never really cared if their SeeDs die in, say, Timber."

Squall shrugged. "If you didn't do it, if I didn't become a SeeD, Rinoa would still be hiding somewhere. Or worse."

Laguna's lips curled up. "You think so?"

Squall nodded. "Now I know I wouldn't have it any other way."
All the cook could manage with the lack of supplies for proper packaging was the wax paper wrap that loosened around the cinnamon buns. Not ideal for the sticky cream glazed over the pastry, but enough to keep everything intact. Squall also remembered to place the paper cups inside the plastic bag and carried a pot of coffee with his other hand, mindful of his parcels as he walked along the corridors from the kitchen. He had to give it to Tear's Point for always having a complete set of ingredients and ready to cook anything.

Squall sighed heavily to brush away whatever fuss he had in his system when he reached Rinoa's door and knocked.

"Come in," she called from the other side. So she really was awake.

Rinoa looked up from her laced fingers on her lap and inhaled sharply when Squall stepped into her room.

"Oh," she said, forcing a smile to allay the racing of her heart. She gulped and bowed slightly before looking up again. She giggled nervously, and she was beginning to worry she looked unstable, physically and mentally. "Uhm…"

Squall gazed at her as he tried to read the unease in her tone and movements. Was his presence suddenly something new and invasive to her? They had been this close several times before, and then there was that more intimate moment in Lunar Gate.

"Do you need more time?" Squall asked, his jaws giving a little quiver.

"Oh, no, please," Rinoa said hurriedly, gesturing at the chair beside her where Vanille used to sit. 

*Hyne, her voice sounds beautiful.*

Squall gave a subtle smile and obliged himself on the chair after placing the pot of coffee on the side table. He lifted the plastic bag. "Cinnamon swirls."

Rinoa eyed them anticipatingly. "Are those for me?"

"Yeah."

She smiled and bowed. "Thank you."

Squall placed the bag closer to Rinoa and peered at her sideways. She tucked her hair behind her ear and brushed it down to gather over her shoulder.

"Uhm, how have you been?" she asked.

"I'm fine," he replied.

"I'm glad you're awake."

Squall nodded once. "Thanks." He angled his chin at her wound. "How are you holding up?"

Rinoa placed her palm over the bandage on her waist. "I'm getting better. It doesn't hurt as much anymore."

Squall nodded and Rinoa squeezed her arms together after looking away.

"This feels strange," she said after a moment of silence.
Squall studied her with a curious gaze. "How so?"

Rinoa returned his look. "This is the first time we ever talked."

"You mean, actually talk."

Rinoa laughed softly. "Yeah. It's just that—" she fidgeted her thumbs. "--there were so many things we could have said to each other. If only…"

Squall watched her shift uneasily on her bed as he waited on her next words.

"If only I had made you knight sooner."

He adjusted himself against his chair and leaned his elbows against his knees. "I supposed I wouldn't make me knight back then either."

Rinoa smiled and tilted her head. "What made you say that?"

Squall lifted his gaze. "Need I explain more?"

Rinoa laughed and shook her head. "For starters, you were a meanie."

"Meanie?"


Squall tried to keep his smirk as subtle as possible. "I'm sorry you had to deal with that."

"That's alright. I just wish I had a way to tell you that."

"Would it make any difference?"

"I don't know. Would it have?"

Squall tried to hide his grin and the flush that crept his cheeks behind his unruly hair. He didn't care less of what she thought of him than he did now. "Maybe…"

"What about you?" Rinoa asked. "What would you have told me?"

Squall pushed his hair back. "Back then?"

"Yeah."

"Since when?"

"From the start."

"From the cabin in Timber?"

Rinoa hummed and nodded. "If you still remember."

"How could I forget?"

"It was too long ago."

"It was the first time I met you," he came back softly.
It was Rinoa's turn to blush under his gaze, though it was too late for her to hide it. She ironed the sheet on her lap to distract and compose herself. "So, what would you have told me?"

Squall gave it a thought as he surveyed her. And when she looked back at him, he began to talk. "I wish I could have explained everything to you. Why we attacked Timber, why I didn't trust you at first, why they took you to Balamb, why I had to leave you in Lunar Gate..."

Rinoa nodded silently. "Can you tell me everything, then?"

And so he told her. From the time he commandeered the ambush in Timber, to his discoveries in Balamb Garden especially of Fury Caraway (Rinoa asked if there was anything more to it, and Squall regretfully said he only knew what he read in the folder), to their escape, their journey to Esthar, and when they finally made it to Lunar Gate. She was silent the whole time, only asking questions here and there, listening intently as he spoke. When he finally told her of their parting in Lunar Gate, she didn't ask why he left her, but he felt compelled to explain himself, no matter how difficult it was.

"I understand," she said. "You had your duties back in the city."

"To tell you the truth," Squall added. "I didn't want to leave."

"You didn't have to. Why did you?"

His mouth tucked uneasily. "I guess I was unsure back then."

"How you felt?"

"No. How you would feel."

Rinoa's smile sprung for a second. "You could have visited, you know."

"You were welcome to do the same."

They looked at each other for several seconds when they realized they were both waiting for each other to do something for two long months. And then they laughed. Not because they had to wait for much too long a time, but because they both felt the same way and were too silly to see it.

When her laugh died down, Rinoa fell silent again while her smile remained on her lips. "Just so you know,"

Squall turned to her with a waiting look.

"I missed you."

His eyes travelled to the floor and then back to her. And she saw the heartfelt look in his eyes when he said "I missed you, too."

Her eyes widened. "Really?"

Squall nodded once. "You were all that I think about"

Rinoa felt her cheeks warm again and she looked away. "A-and then the war happened," she said, prompting for him to continue.

Squall dipped his head back down. "Yeah."
"We lost Garnet."

Squall's brows wrinkled in the middle.

"Garnet was a good friend. You should remember her back in Timber," Rinoa recounted. "You faced her at one point. She was one of the younger ones in the coven."

"The short one with brown hair?" Squall asked wistfully.

"She always wore yellow," Rinoa replied.

"Yeah, I remember her." He remembered thinking she was much too young to be fighting off the SeeDs.

"She was the reason I was left behind," Rinoa said, her voice staggering against her throat. "She needed help, so I asked Vanille to take her while I distracted the SeeDs." She closed her eyes and tears quickly fell.

"We lost someone, too," Squall said, not to level with her, but to join her in her mourning. "We lost Raijin."

Rinoa gasped. "Raijin?" She remembered him– the gentle giant among Squall's friends.

Squall nodded. "He had big dreams for this world."

Rinoa nodded. "Garnet did, too."

"They all fought with something worth dying for."

"Even Ultimania's knight?"

"Cid Kramer," Squall replied and nodded. "That was his name. Cid made his choice. He looked at the wrong ways to save Edea, unaware that he was leading everyone to a war. He was too blinded by the prospects of curing his wife when there really was no cure."

"Cure?"

"From being a sorceress."

Rinoa narrowed her eyes, more in disbelief than anything. "How can you cure being a sorceress? I don't understand."

"I don't either," Squall replied. "Maybe because Edea wasn't a sorceress in the first place. She was only possessed by Ultimania."

"Edea is his wife?"

"Was," Squall corrected.

"Can't we still save her?"

"It's too late for that." Squall shrugged. "She's gone. And even if we can, I don't know how."

Rinoa's eyes fell. "Oh."

"Cid didn't fight for her like he should."
"From the world?"

"From Ultimecia," Squall said. "Maybe if he sought the sorceresses' help rather than hurting or killing them, he might have found something. Maybe Dr. Odine might have found something. He shouldn't have captured and strapped them in a chair like…"

He stopped when images of Rinoa screaming in pain on that damned chair came back to him in bolts. It hurt too much to go further, and he shook his head in his attempt to remove that memory in his head for good.

Rinoa reached for his arm and squeezed it gently when he looked at her and she smiled affectionately to give him even a fraction of comfort.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

She gave him arm a little shake. "It's alright. We didn't know better back then," Rinoa replied, raising her smile when Squall tugged his mouth on one side. Her compassion really knew no boundaries, and that was a miracle in itself. "Also, thank you… for getting me out. I can't imagine how much you had to give up for me. You stuck around, and I'm grateful."

Squall placed his other hand on hers and brushed it with his thumb. "You saved me. In every way possible. I'm ready to give you everything, as I always have, since Timber."

She smiled and laugh, bashfully looking away and then turning back at him. "I think 'everything' is too much. I only ever want to ask one thing, if I'm entitled to demand for anything."

"What is it?"

"Stay."

Squall finally smiled for good, narrowing his eyes in thinner slits. She never saw him do that before either. "I'm not going anywhere."

"You promise?"

"I'll be here with you, as long as you want me to."

They gazed at each other for a moment before Rinoa pulled away and scooted to a side. She patted the space she freed on her bed and Squall, though unsure at first, took her invitation and sat beside her, kicking his boots off before pulling his legs up. She wrapped her arms around his waist and though he recoiled for a second, he placed an arm around her and she leaned her head on his shoulder. They allowed the moment of getting comfortable to settle in before Rinoa spoke again.

"I'm sorry about making you fight Ultimecia," she said and waited for Squall's reply. When it didn't come, she added, "You were the only person who had the best chance to defeat her."

"I told you before, didn't I? I'm at your service."

"Don't say that."

"What?"

She lifted her head and peered at him. "That you're at my service."

Squall raised an eyebrow.
"Nobody services no one. We're partners, right?"

"Just partners?"

Rinoa playfully jabbed on his chest and Squall smirked when she hugged him right after. When he kissed the top of her head in response, the memory of the night they spent together in Lunar Gate came flooding back to her like a vivid dream. He told her something, and she thought it was a promise or a goodbye. She didn't know, but now she could ask.

"Hey Squall?"

"Hmmm?"

"Remember that night back in Lunar Gate?"

"Hmmm…"

"We were in this same position when you whispered something. I didn't understand it back then, but I really wanted to know. Do you remember it?"

Squall smirked through her hair. "Hmmm…"

"What was it?"

Squall pulled away and gazed at her longingly, stroking her cheeks gently with the back of his fingers as he did. "I told you that no matter what happens, even if you end up as the world's enemy, I'll be your knight."

Her smile grew as she held her eyes on his, swimming into the heart and sincerity of his gaze and words. She cupped his face in between her palms, and gently pulled him close for a kiss.

Squall fulfilled another promise. This time, it was the one he made with Vanille. He stayed with Rinoa for another day, making sure she had everything she needed and that she grew stronger. Vanille had paid them a visit to give Rinoa her Curaga and left everything else to Squall. When the sun set the second time, Squall grew silent, and Rinoa could tell his mind began to travel elsewhere. He didn't seem to be the type who rest still in the present. He always looked forward, anticipating problems and future worries even when he was surrounded by people who would catch his back in a heartbeat.

Rinoa slid from her bed and carefully approached Squall with light footsteps. He was clearing up the table from plates and wrappers they used for dinner and jumped when Rinoa placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Hey," Squall said, half-scolding. "You should be in bed."

Rinoa brushed off his comment and beamed at him. "Let's head out."

He recoiled and shook his head.

She pouted. "I'm getting cooped up in this place already."

"You have to stay and heal. We have no choice on that matter."

Rinoa averted her eyes and rocked on her heels. "What if we give other people a visit? It's just like transferring rooms!"
Squall turned around to face her and leaned his back against the table. "Yeah?"

"You told me you haven't seen Quistis yet."

Squall shrugged. "I'm not sure if I already can."

Rinoa clamped her hand around Squall's and pulled him to the door. "Let's go find out!"

"W-wait, you--"

"Oh stop it, I'm fine!"

The next thing he knew, they were already out in the corridors and Rinoa was glancing around. "So which way is Quistis'?"

Defeated after Rinoa brought up his promise to be "at her service," he relented and lead her to the reception to inquire. They went up one flight of stairs and quickly spotted Quistis' room. Squall knocked and let themselves in after a faint response from what seemed to be Seifer. The latter looked up from Quistis' bed with dark circles hounding beneath his half-lidded green eyes.

"Oh, hey," Seifer gruffed weakly and rubbed his lids with the back of his hand. "It's you."

"Poor thing," Rinoa breathed at Seifer's sight. Squall gave her a curious look. "He must be really exhausted."

"What did she say?" Seifer asked.

"She called you a poor thing and said you look exhausted," Squall translated for him.

Seifer chuckled and swayed an arm toward a sleeping Quistis. "Yeah? Well, I present to you my own mistake."

Squall frowned and examined Quistis. No wounds were visible on her exposed skin, but the left side of her head was wrapped in white bandage with hints of bloodstains soaking from the inner layers.

Seifer's eyes travelled to Rinoa who was approaching Quistis then back at the latter. "I bet Ellone filled you in."

"Yeah," Squall replied, leaning his back against the wall by the door and crossing his arms. Rinoa sat on the free chair by the bed and held Quistis' hand, careful not to touch the tubes injected through her arm, and studied her with inconsolable eyes. When she turned away and glanced at Squall, he swore her eyes were already welling with tears.

"What happened? How can we help?" she asked.

"Rinoa's wondering what happened," Squall said. "I'm curious myself."

"Ellone didn't tell you that part?"

Squall shook his head, coming to the assumption that Ellone wanted Seifer to tell him himself.

Quistis grunted and haltingly opened her eyes. She scanned her visitors inside the room and smiled. When she parted her lips, she began to say a string of gibberish one-syllable words. Rinoa failed to stop her tears from streaming down her cheeks and her sob prompted Quistis to comfort her with a gentle stroke on her cheek.
"Ultimcia got into my head," Seifer began after watching the two. "I don't know how she did it or why she chose me. The last thing I remembered was helping Quistis up the ground. I tried to fight it--" Seifer choked and shook his head. "--Hyne, I did. I fought hard when she made me walk to her, when she made me blow Selphie away with Fire, and when she--"

Seifer's eyes fell and he shook his head some more. "I wanted to scream when I threw her to that rock. And when she didn't wake up. Zell held me in place until a sorceress Petrified me. I'm still thankful that she did. It eats me to think she could've made me do more. And then, when I'm finally myself again, I was told that Ulti-- that bitch tried to make me her knight."

Squall watched Seifer grit his teeth and pull his interlocked knuckled down, all in his bid to repress his own tears.

"She knew what happened?" he asked.

Seifer scoffed. "Of course she does. We told her. She's not deaf."

"Of course."

"We also told her about Rai."

Both of them fell silent. Rinoa began pulling her trick of dancing wisps to keep Quistis entertained when her face fell at the mention of Raijin.

Squall shifted on his heels and cleared his throat. "Can she still write?"

Seifer nodded. "Yeah. She already told me it wasn't my fault. It was nobody's fault. Damn if it isn't. I'm glad that bitch is dead."

Squall caught Quistis watching them from the corner of her eyes and her smile wasn't there anymore.

Now's the time to move onto Rinoa's next question. "How can we help?"

"Do you have a cure for her?"

"Rinoa can try, if you let her. But we both know Curaga can only do so much. It will take more than that."

"Then help the others that you can heal," Seifer said, finally lifting his eyes to Squall with readable entreaty. "Quistis has me. And I'm gonna stay here until they discharge her, whether you need me or not."

Squall shook his head. "I agree. Take as much time as you need."

Seifer turned back to Quistis. "They have the other refugees in the open grounds. They have tents there, it's hard to miss. Zell and the others are already there. They could use as much help as they can get."

"Then we'll go there," Squall said, pushing himself from the wall.

"Thanks."

Squall nodded and called for Rinoa. Her face brightened when he told her they could visit the refugees and help out. He then cocked his chin at Quistis when his sorceress reached his side. "Hey, Quistis."
Quistis carefully turned her head against the pillow and to Squall.

"Catch you later."

Quistis simpered and muttered something incomprehensible, eyes darting between Rinoa and Squall. Whatever it was, he knew it was a warm return.

The open field was an organized mess with people going around and about carrying things, delivery things, and looking for things as they hopped from one tent after the other. Squall searched the place for any familiar face and quickly located Zell's tattooed cheek handing out string bags to the people in line with Fujin assisting him. Not too far from them were Selphie and Irvine who were giving out instructions and directions to the refugees. Selphie still had a bandage around her arm, but it didn't seem to bother her movements. They were also surrounded by sorceresses who lead the wounded to the entrance of the hospital or toward tents. Even the younger sorceresses lent their hands by playing with refugees their age.


Squall followed Rinoa's gaze and saw Fang's hands glowing over a child's wounded leg while the silver-haired sorceress he encountered soothed him from behind. So that was Aranea.

Rinoa whirled around at Squall. "Where should we start?"

Squall pointed the pair of sorceresses. "They seemed to be fully-booked. Want to help Fang with the healing?"

She nodded. "Sure."

They started squeezing through the crowd, ignoring the curious eyes that followed them and murmurs that begged to confirmed if he was the "Loire" and if she was "THE sorceress." And he had no better response, how else would they call them? He could only thank Hyne that Rinoa couldn't understand, and she didn't ask. Though the stares didn't escape her, but she chose not to say anything.

"Squall!" Irvine's voice boomed in the place and waved at his direction.

"SQUALL!" Selphie's call overpowered the other as she waved at the two with two arms. She began jumping when she saw Rinoa. "RINNY!"

Squall leaned over and whispered to Rinoa's ear. "You're Rinny. She's calling for you."

"Oh!" Rinoa began waving at Selphie too, trying to match the latter's energy.

"Squall?" an older woman said.

"Squall Loire?"

"That's really him?"

"So that's really his sorceress?"

Several people around them suddenly paused, staring at them and watching as he and Rinoa tried to pass through. And then, one of the older men began clapping. A young boy followed suit as he shouted a loud "THANK YOU", and the sound of clapping grew louder as everyone gradually joined the ovation. Irvine began clapping zealously and Zell whistled to cheer. Fang was
applauding for them as well with a look of approval.

Squall and Rinoa halted on their tracks and looked around. Rinoa began clapping as well even when she looked uncertain at what's happening.

"What are we clapping for?" she asked.

"I think…" Squall glanced around. "I think they're clapping for us."

"What?" Rinoa's hands relaxed. "Why?"

"You saved us!" Y'shtola replied from behind. The couple turned around. "You did it! And we thank you!"

Squall looked at the cheering crowd and extended his arms toward Rinoa, rousing a louder acclamation with Selphie yelling in support. He began clapping for her too, knowing that it was really her who dreamed big and made everything possible. It was true that she was too good for this world, and though it sounded harsh, maybe even too good for him too. He felt the most fortunate to be granted this lifetime where she was in it.

She shot him a questioning look. "Why are you clapping with them?"

He didn't need to answer. Whatever it was, she saw it in his mesmeric blue eyes. She could see everything in his beckoning visage the reminded her of the incredible truth that he was her knight. He was hers.

"We both saved the world, you know?" she said, gracing him with his favorite smile.

He shrugged. "You started all this."

"All I wanted to do was to save you."

Squall finally laid his hands down and his smile softened when she locked him in a loving gaze. His heart leapt with the way she looked at him and it muffled the cheers and applause around them. Everything else slowed down and revolved around the immaculate vision of her. She was all and everything that mattered.

"And all I wanted is a world where I can stay by your side," he said.

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Eight years later…
Ashen black hair that belonged to a boy floated through the crowd and out of the gaudy assembly. He pulled the hem of his red cape, swirling it through the wind in his victory stance for successfully squeezing free from the madding crowd.

"The knight of the night has made it alive!" his little voice piped and his eyes piercing at invisible challengers. He hopped and pushed his cape back while midair and did a half-kneel landing which he imagined looked mean enough for a hero. He pointed his wooden sword outward and scanned the lit place, stopping at the sight of the lone girl on the ground. She was fixing a loose tire on her doll's pink car, and though patient as she seemed, he could tell she was growing more and more frustrated.

And because he was a hero who fought for anyone in need, he rushed to her side as fast as his small steps could manage.

"What's the problem, you dimsel in stress?" he clamored gallantly.

The girl silently looked up to him from her work and stared blankly with her round brown eyes.

He "sheathed" his sword under the garter of his shorts and knelt beside her. "Do you need help? I can help if you want!"

The girl silently watched him talk before glancing back on her toy, fidgeting her fingers uneasily around it.

The boy offered his hand. "Do you need to fix it? Maybe I can look!"

The girl lifted her gaze again and saw the sincerity in his green eyes. She gingerly handed him her toy car and quickly retrieved her hand to brush her brown hair over her shoulder. She observed him examine the car in his hand as if he had conjured all the concentration and focus from all the depths and corners of the world. He fitted the wheel on the free slot and pushed it into place with a click.

He handed the car back to her and smiling proudly at his work. "There! I changed the tires!"

The girl gave him a half-smile and began to giggle that sounded like chimes in a windy morning.

The boy was about to leave but looking at her made him decide to help himself a spot beside her. And so he sat, rocking back and forth on his thighs. "So what's your name?"

The girl have finally decided to respond and shook her head.

"Huh? What's that?"

She pointed at the banner by the entrance of the place that said "Red Moon Festival" both in sorceress and non-sorceress languages.

"Huh?"

The girl then produced small wisp figures over her palms. One of a moon and one of a sorceress.

"Wow!" The boy said, ogling at the pretty glowing figures she invoked effortlessly. "Are you a sorceress?"
The wisps disappeared and she smiled at him. This time, it was a sweet one that reached her eyes. "So you don't understand me, huh," the boy mused, tugging his lips to his side in evident disappointment. "Well, I hope you understand this one." He swung his strong arm and pointed a thumb at his chest. "Machina!"

"Machina," the girl repeated. Her voice sounded smaller than he had expected. Machine nodded eagerly. "Machina!"

The girl smiled and pointed a finger to her chest as well. "Rem."

"Hi Rem! That's a weird name, but still pretty!" the boy said.

The girl tilted her head and smiled.

"Machina!" a female voice called from behind. Both children looked over Machina's back and saw a woman with long black hair approaching with a hand on her hip. "Your dad and I have been looking all over for you! The sorceress fireworks show is about to start!"

"Just a minute!" Machina called back and turned back around at Rem. "Mom's here. I guess I have to go now. I hope to see you later so we can play with your car!"

Rem only nodded and smiled as she watched Machina scamper away to the woman. He tugged her black skirt.

"Mommy, I found a new friend!" Machina said excitedly. "And she's a sorceress!"

"Really?" the woman replied encouragingly. "That's good. Did you make sure to greet her? This is their festival."

"There you are," a man carrying a popcorn and a chocobo-shaped cotton candy said as he approached the two. He gave the boy a look that was reproaching even under his sky blue eyes. "Where have you been?"

"I met a new friend, Dad!" Machina replied and pointed at Rem.

Just then, Rem looked away at the sound of her name and was lifted from the ground by Squall, her smile growing wider.

"Daddy!" Rem hailed and wrapped her small arms around his neck. Squall pulled her closer and rocked her lightly in his arms. Rinoa reached them from behind and held Rem's hand.

"Mommy!" she giggled and clasped her tiny fingers around Rinoa's.

"Hi Baby!" Rinoa greeted back.

Machina's parents squinted at the girl and her family curiously. "Cloud," his mother said, trying to keep her voice as low as possible. "Is that…?"

"Yes, Tifa," the father said. "That's the Captain."

"So that's Squall Loire?"

"Yep."
"And his sorceress wife? Rinoa?"

"Uh huh."

Just then, Rem was telling Squall about the friendly boy who fixed her broken car. He followed his daughter's finger pointing at Machina's family who were observing them from the audience gathering for the fireworks. Squall caught Cloud's look, and the latter nodded at him with due respect. Squall nodded back.

"So where are we going?" Rem asked and earned back her father's attention. "Is Grampa and Auntie Ewony coming with us?"

"No. But we're going to get the best view of the fireworks," Squall replied, smirking as he adored his daughter. "I'm sure they can see the fireworks from the city too."

"Are we going to that same place as before?"

"Yes," Rinoa replied cheerfully. "The rooftop of the cabin."

"It's too high!" Rem moaned and dug her face on her father's neck.

"Don't worry," Squall soothed. "Mommy and I are here to catch you before you fall."

Chapter End Notes

Yep! Those are Rem and Machina from FF Type-0! If you're not familiar with them, GO SEARCH THE ADORABLE KIDS RIGHT NOW OMG!

Okay, since this is the last chapter, I think I might owe you some explanation. (cracks knuckles)

You might be wondering what happened to Serah, since she's arguably one of the most powerful sorceresses aside from Rinoa. She could have fought, but, along with Lightning, she chose not to. Remember, Snow and Lightning only concerned themselves with protecting Serah and staying out of the limelight. Maybe they made the right choice too, since Serah had been too sheltered all her life without experience in fighting. Even with a knight, she might not last long in the war. Don't worry though! The Farrons and the Villiers are still friends with the Leonharts/Loires! Claire actually ADORES Rem! Just couldn't find a place to fit that into the chapter lol

The "Red Moon" represents two things in this fic. One, it's Rinoa's dream for peace, as that was how she perceived it from the start. This was also why she saved Squall's life in the first place. She was all about peace, and she believed in it. It also represents Ultimcia's power, as the Red Moon or the Lunar Cry event is when sorceresses become more powerful. She was chasing for it which started a bloody war and hatred against sorceresses. Basically it's war vs. peace kind of thing, if there even is one. That makes both of them chasers of the red moon. Of course, Squall is a chaser too. Can't say the same about Cid.

What happened to Holy? Fang defeated Ultimcia using Holy during the great sorceress war 10 years prior. It did work, because that was the most powerful spell she
could summon without a knight. Remember how Fang used to have one but he was killed during the war? Yeah. So Rinoa, being the all powerful now aside from Ultimcia, decided she needed Squall's help to defeat her, since he had the right set of skills to kill a sorceress, and she can add more to those with her magic, making an effective offense toward Ultimcia. Group effort, guys. Group effort.

Now, does it really all have to end here? Well, my buddy Angel Wings Naya asked if there will be any sequels of spin-offs. Not sure about a sequel, but if there is going to be, that will mean I have to do one that crosses over to Final Fantasy Type-0 because I will have to extend the story to Rem and Machina. For spin-offs, mmmmaybe omakes of what happens after the war. So that means actual moments where Rinoa and Squall talk, exploring the aftermath of the war in Esthar, Lunar Gate, maybe Balamb, etc.

Are you guys up for it?

So what's next for Scribbleness? I'm developing a new story and, fingers crossed, I hope you'll like that one too! It's going to be a lot different, but still Squinoa. Also, whereas this crossovers somehow with FFXIII, that one will heavily involve FFXV. I also have other fics to finish, so there's that too!

Oh, and as usual, I hope you enjoyed this chapter and the whole story in general! Comments are still very much super duper appreciated!

Cue the Final Fantasy Main Theme!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!