Chapter 36: "Treason from one angle, saving the republic from another," Caraway shrugged in an uncharacteristically cavalier fashion. "I used to see the world in black and white, but the older I get and the more I see … well, it's just a hell of a lot of gray."
The expanse of an old dock stretched out before him. He could feel the mist of the sea on his face—the strong sun warming his skin, and a comforting wind encircling him. He looked ahead in the distance and saw a shadow of someone, and a feeling of comfort overcame him in a sudden wave.

Behind him, he heard a humming—a song he could recognize, but the melody was distant in his mind. When he turned to find the source the sky went dark, and a deep foreboding sunk into his bones.

The air around him grew cold, and as the stars burned brighter and stood out starkly against the night sky, he realized that he was standing among them. It was dark, empty and lonely—his chest ached for the warmth of the sun and the comforting wind.

The solitude was brief—a dark figure in the svelte shape of a woman manifested before him, some distance away.

"Boy," she cooed, as she began to float towards him. "I've been waiting."

Waiting waiting waiting … the word echoed around him. He shivered.

"Boy," the voice said again mockingly, laughing. "Are you afraid? You'll have no fear soon enough."

She floated closer and he stepped backward a few paces slowly.

"Who are you? What do you want from me?" He cried out, panicking as the dark visage began to cackle.

"Boy," she taunted once again, her voice edged with anger. "You can't out-run me. You are fated to be mine."

The air grew cold, and he turned from her, running farther down the dock. He could feel her floating closer, laughing as he quickened his pace. His feet plunked and scraped against the weathered boards—his legs vibrated and felt weaker with each step.

At the end of the dock, a bright white light emerged, with white wings of wind outstretched—it commanded him to run. Without hesitation he sprinted towards it, but the dock seemed to grow longer with each step he took—he couldn't get close enough. The dark woman screeched behind him.

"This knight is mine. You're too young my dear, and too weak. You've just been born."

The dock began to quake and crack beneath his feet, with planks pulling apart to show slits of night sky. He tried to move faster, but the boards ripped and bent with a horrifying screech, and he fell between the spaces. He screamed but heard nothing. He was convinced this was the end.

But as the figure behind him approached and his body began to slip downward into the chasm of space, the white wind stretched toward him and enveloped him, pulling him from the docks and towards the bright light.

"Fools!" The dark woman screeched, just over his shoulder. "I'll find you!" He could feel her claws pulling at his back. But it was too late. The wind and its wings were encircling him and pulling him...
Seifer Almasy shot up in bed, drenched in sweat. He'd had that dream again, with light and darkness dueling, and him being torn apart in the middle. He was angry to once again wake up before figuring out what the winged savior was—he always wound up in the eye of a storm, with the bright light shining above him, but he never managed to dream long enough to see the next part.

Sighing, he wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. He swore these dreams were worse in the heat. He looked over to the window and found that it was closed, most likely by one of his traveling comrades asleep in the same room.

Pulling his sheet around his waist, he stood to walk towards the window and parted the curtains to get a look at the sky—not a single star. No matter how many time he stayed there, Dollet always gave him the creeps at night and he never quite knew why. But, it was a convenient summer escape from Balamb Garden, and Hyne knows he could use some space from that place.

Maybe it wasn't the heat that woke him, as he registered a sudden sharp pain beginning to form in his head. He touched two fingers to his temple, wincing.

Too much whisky.

Seifer turned to survey the room. His bronze comrade Raijin was asleep on one of the hotel room's double-beds, gently snoring. He could vaguely remember Raijin grabbing a girl and ducking out early on them, leaving Fujin on duty to manage Seifer; it had been that way almost all summer, which was no easy task after he failed the SeeD exam. Most nights had consisted of heavy drinking, high bar tabs, getting into some minor scrapes with locals, making some inappropriately timed (and maybe just entirely inappropriate) passes at people, and stumbling into bed. It had been quite a vacation so far …

Speaking of people he'd made inappropriate passes at this summer, he noted that Fujin was nowhere to be found in the room. Seifer peered at Raijin's bed, unable to spot their pale friend. He then looked to his own mattress, already knowing that she wouldn't be found there …

With panic building in him, his eyes darted around the room as he sought for her pallid body in the wan light. Why wasn't she here? Had he left her alone in the Dollet streets to fend for herself? Had something happened to her? Raijin would kill him … which would be fine because he'd probably want to be dead anyway.

A mix of relief and guilt overcame him when his eyes finally settled on her, safe from the dangers of Dollet. Why was he overacting? She was a well-trained murderer of men—of course she could handle herself in Dollet … Hyne, Fujin even outranked him now.

She was asleep on the floor between the two hotel beds, using Seifer's white trench coat as a blanket. Apparently, he and Raijin forgot about her comfort entirely. In Seifer's defense, he'd had a lot to drink—he couldn't even remember coming home. He futilely tried to piece together the events of the evening, giving up quickly and running his hand over his face to feel the scruffy beginnings of a beard. He should probably wake her up and switch places. Poor Fuu, always getting the short-end of the stick in their rooming situations.

Seifer turned from the window to walk towards her, needing to adjust the sheet as he stepped on one
He searched for any piece of his clothing in the dark, tilting a chair and lightly shoving an ottoman aside. He inspected the side of the bed that Fujin wasn't occupying, and then scrutinized the area around her to find that she was sleeping on top of all of his clothes, any of Raijin's discarded clothes she could find, and a couple of the extra pillows from his bed.

Touché Fuu, he chuckled. Things really were a mess in here. He was only a little proud … a shameful sort of proud.

Seifer pulled the sheet tightly around himself and slid down next to her. When she slept she looked so peaceful … which was a nice change from the stoic front she put on for most people. Not for him, but for most people. He was one of the lucky few allowed to see the soft side of her—most people would assume she didn't have one. Wouldn't they be shocked to know that when he'd failed the SeeD exam this year, Fujin was the one to comfort him? And all these nights this summer, when Raijin was out pursuing some evening conquest and Seifer had too much to drink and "sort've put everything out there" (as he'd shamefully called it when apologizing to her the next day for being a wuss) about the nightmares he'd been having, and his fear of failure, Fujin was there for him. She'd always been there for him.

Let's not think about that right now. He urged himself to brush those thoughts aside, the events from these past few days replaying in his mind briefly. The rejection still stung a little … probably because his feelings had been honest.

Seifer put his hand on her shoulder, and shook her gently.

"Fuu," he whispered. She groggily opened her eyes, her silver hair obscuring her view.

"Ugh, what time is it?" She whispered, leaning up a bit as she searched for his face in the dark and took in the sight of the large mound that was Raijin still asleep in the bed next to them. "How are you even awake right now? I thought you'd be passed out for at least a week with the way you drank tonight."

"Well, sorry—you're not that lucky." He smiled, his hand still on her shoulder. "I have no clue what time it is. I don't even remember how I got back here." Seifer noticed she was eyeing the sheet draped around his waist. "Oh, and you're also bogarting every single piece of clothing I own."

"Uggggggggh," she groaned. "WHY WAKE?" She was definitely not in a good mood. He must have done something tonight that had made her mad. That was pretty common these days, with the way he was acting.

"You know I hate it when you talk like that around me," Seifer grimaced.

"WELL," Fujin shot back sharply. "WHY WAKE?"

Quiet fell upon them again as he stared down at her and she stared past him, seemingly at nothing.

"Yikes. Okay. Look, I can't really remember tonight. But, I'm sorry in advance for whatever it was that I—" She cut him off abruptly.

"WORRY NOT." Fujin sank back down to her makeshift bed and rolled onto her back to stare up at the ceiling, throwing his hand off her shoulder and pulling his coat up to her chin. There was something on the collar Seifer couldn't make out—a red stain of some kind. Hyne knows.
"NOTHING WRONG. FINE NIGHT."

What in Hyne's name?

"Hey, come on, Fuu—stop it. Don't be mad at me." Fujin scoffed at his comment but didn't respond otherwise. "Whatever it was that made you mad, you know I didn't mean it. I never do when it comes to you."

"I KNOW … you don't ever mean it." Her voice was soft and distant, and she turned her head to look at him. Her features lost their hard edge when her eyes met his gaze. "I know you."

Seifer wasn't sure what she meant, so instead of pressing it he opted to flash her his classic charming smile—the one that always seemed to get him out of trouble—as he ran his hand through his hair casually. "Fuck. I have the worst headache I've ever had, I think."

"You earned it." He could tell Fujin meant he deserved it.

Seifer caught her glancing at the slipping sheet and his lack of clothing, and even with the small amount of light the moon provided, he could see her cheeks flush a little. Normally Seifer would at least tease her about scrutinizing him in a disrobed state. But not knowing how to read her mood just yet, he opted not to speak on it—he committed the gratifying stolen glance to memory instead.

"Well, I don't want to keep you up. Let's switch spots," he motioned for her to get up. "Unless you want to share?"

"HA," Fujin scoffed, not budging from her nook on the floor. "No, I don't. I'm fine here. Don't trouble yourself.

Don't trouble yourself? So formal. Shit. He must have fucked up tonight.

"No seriously, just take the bed. It's the least I can do…"

"Seifer—FINE RIGHT HERE. I don't need any favors." His face twisted in confusion at the intrusion of her vacillating speech pattern, once again. Now he was just getting irritated.

"Fujin, just take it," he sighed. "We don't have to make it a thing. I know I'm an asshole and you can be mad at me for as long as you want about … whatever it is that you're mad about … but Hyne, chivalry isn't dead."

"Chivalry?" Fujin scoffed. "Fine, Seifer. Whatever you want. It's always about you anyway." She sat up and defiantly started unburying herself from the bed of clothing she'd created.

"What in-the-actual-fuck, Fujin?" His voice was riddled with disbelief and growing louder by the minute. "I'm just trying to be nice—cut me some slack."

"Shhh!!" She held out her hand and pointed emphatically at Raijin. "NEED WAKE EVERYONE? … SLACK? SELFISH." She whispered, as she tossed his coat from her body. Seifer ran his hand over his face and groaned impatiently, unable to stop himself from uttering words he knew he shouldn't go near right now.

"Look … is this about us?" He looked over to find Fujin rendered motionless and staring at him wide-eyed, clearly shocked that he'd brought it up. "Because … I mean if anyone is going to feel a certain way about that it should probably be me. I don't know what you're all bent out of shape about." She said nothing, and he pressed on—it was either a perfect opportunity to save face, or a terrible time to pour salt on a fresh wound. "Besides, it didn't really mean anything, anyway."
Fujin just continued to stare at him for a moment—her eyes, one fiery red and one sapphire blue, blankly fixed on his own. Seifer was sure she was wracking her brain for a witty response, but as minutes seemed to pass … nothing came, and a palpable discomfort settled in the space between them.

Regret weighed heavy in his chest when Fujin's brow furrowed and she unlucked her gaze from his. She grew restless, sitting up straighter and clearing her throat, and her eyes darted around the room to look at anything but him. Her pale fingers began to nervously drum on the carpeted floor—a coping mechanism of hers that she employed when she'd been thrown off-balance, and was trying to refocus.

Salt. Definitely salt.

"Great, well … thanks for making that clear, Seifer." Fujin spoke the words curtly and quickly, a combination she didn't use with him often. She scrambled to her feet and readied to leave. To where, he wasn't sure.

Seifer's finely honed combat reflexes kicked in to stop her, before he even realized he didn't want her to leave. He shot his hand out to grab her ankle, no strategy in place … all he knew was that he couldn't say something like that to her and just leave it. He was embarrassed about what had happened the other night, whatever happened tonight, what he'd just said, and any night he couldn't just keep it together. He needed to salvage this … no need to ruin everything in one night. He'd grown so accustomed to doing that, he almost wasn't sure how not to.

He stared up at her as his hand slid to her calf—his desperate grip pressing into the muscle he found there, unintentionally harder than what was probably considered okay for anyone but a fellow seasoned soldier. She winced at the pressure and looked as if she going to attempt to shake free, but stopped herself knowing that a quick reaction would only cause more pain.

"Let go," Fujin whispered, lacking the commanding tone the statement should've had as something shifted within her. She sounded defeated—something Fujin rarely was—and Seifer felt lower than low.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, shaking his head at his own actions and relaxing his grip a bit. "I don't know why I just said that. It's not true. I'm just … being a dick." He said the words through clenched teeth, angry at himself for hitting below the belt again, and disappointed at being this vulnerable. For coming to her again with these sorts of thoughts, hat-in-hand, no defenses. But if it was a choice between embarrassing himself, or flat-out losing her because of his fucking pride … he'd take the shame any day.

Fujin only stared at the floor—his confession only seeming to make things worse. Seifer wondered if she was disappointed with the reality of what he was. Often cold, almost always destructive, impetuous, and always an asshole when he didn't need to be.

"Just take the bed, Fuu." His thumb drew a circle on her skin lightly. "Don't make me a fool and a beggar all in one night." No need to remind himself that he was essentially already begging—his desperate tone and his hold on her calf were giving him away.

For reasons he couldn't begin to wrap his mind around, Fujin quietly complied. She slid away from him, letting his hand fall to the floor as she disappeared to the bed under the blankets.

He adjusted the makeshift mattress of clothing and pillows she'd created to better fit his six-foot frame, a little irritated she'd just wordlessly shuffled off to bed. Did she not just blow off another full-throated proclamation of his? Why he'd even bothered to wake her up was beyond him. It didn't
really make sense—she'd slept in worse places. But … if he were being honest with himself, it was only because he'd had that terrible dream and he wanted to see her. He was selfish. She had it right. She always had it right.

Giving up on being comfortable, he pushed the clothing pile aside and started to pull his trench over himself—he'd sleep directly on the fucking floor. As he swept the white coat over his body, a small, bright piece of paper fell from the pocket. It was a business card from the local bar they'd been frequenting, with writing all over it.

He picked it up and squinted in the darkness to read the messily scrawled letters on the back through a deep red lipstick mark left on it by whomever had given it to him. That same lipstick stained the collar of his coat, which he now had a good view of. "Loved every second of tonight Seifer—call me soon! - Xxxxx Rinoa." Her phone number was written along the edge—a little heart drawn over the 'i" in her name. And suddenly, snippets of the night's events came rushing back.

Too much whiskey to forget recent events with Fujin. A beautiful brunette at the bar wearing a blue shirt with white wings on the back. Wings … maybe like his dreams? He'd been curious, and it provided a thin excuse to exact revenge on Fuu. She was someone ... important ... he couldn't remember exactly why. Her name, apparently, was Rinoa.

She was from Deling, he remembered. She'd been impressed that he was at Garden ... he'd even told her he was in SeeD, which obviously wasn't true. She was hanging on him, kissing his neck, asking him to dance. Seifer refused that activity but not the general invitation. Raijin was off doing his own thing. Fujin kept her distance from them on the opposite side of the bar.

Seifer had felt momentarily guilty, but in his childish anger he made himself put Fujin out of his mind. He couldn't remember even speaking to her all night. He spotted her a handful of times, ignoring a few aggressive locals (he kept an eye on those pricks). They had all walked back to the hotel together, and, regrettably, he was pretty sure he'd used Fujin as a punchline to impress his new friend. Rinoa had a room there … and he went back with her … and he and Fujin parted ways. Nothing had happened, he wasn't even sure why he went. And somehow, later in the night, he made his way back here to Fujin ... where he really wanted to be. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

"Fuu …" Seifer whispered as he rose up from the floor. No response.

"Fujin." Silence. Was she asleep already?

He leaned closer to the bed, and was alarmed by the sound of labored breathing—the masking of tears. She wasn't just angry … she was hurt. He couldn't believe he didn't remember everything until just now. He would have done this all so differently...

His heart began to race and pound in his ears—he didn't even know why. It's not like they were anything—Hyne, he hadn't cheated on her. It's not like his confessions had made anything more definitive, or clear.

But still … the guilt crept up on him. He'd betrayed her.

"I…just realized what happened tonight—shit, I mean nothing happened tonight, really." Seifer stopped himself. Probably hearing more about it right now wouldn't help. And saying 'happened' just sounded like it was a casual accident. 'Whoops, I definitely maybe briefly thought about sleeping with someone while we're trying to figure out the shit we may or may not have ... my bad.' This situation was a mess. He wasn't very good at this sort've thing, not having much practice caring about the feelings of others. He tried again.
"I ... I didn't think … I mean, I wasn't thinking about you." He saw her flinch. "No! I mean, I always think about you, Fuu." Pick up a shovel, Seifer. You're digging your own grave tonight. He reached over to place his hand on her shoulder.

"AWAY," Fujin demanded quietly through the tears she was still pretending weren't happening, and flinched again under his touch.

His heart, what little of it was accessible for anyone else to affect, ached. The last thing he ever imagined happening was her recoiling when he touched her.

"Fuu—I'm not going anywhere." Seifer spoke softly as a lump formed in his throat. He sat up straighter and leaned over her, gripping her shoulder again and not allowing the flinch that followed to drive him off. "I meant everything I said to you these past couple of days. Every word of it." Fujin was crying now, hard—something he'd never seen before. He could feel her shaking. He'd made a terrible mistake.

"Just stop! Stop saying these things!" Her voice cracked, and she began to sob. Out of the corner of his eye, Seifer saw Raijin moving in the dark, quietly tip-toeing around to find something to wear so he could make an exit—they'd woken him up, and he was very wisely retreating. Seifer nodded in thanks as their friend passed by him—his lips pressed together in a thin, disapproving line—and slipped quietly out of the room to give them space.

"This is exactly why I told myself I wouldn't do this." Fujin said aloud as the door closed. An onslaught of sobs stopped her from saying more. That was the closest she'd come to saying anything about what was happening between them … since the words they'd exchanged and the few moments they'd shared. Seifer didn't press for more—he didn't like the sound of it.

"Okay Fujin, shhhh. I'll stop." He was up on his knees now, the sheet around him falling into a forgotten bundle on the floor as he bent over her at the waist. He brought his hand to her face, wiping a salty tear from the bridge of her nose. "I'm sorry. Please, don't cry. You'll kill me if you keep that up." So much for not making the begging obvious.

Something about his touch and his pleading made her body relax. The sobs stopped, and the tears only continued on silently. Surely he could do better than that. He put aside his childish concerns of how it would look if he showed weakness, and crawled onto the bed next to her. A boy would let her cry, but a man would control his own destiny and try to fix it.

"Seifer, don't. I'm too tired to fight with you." Fujin whispered into the dark, her voice sounding small and distant.

"Then don't fight me." Seifer draped an arm over her to pulled her into a tight embrace and felt her body wrench with grief at the bittersweet feeling. He knew it wasn't just tonight doing this to her. It had been everything. Years of watching him with other people, seemingly oblivious to her existence—she'd probably given up on him a while ago. Him dipping his toe in the waters (and then seemingly jumping into a different pool soon after) was probably horrifying, when you thought about it that way.

Seifer moved to brush strands of silver hair behind her ear, and realized the business card was still in his hand. He held it out in front of them both.

"I know you said to stop, and I will, but you need to listen to me." He flipped the card in a circle between his fingers to emphasize his flippancy towards it. "I don't know what's been happening this year. These fucking dreams, failing the exam...I feel a little unhinged. I feel like I barely know myself anymore." He leaned in close to whisper in her ear. "But the one thing I know for sure is you. And
this shit?” He held the card in two fingers, folded it in half, and flicked it into the dark. “This never means more to me than you do—okay? No matter what it looks like.”

Fujin didn't reply, but when he rolled onto his back, she gave way to the tugging of his arms and allowed him to pull her with him. He drew her close, her head resting on his chest. Was she accepting his concession, or was she just waiting for the right moment to slip away from him?

Lying bare in the cool evening air and contemplating whether he'd won or lost the draw, Seifer was suddenly very aware that he was very naked. He was about to reach down to grab his long since discarded sheet from the floor, when Fujin pulled the edge of her blanket over him. She sighed shakily, and reluctantly wrapped a single leg over his own. He mirrored her sigh, thankful she wasn't bolting, and squeezed her tightly against him. So the battle hadn't been lost after all, he thought, as he kissed the top of her head and felt her shiver—it was a stalemate.
Red Sky at Night

Chapter Summary

So, Seifer Almasy did say things like this. And he was saying them to her.

Two days ago...

Dollet’s small-town pub seemed to be bursting with energy tonight, filled with the low murmur of intimate conversations at its small tables, and the more than occasional garrulous laughter erupting from soused patrons. She could almost taste the alcohol—the air was thick with its general smell. Stale and sweet. This tiny harbor town drank like the ocean was running dry.

Fujin Sanada was alone at the bar again. Most nights this summer had been that way so far, and there were still so many lonely nights to come. They'd arrive together—she, Seifer, and Raijin. But then somewhere in the evening they’d lose themselves in whatever they were pursuing and part ways. For Raijin, it was girls and food—not always in that order. For Seifer it was girls ... but only to a certain extent. He was enjoying their company, sure, but it didn't seem to be his mission this summer—unlike most summers. Fujin was thankful for that. He was spending a lot of his time upstairs playing cards with the locals and walking the streets in solitude ... probably taking stock of what would happen when he returned to Balamb. And yes, he also had some occasional late-night drunken breakdowns spliced in between. But that was a secret between the two of them—a rarity in their trio—and they never talked about the incidents after they happened. Other than that, they'd been ghosts to each other.

It didn't used to be this way ... they were thick as thieves, the three of them. But as the year rolled on and they grew older, she had a terrible feeling that things were changing. That they were all drifting apart.

"Is this seat taken?" Fujin was startled from her deep reverie by a voice that had, surprisingly, snuck up on her. She turned from her perch on the bar stool to see a tall, dark stranger smiling down at her. He had two shot glasses of a clear liquor in his hands, and presumptuously sat one down in front of her as he smoothly rested himself on the unoccupied seat to her right, not even waiting for a response.

The interruption couldn't have been more unwelcome for Fujin at the time. She'd been lost in thought, stirring the fizz out of her club soda with the small cocktail straw it had mysteriously come with, even though it wasn't a cocktail.

She'd been thinking about their return to Garden, the things she'd learned when they'd left, and how she was going to manage them. It was very Fujin of her. She'd always been the planner in her trio—Raijin followed orders blindly, she calculated worst case scenarios and tried to keep everyone's heads above water, and Seifer ... well, Seifer always risked everything and did what he wanted. Nothing ever changed with that.

The only thing that had changed was that she'd passed the SeeD exam, and Seifer hadn't. And she wasn't exactly sure how she was going to tell him.

"Hi there." The stranger flashed a smile, making his presence known again, almost waving to see if
she was conscious. She noticed that he had an accent ... something relaxed and from a lazy coastal town in the south. "I'm Abel—can I sit with you?" A silly question, since he was already sitting. He touched the glass with his fingertip and slid it farther in front of her. "It's tequila—a good one—but I can get you anything else if it's not your thing."

"Thanks, but I'm not—" When she turned to look at him and saw his face in full view, lit up by the glow of the neon bar sign, she was taken aback by how handsome he was—dark hair, bright blue eyes, strong jaw, muscular, tall. He had to be older than her ... in his mid-20's, maybe? She blushed, even though he wasn't really her type.

Generally handsome isn't your type? Fujin thought to herself, shaking her head a little. Her irritation dissipated a bit.

"Sorry, I'm not really here to drink." She replied nervously, and held up her glass. "Club soda—the straw's deceptive." He chuckled, and waved for the bartender to come over.

"You know what? It is. Another club soda for the lady." He pulled a few bills out of his pocket, more than necessary, and laid them on the bar. "And throw in a lime for her will you?" He turned and smiled again.

"It's the least I can do. And by the way, don't apologize for turning down a drink. You basically just gave up your power in this situation." He rested his forearm on the bar to lean in closer to her.

"You see, normally, if a girl turned down a drink I would high-tail it back to sit with my friends, who'd all be laughing at me. But you said 'sorry.'" the bartender brought over the club soda and set it between them, with a green wedge of lime resting on the rim.

"Which means you're either sorry you hurt my feelings, or you're sorry that you're not drinking. Either way you can't blame me for stickin' around to find out which one it is." A smile pulled at the corner of her lips, as she gingerly grabbed the lime to squeeze it into the drink, and scooped it up in a thankful motion. He was funny … charming.

"I guess I can't. Thanks for this." Fujin took a sip. "Much better with the lime. I hadn't even thought to ask."

"Well, that means you're thinking waaaay too much about other, more serious stuff than limes. You don't do that at these places." Abel scrunched his nose up. "Not really what people come here for. You're sure you don't want the shot?"

Fujin had been thinking about serious things—mostly about the visit to the infirmary she'd made to see Dr. Kadowaki at Garden, just before they'd left. She'd been feeling ...a little off, to put it mildly. She'd had a strange sensation in her head, every so often, that could only be described as howling or a strong gust of wind ... like when you leave the windows open at your beach home during a hurricane. It was fucking weird, and it scared her. The only thing that she and the doctor could guess was that it was a strange side effect from her GF junctioning. The oddity and unclear diagnosis is apparently what convinced Cid to allow her to pause becoming a full-fledged member of SeeD, and she was almost grateful for it ... glad that it wouldn't create a rift between her and Seifer.

Seifer, she sighed. What did it mean that she'd take a mystery illness over making any waves with him? She quickly glanced around the room for him, but her eyes couldn't find him. He must have made his way outside with someone else ... probably that curvaceous blonde he'd been chatting up earlier. Fujin was alone …

Well, if that wasn't a sign to drink, she didn't know what was. Fujin lifted the shot to her lips and
tilted her head back. Her new friend laughed.

"There you go!" He waved for another from the bartender. "Now, what could someone like you be so worried about?"

"Someone like me?" She arched a questioning pale eyebrow, and he sat up a little straighter.

"Well yeah, someone as pretty as you." He was very confident, bordering on arrogant. Now that, she already knew, was her type.

"Everyone has problems." Fujin shrugged shyly, and consumed the contents of the glass that had just placed in front of her, ignoring the compliment. She didn't know how to handle compliments and truly never believed them anyway.

"Oh dear, this sounds terribly serious." Sarcastic too—she was warming to his company. He scooted his seat closer so that his knees were grazing her thigh. She felt warm. "Let me see if I can guess what's bothering you, girl who has yet to tell me her name."

"Fujin." She smiled. "It's Fujin."

"Ah, beautiful name!" Able rubbed his hands together and looked around the room.

"Well, if you were here with someone they would have punched me by now. So not man-related?" She hesitated to answer and he laughed, picking up the shot he'd bought for himself and tipping his head back to drink it. Two more were delivered, almost instantly. "Okay, partially man-related. But whoever it is isn't here, so I'm taking that as a good sign. Moving on…"

That stung a little, but Fujin smiled anyway. She thought back briefly on the strangeness that had been this past year, between her and Seifer. Every time they were together there was a heaviness. When they were younger it was so simple—she adored everything he did, and in his true show-boat fashion he reveled in it. But later in life, her adoration turned into something else ... something ... painful. Unrequited. Sometimes, she swore he could sense it ... but they never spoke of it, so she was probably wrong. That familiar ache rose in her chest again, but she pushed it aside.

What was happening right now, in this moment, was lighthearted and refreshing. She craved that.

"Work related?" Her guest interrupted her thoughts.

"Actually yes," Fujin nodded. "It's very much work related."

"Well whaddya you do? Maybe we have something in common." She laughed then, almost spitting out the third shot she was swallowing. Pace yourself Fujin, she thought to herself. Her cheeks flushed. You're not around people you can trust. She turned to look at him and saw a tenderness in his eyes, and was caught off guard. Or maybe you are?

"I doubt it—I'm training to be a SeeD mercenary at Balamb Garden." She looked down at the empty glass. "I just passed my exams, actually."

Able stared at her wide-eyed for a moment. More drinks arrived, and she left this one alone. She was already feeling a little tipsy ... better to let this one rest for a minute and regain composure, which seemed to slowly be leaving her … like everything else had tonight.

"Shit," he animatedly looked around and said with a smirk, "I knew you were dangerous, just not in a literal life-threatening way." She turned to him and smiled, flirtatiously.
"Don't worry … we're mercenaries, and no one's paid me to hurt you."

"Well, that's too bad." Fujin raised her eyebrows, surprised, and he laughed. She blushed a deep pink. "'C'mon, it was too easy." He touched her arm just above her elbow, quickly in apology, sending a faint spark tingling through her.

This guy was definitely older. A man. She felt a little uncomfortable, but … not in a way that she didn't enjoy. He was being pretty forward, and she wasn't used to this kind of unexpected attention. This must be what other girls experience when…

She didn't finish the thought. Her heart sank.

"Well, anyway," Abel motioned to the bartender again. More tequila for him. "I'm a fisherman. So you know, basically the same thing."

"Oh yeah, basically." Fujin laughed, and nervously attempted to tuck strands of silver hair behind her ear. "So what brings you here?"

"Ah, a question for me? See, I knew you weren't lookin' to hurt my feelings." He smirked and grabbed the shot, tossing it back quickly and barely taking his eyes off her. "Just a harbor stop—reloading on supplies, patching some leaks, seeing old friends, and of course breakin' hearts in every port. Typical wayward fisherman stuff." He winked.

"I bet you do." She stared back at him. "You're quite the charmer." Looking down at the empty glass in his hands then, Abel almost seemed alarmed by himself.

"Actually, I'm not usually this bold. It could be the liquor or it could be the audience." He nodded to a table of gruff looking men, around the same age and likely in the same profession, who raised their glasses at him from afar and laughed.

"Ah," she smiled, and placed her chin on her hand. "I didn't know we had an audience." She scared herself a little, with how this attention was making her feel…and act.

"Yeah well, they're keeping an eye out for me tonight." His gaze fell to the empty glass in his hand. "I'm actually fresh off a divorce. Two days ago, to be exact. Got married young, made some bad choices, did some things I only half-regret …" His voice became distant, and his tender eyes flickered with sadness. "Which is when you know it's wrong."

"Oh—I'm sorry." She placed a hand on his knee, surprising herself a little, and removed it almost as quickly as she'd put it there. She empathized with heartache. "Even if it's wrong, it's hard. Especially if it's wrong."

Abel leaned in a little closer, only enough to make their conversation seem more private. "I knew when I saw you, you were among the rest of us lonely wanderers with broken hearts."

"Oh n-no," she stuttered. "Not in the same way."

"But in some way?" He asked with a smile. Fujin smiled back, embarrassed.

"My friends over there," he jerked his head in their direction. "Honestly, they're just trying to help find me someone to keep me warm for the night, and get me out of this funk I've been in."

She blushed again. Do people say these serious things to each other, out in the open, in the full light of a bar with the world happening around them? … Does Seifer say these things? She suddenly felt too young to be talking like this…
"They actually wanted me to talk to you—a formidable challenge for a friend they remember having much more game than he really does." He chuckled quietly and rubbed the back of his neck, glancing at her, no doubt, to gauge for a reaction. "But don't worry. I don't have any grand designs. Just tryin' to make it look good."

"You have much more game than you're giving yourself credit for," Fujin said in a quiet voice, as she picked up her new club soda and absentmindedly swirled the straw in the clear liquid. "And you're very handsome, and very charming. You seem kind."

"Ah, the kiss of death." He laughed. "Kind. I'll have to go back to my friends and confess that the silver siren couldn't be persuaded." Their eyes locked, both smiling.

"Your eyes," Abel changed the subject absent-mindedly. "One red, one blue. They're remarkable." He moved his hand to brush her hair from her face and tuck it behind her ear, but it fell away. Fujin's cheeks burned with a deep blush.

"Th-thanks. I think." She stuttered. "I hate them, actually." In fact, she kept one covered almost all the time. Seifer had insisted on it when they were kids... she was pretty sure it was because they creeped him out, but he'd said it was to make her look more tough. She never knew why she stuck with it. Probably because Seifer suggested it, and whatever Seifer said was law, even back then.

"That's crazy." He put his hand dramatically against his chest, like he'd been shot. "My stars, never say that again in your life. They're fucking beautiful." She laughed at how grandiose he sounded, not nearly as nervous as she'd been when this all started, and he placed a hand on her thigh.

"Sorry, I think the liquor is pulling the mariner out of me. Let's talk about something else." Abel squeezed her leg and left his hand where it was. "You said you were just finishing exams... exactly how old does that make you?" They both stared at each other for a few seconds, before bursting into a sudden fit of laughter. "I probably should have asked sooner than this, right?"

"Yes," she nodded, "you probably should have."

"I just didn't get around to it. This was going so well..." His laughter died down and he looked at his empty glass, wistfully. "I'm not used to that so much anymore."

"Me either." Fujin looked away from him to the bar, feeling embarrassed and giddy all at once.

"Aye, you must be young then." Abel shook his head. "Because for girls like you, that only happens when the men you're into are at that age...you know, where they're too stupid to know what's good for them."

"Well, I think I'm definitely younger than you. Not so young it's a problem."

"Wow, okay." He chuckled. "Well, that's better than the worst case—."

Abel stopped talking abruptly. Fujin felt his hand slip away from her thigh, and realized that his gaze was fixed on something behind them. She saw a shadow looming over them, stretched across the bar, tall, solid, and straight.

"Can I help you?" Abel questioned, confused. His brow furrowed and his eyes darted to Fujin and then back to the stranger behind them. Silence.

"Something wrong, mate?" Abel spoke again, placing his hand back on Fujin's leg protectively.

Seifer's voice, in a low primal growl, cut through the palpable silence to speak for her.
"I don't know Fuu, do you think he can help me?" She looked over her shoulder at him, his eyes radiating fury and glaring down at her new friend.

"Ah," Abel's eyes darted to hers as the conversation came full-circle and he realized what her earlier wistful state had been all about. He lifted his hand from her thigh, squeezed it into a fist, and tapped it down on her once awkwardly before laying some more bills on the bar. "Something tells me I can't."

"You're fucking right you can't." Seifer shot back, matter-of-factly. He didn't move.

Abel stood, and stared at each other for a few uncomfortable seconds, Abel sizing Seifer up, and Seifer wordlessly daring him to start something—Able was almost as tall as Seifer but definitely not as built. It was then that she felt Abel touch her shoulder, readying to say goodbye. She didn't fault him for that—anyone would have known they were outmatched when standing next to Seifer. He'd been built in the image of gods.

"You have a good night, Fujin. Thanks for the chat." He smiled down at her. "Maybe I'll see you here again."

How like Seifer, to completely unprovoked, selfishly ruin what was otherwise a fun night for her. Her eyes welled up a little, a sign the alcohol was kicking in. Why would he act like this?

Seifer took one step backwards, allowing Abel just enough space to step away, his chest puffed out. Luckily, he'd left his gunblade at the hotel.

"Thanks, mate." Abel nodded in Seifer's general direction, and gave Fujin one last smile before walking past him. "Quite a girl you have here. Don't leave her alone at a bar again, eh?"

Instinctively, Fujin shot her hand out to grab Seifer's wrist. She knew he'd be readying to spring into action, and Abel didn't deserve what would come of that. She'd acted just in time, as Abel walked away unaware at how close he came to a final demise. She felt Seifer pulling slightly in her grip, the muscles in his forearm tensing.

"Seifer," she groaned. He was still watching Abel. "Don't."

He ground his teeth together and his jaw clenched. Fujin's fingers pressed harder.

"Seifer." She said again, quietly, trying to keep the scene from being too obvious. Abel and his whole table of friends, with quite a few drinks in them, might be able to take Seifer ... she didn't want to see that either. He finally looked down, their eyes locking—his losing a little of their rage. Even still, she kept her tight grip on his wrist. "Hyne, just sit down."

Chagrined, he shook free of her grasp lightly, and placed one of his hands on her shoulder—a quiet but telling gesture to keep his balance—as he lowered himself to the stool. He was mildly drunk, and the only problem with a mildly drunk Seifer is that it almost did nothing to him except make him twice as cruel, if he wanted to be.

Once seated, he turned to her expectantly. Fujin remained silent, not quite sure what he wanted her to say. How long had he been there? She began to panic, as if she'd been caught doing something she wasn't supposed to ... of course, that wasn't true in the slightest. She could do whatever she wanted. It's not as if she'd been claimed by anyone. Definitely not by him.

She held her hands out, palms facing upward, and shrugged. He continued to glare—his face was otherwise expressionless.
"Okay Fujin, well you're welcome." Her mouth fell open in shock.

"'You're welcome?'" Fujin was incredulous. "What exactly am I supposed to be thanking you for? I was having a nice time."

"Oh, is that what was going on?" He scoffed. "Because it looked to me like that guy was trying to have a good time." She looked away from him, taken aback by how cold he was being. "Honestly Fujin, a roving divorcee? What the fuck are you doing?" The question was punctuated with a laugh.

She shook her head and picked up her glass up, needing something to keep her fidgety hands preoccupied.

"Were you ... listening the whole time?" Embarrassment crept up on her. Fujin wasn't sure she wanted him to see her acting that way.

"Just about." Seifer crossed his arms and leaned back—perching one of his long legs on the lower rung of the stool and resting the other on the floor. Even at eye-level he still seemed to tower over her. He always was too big to be contained in just about every sense. She barely had enough space for him in her mind anymore. He was everywhere.

"I have to admit, he had some good lines. If I didn't know any better, I'd say it was working." He sounded accusatory as he tapped his foot on the floor. She could feel his eyes on her still, and she couldn't bare to look up and see that disapproving glare. "Is this what you get up to at bars when I'm not around? Seducing old fisherman?" It was cruel, the way he said it—meant to be a dig. Meant to be an insult.

"I'm not sure how that's any of your business," her voice wavered with vulnerability. "You and Raijin leave me behind almost every night here … why do I owe you an explanation?" Her eyes began to well up again and she had a lump in her throat. She was trying desperately not to make more of scene than they already had.

"Of course it's my business." He scoffed again, and said quietly ... more hesitantly, sounding surprised she'd suggest otherwise. "Everything you do is my business."

The tone in his voice confused her, and got the best of her. She looked up, her gaze meeting his still expectant green eyes, and regretted it instantly—even if he was mad at her, and she was furious with him, those eyes still made her weak.

"Shit." He muttered to himself before pressing his lips together and breaking eye-contact with her to look down at his own hands. His voice and his features softened—her reddening eyes giving away the secret she'd been struggling to keep—that he'd hurt her feelings.

"Were you going to tell me?" He asked after a quiet pause, not looking up.

"Tell you what, Seifer? I just met Abel here—" He cut her off.

"Nope, not about the guy Fujin. And by-the-fucking-way let's not bring him up anymore." His voice was hard again, and he shook with anger at the mere mention of Abel. "No, I'm talking about SeeD."

Panic set in. Fujin forgot that in the haze of flirtation, she'd mentioned that she passed her exams. **He'd heard every word. He'd been there from the start.**

"Seifer, I—"

"You told a stranger." Seifer leaned forward and looked her square in the eyes with a mix of fury
and hurt, his voice still quiet. "You told a stranger," he repeated himself, trying to wrap his mind around it. "Before you told me?"

Under a thin veil of inebriation, she struggled to find words that could make this situation any better, but came up short.

"What must you think of me, Fujin, to think that I wouldn't be happy for you?" He waved for the bartender. "And for some reason that guy gets to know? For some reason that guy gets to see this side of you …" He stopped himself, and her brow furrowed.

"I was going to tell you, Seifer," she acquiesced. "There's more to it than just passing. I have...other things going on."

"Clearly." He sighed, waving agitatedly at the bartender again. Fujin grabbed his hand, and brought it to rest on the bar before it could be seen, and was surprised when his eyes had snapped to fix on the touch—at their hands locked together on the bar. As he ran his thumb over one of her knuckles, Fujin's breath caught in her throat.

"Hey," she tried to refocus—she was having a hard time following her thoughts with him touching her in that small way, and a hard time gauging if her own voice sounded loud in chatter of the booming pub. "Maybe we should go? Let's get out of here—we can talk more on the walk home."

"How can I keep you safe if I'm not there?" He snapped, a little loudly, and unwittingly squeezed her hand. A low murmur came from the general direction of where Abel had disappeared to. He ran his other hand over his face, exasperated. She could tell he was aware he was overreacting—she could sense the beginnings of shame and regret.

"Safe? Seifer, what are you talking about? I don't need to be protected. You taught me everything I need to know ..." She whispered, hoping it would urge him to be quiet in kind.

"Never mind," he pulled his hand away from her. "Let's get the fuck out of here. On the way home maybe we'll swing by the port. See if we can't find you any more charming sailors who can tell you that your eyes are 'fucking beautiful' and whatever other shit they want to get you into bed." In haste, Seifer laid money on the counter for drinks that he hadn't even bought, and marched out into the street.

Fujin sat in shock momentarily at his harsh words before standing and collecting herself. She smoothed out her black tank top, and sighed heavily. She glanced towards Abel, and found that his table of friends had long since forgotten she existed. Abel was still staring at her, though—his eyes concerned. He motioned for her to come over, but she smiled and raised her hands in weak protest. Shaking his head, he smiled back, and turned his attention back to his friends and his drink.

Outside, she found Seifer pacing—a nervous habit of his, which along with his nervous talkative rambling was the only nervous habit he really had. He seemed even more agitated now, out of the light of the bar and in the street where he was free to act however he wanted. Being that he was drunk, she didn't even want to begin to guess what was coming next.

"Took you long enough," he snapped at her, stopping his pacing as he saw her approach. "Saying goodbye to your friend?"

"No. And what the hell just happened in there? Where exactly do you get off, talking to me that way?" She snapped back at him.

"What, you want me to pat you on the back?" Seifer shoved his hands in the pockets of his white
trench, and turned his back to her, beginning to walk away. "Great job for lying to me Fujin—*aces.*"

He yelled sarcastically, spinning around to walk backward for a few more steps before stopping again. "Also, way to be a slut. *Super proud of you.*"

A young couple who'd been sharing a cigarette just outside the door of the bar murmured in disapproval to each other at the display before rushing back inside. Seifer kept staring at her, stepping one more pace backward, his face turning red with anger. He began to yell now, loud, ferocious, and unhinged.

"I'm slipping in training—*Leonhart's* beating me these days! I failed my SeeD exam again, and I'm having these insane fucking nightmares." Seifer ran one hand through his hair, his voice quieted a few decibels, and he began to laugh. "And now, you." He threw his hand out towards her, flippantly. "*You.*"

She stood, dumbfounded, as he turned his back to her and sighed.

"What you're doing to me ... this is the worst I have ever felt." He kept his back towards her, and shoved his hands in his pockets as he lowered his head to look at the ground.

Fujin walked forward silently, each step measured. She stopped when she lined up with him at his shoulder, straightening her back. No matter how much she cared for him, she couldn't let this stand.

"Seifer, I'm sorry that I didn't tell you sooner. Dr. Kadowaki thought it would be best to stay quiet for a bit." She saw him turn to her out of the corner of her eye, wondering what she was talking about. "I'm having some issues with GF junctioning—something they haven't seen before."

"What? Are you oka—" She cut him off.

"Everything's fine." She took a deep breath, a moment to regain some courage, and stepped out to face him. His reluctance to look her in the eye signaled that he knew he'd gone too far.

"And I'm sorry you're having a hard summer. I really am. I'm sorry that I'm making you feel the 'worst you've ever felt.'" She crossed her arms over her chest, growing cold in the gentle sea breeze.

"*BUT YOU,*" Fujin caught herself slipping into her monosyllabic defense mechanism. Seifer had taught her that too. He'd taught her virtually everything she knew about herself, the good and the bad. She wasn't sure where she ended and he began. *Was she even her, or was she all him?* She corrected, careful not to slip into the motions of old habits—she wanted to convey this eloquently, in her own voice.

"*You* have no right to call me a slut. I've never even kissed anyone. Did you know that? I've been so devoted to you ... " Her voice trailed off and she thought twice about a full confession. "To you, and to Raijin, and to our friendship. I've never even thought about my own happiness. But you ... " Fujin looked away from him, shaking her head at his still fresh and stinging accusations. "You only think about yourself. You spent this summer doing Hyne knows what with *Hyne knows who.* You never even asked me about my field test—you just assumed I'd failed. *You haven't even noticed that something was wrong with me.*"

"That's not true." Seifer whispered.

"*Please. Isn't it?*" Fujin laughed, more at his sheer audacity to speak again than the content of the conversation. "Ever since you and I met, we've thought about you—collectively. All I do is think about you." She was suddenly very aware of how this was making her sound, but she also didn't care much. The alcohol was a great substitute for actual courage.
"Your complete lack of acknowledgement that I'm a person, with feelings, has made me feel the 'worst I've ever felt' for an entire year ... something's changed, and I hate it." Tears fell onto her cheeks—she felt betrayed by her own body for allowing it to happen. "So forgive me, if I have a hard time stroking your ego after you have just leveled the most heartbreaking insult you possibly could at me." She wiped her face, and absentmindedly wiped the salty tears on her black leggings.

"Forgive me, for enjoying a few minutes of someone showing a little interest in me. And thanks for denigrating it, and making it feel empty. Up until this happened, it was the best I'd felt in a while."

Fujin marched down the alley and left him in the dark, not waiting for a response. With each step, she muffled the sobs that were escaping her. She didn't want him to know she could be so weak. Even when she didn't want it to be about him, it still was. It always was.

She came to the center of town and couldn't bring herself to walk a step farther—her knees felt like they would buckle. Circling for a moment, she decided to sit on the far, more shadowed side of the water fountain in the middle of the square. She placed her head in her hands, curling up into a small ball. Her body wretched with grief and shivered in the cold wind. She sat for a few minutes, crying alone in the empty evening street.

She wondered if he knew now, truly, how she felt about him. She wondered if it even mattered anyway. She thought about Abel, about that spark she'd felt when he touched her arm, his eyes as she walked away tonight, and what he'd said about men her age. Maybe they only knew what they had when they'd lost it ...

A coat, bright white and warm from body heat, slide over her shoulders and pulled her back into the present. Fujin was surprised he'd followed her. She figured he'd gone back to the bar, ready to drink more and never talk about this night again. That's exactly something he'd do, of all the incredibly selfish, pig-headed, stubborn ...

The thoughts in her mind ceased when he slid down beside her and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her head against his chest in a tight hug. She jumped a little, gasped, and then cried more. Damn him.

"Hyne, you're pretty well hidden. I think I walked by you twice," Seifer sighed. His voice was hushed now, as one hand ran through her hair and expertly tucked the locks behind her ear. He'd never done that before. "I'm sorry. I'm a little drunk and I know it doesn't excuse it ... but I didn't at all mean what I said. I should never have called you that." He squeezed her tighter. "And of course I want you to be happy. Of course I do. You're my best friend." Her heart ached.

"And yes ... the reasons I'm mad about not knowing you made SeeD are a little selfish. I know you can handle yourself, but the thought of you being in danger without me around ... fuck. I'm afraid you'll get hurt, okay? I didn't convey that very well." His large hand shifted to cradle her face against him, and he rested his cheek on the top of her head, and Fujin was too shocked to even begin to register what was going on.

"And then," he sighed, "that makes me nervous too. Because I'm worried, maybe, that I wouldn't be able to do the job that needs to be done anyway if we were out there together. Maybe I would hesitate and put a mission at risk, if you were in danger ... maybe subconsciously, that's my problem ... " Seifer's voice trailed off, and he rubbed her back.

"You're right about so many things, Fuu." He pulled away, and tilted her chin up, urging her to look in the eye. She couldn't—her vision was obscured with fresh tears, and she was far too nervous. "And you're right, I don't want to be around when that guy," rage briefly snuck into his voice again, "any guy, pays attention to you, and is telling you how beautiful you and your eyes are." She was
embarrassed he'd heard so much. "But you're so wrong in thinking I don't care about you. It couldn't be farther from the truth."

Fujin's heart skipped a beat as she blinked to clear her eyes and meet his gaze—tender green. He looked worried and a little scared at himself, and she was utterly confused. Was he about to…? She started to speak, when his thumb moved to stop her lips.

"Don't say anything. I know. I'm an unforgivable ass sometimes." Seifer dipped down to place his forehead against hers, his hand once again cradling her cheek. "And I'm an unforgivable coward for waiting this long to do this."

And with that, he leaned down to kiss her. Her whole body tingled—electric, a full shock. It was soft and gentle, yet hard and full of passion at the same time. Her chest filled with warmth and her heart... it felt like it would burst.

Breathless, he broke away too soon for her liking, kissing her quickly, lightly and softly a few times more. He ran his finger along her jaw, down to her collar bone. She was frozen in his arms.

"You're my best friend." Seifer emphasized again, as he tried to read her features for a reaction to what he'd just done—a single act that could change everything. "But you're also that girl, in a bar, that other guys want. And Hyne, I'm no different than them. I want to be the one telling you that your eyes are remarkable. I want to be the one … keeping you warm."

So, Seifer Almasy did say things like this. And he was saying them to her.
Chapter Summary

He'd tried not to think about it too much, but when he did allow the thought to creep into his mind, he always pictured they that would start in the middle. He'd imagined just leaning over and kissing her one day after training, or something seemingly unromantic that was completely romantic in its simplicity, and then they would just happen. He always did like shortcuts—he wanted to skip to the good parts.

The way she saw it, there were important facts to consider as she struggled with the reality of standing on the precipice of lovers and friends.

Fact one being that they were both drunk, and that maybe, just maybe, the things that people whispered to each other on moonlit streets—prompted only by liquid courage—weren't entirely trustworthy.

More to the point, she'd just gone on an odyssey of self-analysis. She'd enjoyed the company of a stranger and what it was like to be discovered by someone ... not to be already known. Abel sought her out her from a distance because he saw things about her that he desired. Seifer, the only person who she'd ever been truly close to, had always seen things in her he thought needed changing ... And then, of course, she'd been insulted. A deep kind of insult. She'd said her share of cruel things to him over the years, but in a childish context—"I'm a better fighter than you" or "Raijin likes me more than you" (only one of those was true). Still, maybe it wasn't fair to leverage this particular fact, since we all have low moments when we say things we don't mean to get the upper hand. But a part of her felt that he'd known she loved him all along, which made it feel pointedly cruel. Besides, he probably only chose to pursue her tonight because her eyes weren't on him, just this once. He did like control ... he did love attention.

But then, there was the fact that sat in its own column—the fact of all facts. A behemoth fact with a commanding and utterly intoxicating presence.

There was him.

How he was holding her now. The way he'd kissed her. The things that he'd just said. The comforting warm temperature of his body, and how large his hand felt as he rubbed her back. Most importantly, knowing him, and how out of character this soft glimpse was. Even with any of the other women he'd swept off their feet, none of this would have happened for them—not with Seifer. Someone like him didn't benefit from confessing like this. All he really needed to do was smile at most women and he could have anyone and everything he wanted. She shook her head.

Maybe knowing someone was both a blessing and a curse. What do you even do, she thought, scared out of her mind, when seemingly everything you ever wanted comes true?

It was then that he cleared his throat. She could feel it, humming on the top of her head—it made her weak. He moved one hand to squeeze her thigh.

"Fujin?" Seifer asked hesitantly. She didn't answer, but rested her hand on his forearm in
acknowledgement. "Shit, I'd feel better if you'd say something. You're kinda leaving me hanging here."

"I don't even know ... what to say." This situation was a mess, and the alcohol had finally caught up with her.

"Well," he chuckled. "Not exactly what I was going for, but I'll take it over awkward silence." He still sounded so confident.

In the distance they heard the footsteps and laughter of a crowd filtering out into the street; the pub having just closed for the night. She had a hard time wrapping her mind around how she and Seifer could be sharing this moment with all those other people simultaneously. She felt like they were on another plane right now, frozen in time. But the sounds moved closer, the stars grew brighter in the sky, and she could hear the wind picking up—they were just two regular people, and the night was marching forward.

"Seifer?"

"Mmmm."

"Thanks for ... this." It came out clunky and awkward. How had she been so breezy at the bar when she met Abel? He was probably wondering the same thing.

"... 'You're welcome?'" He laughed at the fact that they were mirroring their conversation from earlier. "I was expecting ... I don't know. Something else, I guess." He moved his hand from her thigh and scratched the back of his neck, awkwardly. "Did I do ... something wrong? You know, besides fuck up the whole night." He sighed. "I probably should have done this differently—not how you pictured it?"

"It's not that." She shook her head insistently, leaning away from him to gaze into his eyes for the first time since he kissed her. He was looking at her differently now. She'd say it was longing, but she didn't really know for certain what that looked like staring back at you. She was used to doing all the longing herself.

"We're drunk ... and I have a lot to tell you, and I have to make some choices. And questions ... I have so many questions. And I can't think," she looked away again, down to their feet, "with you staring at me that way."

He pulled her close again, and nodded in understanding. It wasn't what he'd wanted to hear, she could tell. "Yeah, I suppose we do have a lot to talk about."

"Can we talk tomorrow? I want to tell you everything." Fujin placed her hand on his chest. "But all those people are coming towards us, and your eyes ... and this wind. I can't think," she said again. "And I don't want to say all the wrong things."

"Well, you're definitely drunk." Seifer covered the hand she'd placed on his chest with his own and chuckled. "There's people down the street, but there's no wind tonight, Fuu. You must have the spins." He kissed the top of her head before getting them both to their feet. "We should probably get you to the hotel. Something tells me you're not going to have a fun morning."

"No wind?" She placed her pale hand on her forehead and squinted. She looked around at the few trees in the square—their leaves wiggled in the soft sea breeze, but were virtually motionless. Her head was howling. "Ugh, Pandemona."

"Pandemonium?" Seifer looked at her perplexed. "Leave it to you to break out a thesaurus when
you're loaded. And for the record, referring to the night I decided to lay all this shit out as something akin to bedlam—a little cold Fuu, I've gotta say." He laughed, snaking his arm around her waist. "C'mon kid, let's walk back."

"No, Pandemona." She pushed him back to look at him earnestly. "She's a new guardian ... she came out of nowhere ... I can't get her out of my head. Kadowaki said—" Fujin stumbled, and Seifer gently grabbed her forearm to steady her, as he leaned in closer with new interest and tried to understand what she was saying through the filter of tequila. "She's wild right now. It's so distracting ... and I'm so tired." Her hand shot up to cover her face again. "I want to sit down again." She stumbled again, her balance feeling more off now than before.

"Whoa. Okay, Fuu. Hang on, I'll get you to bed." His arm swept behind her knees, and she was lifted—cradled effortlessly. She wrapped her arms around his neck. "And tomorrow, when you get up, I want to know exactly what you're talking about. Because I don't like the sound of this one fucking bit."

He never really did picture asking her out on a date and then professing his feelings. It was too normal, for two people who knew each other like the backs of their hands. Where would you even take a person, after you'd been together for so long and yet still somehow missed out on so much time? A movie? Of all the ridiculous things ...

Seifer tried not to think about it too much, but when he did allow the thought to creep into his mind, he always pictured they that would start in the middle. He'd imagined just leaning over and kissing her one day after training, or something seemingly unromantic that was completely romantic in its simplicity, and then they would just happen. He always did like shortcuts—he wanted to skip to the good parts.

Last night was anything but simple, though. Jealousy leading to a fight, the fight leading to his confession. And then that kiss ... Hyne, that kiss.

But he couldn't think about that now. The fact that she hadn't responded to his feelings one way or another was overshadowed by the fresh information of Pandemona—this GF of hers that she'd said spawned out of nowhere. The big fucking thing she hadn't been telling him.

He'd carried her back to the hotel room last night, and the whole way there she talked about wind ... a tornado happening around her. But the sky was clear and not even a branch was moving. It sounded crazy, but she sounded so sure ... and it reminded him so much of his own nightmares that he'd been having as of late.

"Can I help who's next? Sir?" Seifer was lost in thought, and didn't notice that the line in front of him had moved. He took a step toward hotel's reception desk, where a woman in her late 20's was smiling at him patiently.

"Good morning!" The clerk cheerfully greeted him. He groaned inwardly, her cheerfulness and sugary sweet voice exasperating his light hangover. "What can I do for you today?"

"Yeah, hi—good morning." He already sounded impatient and he'd just gotten to the desk—this could take some effort. "I wanted to see about checking out early."

"Oh dear, I'm sorry to hear that. Are you not enjoying your stay?"

"No—I have some business to take care of, so I'll have to cut my vacation short." Seifer pulled his wallet out, and dug the room key to find his room number. The fact that he couldn't remember it after
staying there for so long was definitely a sign he'd been drinking too much this summer. "Room 209. Almasy ... or Sanada, it may be under Sanada."

"Ah, 209." The woman's features flashed a very brief disapproval. Apparently she'd already had plenty of experience with them staying in 209. "Sure, let's check your reservation and see what we can do."

As he waited, he went through the game plan in his head. When he laid Fujin in her bed to sleep last night, he'd decided that they were sure as hell not continuing their seaside getaway for the rest of the summer while she was having these problems. They were cutting it short and canceling as much of this trip as they could get a refund for, and were heading directly back to Garden. The money that they got back could pay for the unexpected early trip home, and some of the best doctors they could buy if Kadowaki wasn't up to the task of figuring out what the fuck this was. He also had a major bone to pick with Kadowaki and Cid Kramer for letting Fujin leave the walls of Garden without solving this. *Of all the stupid things…*

"Ah, I've found the details of your reservation, sir. I'm so sorry though—it looks like you booked this stay at our advanced purchase rate, which requires full, non-refundable payment up front." He glared at her, too tired and too concerned about other things to deal with non-answers.

"So ... you're telling me that if I check out today, I'd still have to pay for that room for the full reservation?" He sized her up for a minute before making his next play. She was just a little older than him, and not too much of a looker. Maybe if he broke out some of that old Almasy charm, he could get her to see reason.

"Yes sir, I do apologize for the inconvenience. Unless this is due to the death of a family member, or an unforeseen urgent medical issue—"

"I mean, this is *sort've* a medical issue." He interrupted her and shrugged his shoulders, flashing his classic charming smile. "Any way we could make it work?" She blushed and fidgeted with some of the papers on her desk.

"Oh, no sir—I'm sorry. We have a strict policy. It would need to be a *definite* medical issue," she returned to her work. "Not a 'sort've' medical issue." He groaned, irritated that he was going to have to put more effort in if he was going to charm his way out of this one. Just then he felt a tap on his shoulder.

"Excuse me? I'm sorry, I don't mean to eavesdrop. Do you have a long-term room here?" He turned to see an older, distinguished man with dark hair standing just off to the side of desk. His irritation reached a new height. *As if he needed to include more people in this circus.*

"Yeah, and I'm in the middle of trying to unload it right now, so if you don't mind." He turned back to see if he could work on wearing the clerk down with a wink or something, but the man pressed on.

"Actually, I'm in need of a room here for a couple of weeks or so," the man leaned on the counter, placing himself in the middle of the conversation. "But I was only able to get one for a couple of nights. They're all booked up, you see. 'The busy season.'" He smiled at the clerk, as he echoed the words she must have told him when he couldn't get what he wanted either. "That is, unless I could maybe make a trade with you?"

Now *that* caught Seifer's attention. If he made Fujin and Raijin check out early and lost the rest of their hard-earned money there would be hell to pay.
"How about I buy out your room for the rest of your trip, and you buy out my two nights?" The man turned to the clerk and smiled. "We could even switch rooms if that makes the bookings easier."

"Well," she hesitated, contemplating all of the headaches this could cause. "That would work best. But Mr. Almasy and his guests are in a triple room, sir. If I remember correctly, you have a double booked." She moved back to check her computer system.

"A double's fine." Seifer spoke up. "Anything is fine. My friends and I can make a double work."

"Splendid!" The man reached into his pocket for his wallet, and started to pull out cash. "Miss, why don't you print a bill for each of us. We'll settle the finances on our end—just switch our names on the reservation and give us some new keys. Oh, and get a cleaning and turn down scheduled for room 209 before 6 p.m."

Seifer was impressed with this guy's ballsiness. Stepping up and asking a stranger if he could have his room, laying out the whole process for the woman who worked there and not even giving her a choice in the matter. He admired that—the ability to command with sheer confidence. He'd been trying to master that for years.

"Hey, thanks." Seifer reached out to shake the man's hand. "Sorry if I was short with you. I'm in a hurry." It was a white lie to cover his rudeness. He was in a hurry, but only to get back and check on Fujin.

"Ah, no problem. A big guy like you, decked out in all that gear. You must be on a mission." The man looked down to Seifer's side, where Hyperion was resting. "And a gunblade to boot. You don't see many of those anymore." The man studied the bill, and laid a stack of cash on the counter. "There, that should settle it up. Feel free to count it out if you need to."

"No no, that's fine. Thank you," Seifer took the money and held his hand out to receive their new keys from the clerk. "I'm just wrapping up a vacation, and getting back to work ... sort've. You've done me a favor."

"Well, you've done me a favor. I'm here trying to retrieve my daughter," the man sighed and shook his head as he tucked his wallet away. "I thought I'd only need a day, but she's refusing to see me. I think I'll be here a little longer than anticipated. Teenagers." He laughed then. "Well of course you know. You're probably around her age. Though you're probably doing more serious things than rebelling against your parents."

"A little," Seifer smiled. "I'm training to be a member of SeeD at Balamb Garden. You must be in military too, if you recognize a gunblade." They started to walk away from the desk together towards the center of the lobby.

"Ah, good observation—creative thinking is a great skill for a cadet. Yes, I'm part of the Galbadian army. Well, I lead it actually." Seifer's mouth dropped.

"Oh, shit—are you General Caraway? Man, you're a legend!" He excitedly tapped the general on the shoulder with the back of his hand. "I've been hearing stories about you since I was a kid. You practically ended the Sorceress War." He couldn't mask his excitement. "It's an honor to meet you, sir."

"Well it's an honor to meet you, Mr. Almasy. SeeD is a very important organization and they've been doing some great work as of late." Caraway's expression changed. "Actually, our meeting is somewhat serendipitous. I have some important information I need to share with Balamb Garden as soon as I finish up in Dollet."
"Oh, with Cid Kramer? Well hey, I actually work directly for Cid managing disciplinary matters at Balamb. If you want I can give him a message for you. I'm heading right back there after my friends and I finish up here." The General smiled, and patted Seifer on the shoulder.

"That'd be great, cadet. Tell you what, I'll get settled and then get a letter drafted to send with you." He paused. "Actually, I hate to ask, but would you mind showing me your credentials? You can never be too careful."

"Sure, I would have offered anyway. Here." He fished through his wallet to find his badge, and handed it to the general. "I'm sure you can look me up in Galbadia's database too. I think we're linked because of your Garden."

"Seifer Almasy. That's a name that will sound good in the annals of history someday." He smiled at a Seifer, handing him his card back. "And look at those stats—good for you."

"Thanks, I've been there practically my whole life. Still working on gaining official status, but we'll get there. Creative thinking tends to be my problem." Why in Hyne had just admitted that? He kicked himself internally.

"Well, I always found that to be a blessing and a curse when I was your age too." Caraway clasped Seifer's shoulder jovially. "But, it's invaluable in the field. Don't fault yourself for it. You'll get there."

"Thanks sir, I appreciate the vote of confidence." They shook hands again, as Caraway started to make his way to the stairs and Seifer to the dining room.

"Anytime. Maybe we'll have a chance to chat again before your trip is through. I'll give you tips on how to lead your own army one day." Caraway winked, and turned to walk away from Seifer up the stairs.

"Wow, General Caraway." Seifer said aloud, a little star-struck, as he walked towards the hotel's breakfast station to grab coffees for himself and his friends. "I can't wait to tell Fuu and Raijin."
They sat in silence, with the bright Dollet sunlight shining through the sheer curtains. They weren't in a dark room anymore ... they couldn't hide from each other. They couldn't pretend to be oblivious. Everything had already changed. Why not stop trying to control it ... why not stop trying to pretend they both didn't want this? They weren't kids anymore ...

Seifer found the door slightly ajar when he returned to their room, and nudged it open with his shoulder. The cardboard tray in his hand teetered precariously, almost spilling the three coffees he brought back with him.

*Hyne above, can we at least get through this morning?*

He spotted Raijin across the room, busying himself with packing up his dresser. He nodded in Seifer's general direction when he saw his friend enter.

"You get one of those for me? I been up almost all night, ya know." Seifer rolled his eyes, placing the tray down on the bench near their door.

"Well there are three of them Raijin, you do the math. Extra cream and sugar." Seifer plucked Raijin's cup out of the tray and walked over to plunk it on top of the dresser. "Which is very obviously yours. Plus, whose choice was it to not come back until 3 a.m.?

"Ah man, that chick was worth it." Raijin replied with a wistful smile, and then shook his head. "Besides, you don't tell me *anything*, ya know? I wouldn't be surprised if you forgot to get me a coffee." He indignantly grabbed the coffee and took a sip.

"Mature," Seifer groaned at the reach in logic his friend had just made. "I'll tell you what you need to know, when you need to know it." He glanced around the room. "Where's Fujin?"

"Oh man, she's in the bathroom. She was getting sick in there when you went downstairs. She just came out to grab her toothbrush though so the worst is probably over. What'd she get up to last night?" Raijin asked with a hint of suspicion.

Seifer moved to the other side of the room, dropping Hyperion and his trench coat on the bed, and grabbed a bottle of aspirin and one of the drinking glasses off the nightstand. He'd needed both this morning to recover from what he'd gotten up to last night.

"Well, I *know* she had some tequila." Seifer grimaced, remembering how that dick had been trying to ply her with shots.

"Eesh, that stuff is bad news." Raijin placed his packed bag on the bed. "I packed her things too."

"Thanks man. When you're done, we're heading to this room." He handed Raijin one of their new keys. "Can you start moving our stuff over? Fujin and I need to talk about a few things."

"Sure, Seifer. No problem."
Seifer turned away from him to march towards the bathroom, but heard Raijin hesitantly call out behind him.

"Ah, Seif…?" He spun around, irritated, and met his bronze friend's concerned eyes.

"Raijin, the room number is on the card. Just walk out the door and go find it. What else do you—"

"It's not about the room, man." Raijin awkwardly scratched the back of his neck. "I don't know the best way to say this. It's just…you've been…a little crazy this summer, ya know? I just don't want any problems with our Posse."

"What the fuck are you talking about Raijin?" Seifer's face contorted into a sneer. He shrugged his shoulders and crossed his arms in one motion.

"C'mon." Raijin stuck out his thumb and pointed it at the bathroom door. "Don't you do something that we're all gonna regret."

Seifer scoffed and rolled his eyes, looking awkwardly around the room. They stood in silence, as Raijin gave him the sternest stare he could manage giving to a guy who he considered his hero.

"That's still our Fujin in there, that's all I'm saying. And we have to take care of her…because we take care of each other, ya know?"

"Raijin, I am taking care of her." Seifer, exasperated, ran his hand over his face and rattled the bottle of aspirin as proof. "That's what I'm trying to do right now." He ignored the insinuation. They both knew the truth—no need to address it.

Raijin shook his head and grabbed two duffel bags from the bed. "Alright man. Have it your way. I'm just sayin' that some things might just be more serious than you're looking for."

"Duly noted, Raijin." Seifer groaned. "I'm not planning on fucking anything up colossally today so how about you relax for a minute, and just get our shit out of here." Raijin shook his head again, and walked towards the door.

"Alright man, I'm going ... Do we all get a bed?"

"No," Seifer shot back. "There's only two."

"Ha, of course." He laughed and walked out the door, yelling from the hallway. "I'll see you two later after you finish 'not fucking anything up,' ya know?"

Seifer shook his head and wondered how a guy who was normally so dense could be so perceptive sometimes. He closed the door behind him, leaned against it and closed his eyes. He knew that his friend wasn't entirely wrong. Still, Seifer didn't hesitate to move forward to knock on the bathroom door.

"AWAY." Fujin shouted from the other side, with half the force of her normal voice. She sounded awful.

"It's me." Seifer yelled back. "I'm coming in."

Not waiting for an invitation, he opened the door and found her sitting on the floor with her head resting on her knees, not too far from the toilet.

"Yikes. Not feeling good, huh?" His chest filled with warmth and ache at the sight of her. "Why the
"hell do you have the light on in here? Hang on, I'll get you some water." He went to the faucet and filled up the glass he'd brought in with him.

"It's fine, really. I'm actually feeling better—just an awful headache now."

"Here." Seifer turned off the faucet, and then flicked the light switch before moving to sit down next to her, leaving the bathroom door open a crack.

"Fucking cheap tequila." He spat, before reaching over to touch her chin and tilt her face upward. "C'mere. Take this." He placed the aspirin in her palm. "And drink all this water—slowly."

He waited as she obliged, popping the aspirin in her mouth and drinking a few sips of water. The open door offered just enough light for him to see her tilt her head back to rest against the bathroom wall. Seifer leaned his back in tandem, staring at the stream of light spilling onto the floor that ran between them, dividing them in the dark.

"Now I remember why I don't do this." Fujin laughed lightly but then stopped abruptly, likely due to why she'd had so much to drink. "Never again," she muttered.

"That's what everyone says." He placed his forearms on his knees and laced his fingers together, nervously clearing his throat. He wasn't here to avoid the obvious things they needed to discuss—he'd never been one to let a problem lie. May as well get started.

"I hate to do this to you now, but we need to talk." He turned his head to look over at her, and saw her close her eyes. "This might be the last chance for us to be alone today, and I don't know about you but I can't wait until tomorrow." Fujin's pale hand moved to press above one of her eyebrows on the invisible ache that last night had caused.

"Fujin," he said, a quiet order, and she turned to look at him. "Tell me about Pandemona."

She pressed her lips together and looked away again, shaking her head.

"I wish I could. I don't know anything about her yet, other than I can't un-junction her. It's been three months now."

"Three months?" He felt his temper flaring up, but thought better of letting it get the best of him. He tried again. "You've been going through this by yourself for three months? I wish you'd told me."

"I didn't want to worry anyone, and it wasn't a problem at first…but then…she started to get stronger." Fujin turned back to look at him. "She feels less like a guardian force, and more like a person. It's hard to explain."

"You mentioned Kadowaki last night. What did she tell you?"

"Inconclusive. She wants me to spend more time with her when we get back so she can do more research. They've just never seen it before—they'd never seen one grow so powerful so fast and latch on like she has." Seifer continued to stare at her.

"If you'd told me, you know we wouldn't have left Garden this summer." It sounded hard but he hadn't meant it that way—he was kicking himself for not noticing something was wrong sooner.

"You needed to leave." She closed her eyes. "You needed a break from that place. Those crazy dreams you've been having…you needed to get out."

"Not at your expense. The three of us stick together, Fuu. Hell, I think loyalty is our collective best
quality."

Fujin gave him a weak smile; she was fully aware he was referencing last night's rant. She nodded, and ran her foot over a piece of cracked tile on the floor absentmindedly. "I know. I put you first though ... most times."

"I know ... I know you do." He hesitated, and then angled his body towards her. "We're heading back to Balamb early. We had to switch rooms here at the hotel and we're leaving as soon as we can. I'm not going to sit here and pretend that I don't know this is happening with you. You don't get to put me first ... you don't get to make that choice for us." She nodded, seemingly already knowing that was going to happen.

"Now, about SeeD."

She groaned and leaned her head against the wall again. "Do you need to interrogate me when I feel like this?"

"I'm not interrogating you. I just ... wanted to tell you that I'm proud of you for making it."

Surprised, she tilted her head towards him. "My reaction last night ... I was upset about other stuff..." his voice trailed off, locking eyes with her and hoping to catch a glimpse of confirmation that they were on the same page about where this conversation was going. "It was all true, but I could have handled it better. Fuck, I don't know. I just wanted to say that I'm proud of you, Fuu. I never want you to hold yourself back because of me." Her eyes softened, and she reached out to grab his hand.

"I'm sorry I've been keeping everything from you. It's not that I didn't think you'd be happy for me. I just didn't want to make you feel..." She didn't finish the sentence, but she didn't need to. He could read between the lines. Like a failure.

"Next topic." Seifer squeezed her hand in his. He decided that he was going to treat this more like a meeting, and less like a life-changing event. Compartmentalizing it into a stand-alone problem—disconnected from heart and mind. This was their SeeD training in action ... it was amazing how much it permeated throughout their lives.

"This." He motioned between the two of them with his free hand. "What are we going to do about this?" He was reluctant to make any suggestions just yet, since he hadn't been able to gauge one way or another last night how she'd felt about that kiss.

Turning away from him again, she leaned her head back against the wall and sighed. She squeezed his hand in return, her index finger idly tracing lines on him.

"We both have a lot to figure out," she said distantly. He didn't take her eyes off her, as she quietly whispered in the dark. "Last night reminded me about ... a lot of things I've thought over the years." A familiar ache rose in his chest. He knew she was talking about all those things she'd said last night—about feeling invisible. He also knew she meant that Abel guy, and not so much him specifically as how it'd made her feel. He knew her hesitation rested mainly in the theory that it took him so long to see her. If only she knew...

"Right, I'm sure it did." His voice was quiet, waiting for her to wrap up her thoughts.

"I think we should step back ... and think about what this means for us." She still wasn't looking at him. "It's a lot to change ... all in one night."

*Well shit. He hadn't seen that coming.*

"Yeah, of course," he replied too quickly, as he shook his head and gently let her hand go. "I ... I
"Seifer, I'm not saying that—" He cut her off, laughing nervously and standing to his feet. He didn't know what to do or where to go.

"Well, that settles that. Let's put a pin in it for now." He stated awkwardly, like the whole conversation had been a mission debriefing, as he reached for the door. "Why don't you take a minute to get yourself together. I'll wait for you out here. We'll head to the room together." She said his name quietly but he pretended not to hear her, and he left the room bereft.

As he sat on the edge of the bed, that pesky feeling of regret crept into his chest again. 'That settles that' and 'let's put a pin in it'? That's not how he fucking felt. That's definitely not what he wanted to say. He'd played this moment through his head a thousand times today alone. How could he still mess it up?

Fujin emerged from the room moments later, not really needing much time to 'get herself together' because all of her things were packed up and moved already. A thing he'd forgotten in his haste to get away from the situation. She sat down next to him on the bed, wordlessly, and put her hand over his again.

They sat in silence with the bright Dollet sunlight shining through the sheer curtains, everything illuminated. They couldn't pretend to be oblivious anymore, and Seifer couldn't take another minute of that anyway. Everything had already changed. Why not stop trying to control it ... why not stop trying to pretend they both didn't want this? They weren't kids anymore ...

He stopped caring about how it was going to make him look. Fujin already knew how he felt—there was no point in hiding it. He released her hand and wrapped his arm around her shoulder to draw her in close, kissing her forehead lightly. He'd been waiting all morning to do that. He felt her shiver.

"For the love of Hyne, Fuu." He whispered, as he felt her reluctantly rest her head against him and settle into the warmth of his chest. He took a deep breath—her hair still smelled like last night's salty sea breeze. "I don't want to step back…." The words were coming harder today than they had the previous night—clunky and less eloquent—knowing that she'd hear them in earnest. Once he said them he couldn't take them back—the bell couldn't be unrung.

"We shouldn't do this right now." She placed her hand on his chest. "Don't feel obligated to—" He cut her off and pressed forward.

"It's got nothing to do with obligation." Seifer shifted away from her so that he could look into her eyes, and he moved his hand to palm her cheek. He could feel her breathing more heavily and her eyes were closed, waiting for what was coming next ... or afraid of it.

"I don't know how else to say it ... " He lowered his forehead to hers, the tips of their noses touching lightly. "I can't stop thinking about you."

"Seifer—" But he didn't want to hear any of her logical protests. He leaned in to interrupt her with a quick kiss, light and warm, and she gasped against his lips.

"Who said anything about talking?" He slid his hand down to the nape of her neck, his fingers gently urging her to come closer. "I'm done talking."

Time seemed to slow down as he leaned in to kiss her again, more passionately this time, his tongue finding its way to hers. Her movements were awkward at the beginning—her mouth unmoving, her arms still at her side not knowing where to go. Her heart was pounding and she was shaking. She
was new to this, after all ... and the thought of that drove him crazy.

"Seifer ..." Fujin she broke away for a moment to catch her breath, whispering his name before leaning in to kiss him back—shyly, but back all the same. He pulled her against him smoothly and greedily, adjusting his position to allow her to sit between his legs. His whole body was tingling. She melted against him and placed her hand on his chest. As she leaned into him, she inadvertently pressed against the stiffness that he hadn't realized had formed against his thigh, and he instinctively pushed back against her—a low, primal groan growing in his throat. Her cheeks flushed with embarrassment, the feeling and the sound startling her.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to." His hand moved to her side, his fingers finding a home in the curves of her ribs. He'd wanted to listen to her, truly he did, but the apology only made him ache more. He lost himself in the moment, leaning in to kiss her passionately again and pressing against her like before, feverishly. When Fujin leaned into him again and his mind went blank. In a quick motion, he maneuvered her back onto the bed, his mouth still on hers and his hand roaming upward from her ribs, grazing her breast before sliding up to thread his fingers in her hair. His other hand moved quickly to work on unbuckling his belt.

He'd broken away from her lips to deliver a tender kiss to her cheek, when he felt one of her legs shaking against him. In his moment of passion, he'd somehow missed the fact that she was trembling. He pulled back to gauge her reaction.

"Is this okay?" When Seifer's eyes met hers, and saw that they were welling up with tears, he knew all too well what the answer was.

"We need to stop." She pulled away, breathless.

His heart sank when he felt Fujin hurriedly slide away from him, and confusion set in. Had he forced himself on her? He'd gotten ahead of himself. He'd gone and ruined everything.

It wasn't the fact that that she'd turned him down that bothered him, or even the fact that she'd wanted to slow things down in general. His mind could wrap around those facts just fine. He was moving too fast, anyway. They were responsible, adult reactions to a situation that could potentially get messy.

What did bother him was the almost physical sting of rejection. He'd never felt that feeling before—the pain, the unrequited ache that came with it. In a quick wave, that pain manifested into shame. He scrambled to his feet without fully knowing why or understanding how it looked to her. He could hear her uttering apologies, but they felt distant. He couldn't unring the bell, but in that moment, he sure as fuck wished that he could.

"It's fine. I'm sorry if you didn't want that. Let's take some time. Let's sort things out." He was talking too quickly, embarrassed now. He'd just gone overboard; made an ass of himself. He made his way towards the door.

"Seifer, wait." Fujin commanded, and he shook his head at her.

"It's fine, Fuu. I'm sorry. We need to get moving anyway. We're in room 303. I'll ... see you later."

And with that, just as quickly as the events had transpired, he picked up his coat and his gunblade and was gone.
By the time they decided to return home the sky had grown dark, the wind had picked up, and the ocean churned beneath them. She'd been scared but, as always, he told her not to worry. She was convinced his confidence—and the fact that the wind happened to be blowing in the right direction—was the only thing that kept them alive that day.

Nothing but shadows of the seagulls flying outside moved in the hotel room. Their silhouettes stretched in the bright morning sun, their wings casting slivers of darkness across her face. Everything was silent, save the flat static sound of a room filled with hollow furniture, not lived in, and the quiet hum of the breeze that was always with her now.

Flat. That's how it felt. Her heart felt flat.

Her eyes fell on the rumpled blankets under her, still unsure if that moment had just happened. Had they really just been there? They'd been sorting things out and making amends. Healing. But then, predictably, she went to him. And then his hands…his body…

She touched the mattress where he'd been sitting. She pressed her lips together and closed her eyes.

Seifer was embarrassed when he left the room—he didn't even look her in the eye or give her a chance to tell him that it had nothing to do with him. But then again, it had everything to do with him. She wanted to have a clear head, to be well again—to be with him without that awful wind howling in her bones. When she'd said she wanted to take a step back, she didn't mean forever. She'd meant it to be very tactical—pull back and take a look at the bigger picture, focus in on the things that needed to be fixed, and then move forward. She was surprised he didn't anticipate that response from her. That potentially lead to a bigger problem—that maybe he still didn't really see her.

She stood, walking to the windows to part the sheer curtains and look outside. The day was just starting, the sky brilliant blue and the sun still not at its peak. There were still so many hours left to sit and think about the consequences of what they'd done. There were still so many hours to replay those moments in her mind.

She took a quick survey of the room to check for things left behind, and then walked towards the door. As she leaned down to grab her shoes from beneath the entryway bench, she spotted a tray with two black coffees that had grown cold and two slices of plain wheat toast. The coffee had been for them. The plain toast to settle her stomach. Her heart ached. These small acts of kindness were what made her love him. He may not notice everything, but he did know so much about her.

Putting on her shoes, she looked around the space one last time, wanting to take just a minute more to relax in neutral territory with hardly any past and no threat of present. Just shadows of the birds.

She couldn't help but feel that something overwhelming waited her when she left that space, colossal and foreboding. She'd experienced that feeling before with Seifer, actually, when they were just children—around 12 years old. They'd decided to borrow a small skiff from the Balamb docks and go fishing in the bay. The fish will be bigger, he'd told her. We'll catch something amazing.
She could still clearly remember him beaming when he'd unexpectedly reeled a small octopus over the side of the boat. Its tentacles wriggled in the air and its suction cups pursed, collapsing and expanding, as it felt around the weathered floorboards searching for a way back home to the water.

By the time they decided to return home the sky had grown dark, the wind had picked up, and the ocean churned beneath them. Fujin was scared but, as always, he told her not to worry. She was convinced his confidence—and the fact that the wind happened to be blowing in the right direction—was the only thing that kept them alive that day. If he'd been worried it didn't show. They made it to shore. They returned the boat unnoticed. Seifer threw the octopus back in the water. It was a normal day, like most normal days, except it had almost been catastrophically abnormal.

She didn't really think much about death then, so she hadn't been scared to die exactly. But she did feel like they were going to be swallowed up. That's the only feeling she'd had she could compare this day to…like being in a small boat in the ocean, chased by the swelling waves.

Sighing, she stood and exited the room, off to find Seifer and Raijin, intent on planning their return home.

She spotted them in the hotel's dining area having breakfast together. Raijin was chatting animatedly and though she couldn't see his face, she could tell that Seifer was nodding along in fake interest. She swallowed the lump in her throat, and forced herself to walk towards them.

"Heya Fujin!" Raijin waved from the table for her to sit down. Seifer didn't turn around. "You look better, ya know."

There were two chairs to choose from. One to Seifer's left, and one diagonally in front of him. Her thoughts were all in relation to him—which to choose? She grabbed the back of the chair next to him nervously, the feet screeching as it dragged on the floor, opting not to put herself in a position where she'd need to look at him.

"Yeah, I'm feeling better." Fujin smiled weakly at Raijin. She didn't have the energy to slip into her usual way of speech. It was too exhausting right now. Raijin didn't notice.

"Seifer and I were just talking about who he saw this morning."

"Oh?" She intentionally didn't direct her response at anyone in particular.

"General Caraway, in the flesh!" Raijin shook his head. If Seifer had even wanted to tell her, Raijin's excitement got the best of him. "It's too bad we missed it. That's who took our room."

"He told Seifer he was here to take his daughter home." Fujin smiled weakly. She didn't have the energy to slip into her usual way of speech. It was too exhausting right now. Raijin didn't notice.

"He's giving us some sort of message to bring to Cid too. He also told Seifer that they should meet up and like, hang out, before we left."

"Huh..." she responded absentmindedly, as she watched him across the room. He was taking a remarkably long amount of time to pour a cup of coffee. "What kind of message?"

"Eh, we don't know yet. He's going to bring a letter by later today." Seifer was now drinking some
of his coffee directly by the coffee pot and refilling his cup immediately after. "But it's weird right? Seifer was wondering why the guy wouldn't just try to make direct contact. Why send a message with a bunch of cadets?"

"So it can't be traced, maybe." Her pale fingers reached out for the coffee he'd given her, her eyes still on him as he lingered by the buffet table, grabbing more food. "Odd."


Seifer was approaching them again, with his coffee and a small plate of toast. He awkwardly stutter-stopped when he approached the table.

"Uh ... here, Fujin. I don't think you got a chance to eat before. I doubt you want much else." He placed the plate down in front of her, and touched her on her shoulder, very quickly, before sitting down again.

"Oh … thanks. Yeah, I didn't see that you'd brought anything until I was getting ready to find you guys." She could see Seifer nodding out of the corner of her eye. She looked up and saw Raijin staring at her with an arched eyebrow.

"Alright, you guys are being weird, ya know? What the hell is going on?"

Seifer placed his elbows on the table, lacing his fingers together and resting his chin and mouth against them. His hesitation left her space to speak up.

"Raijin, we're heading back to Balamb soon." He rolled his eyes at her.

"Yeah Fuu, I already know that. What I don't know is why. This guy won't tell me anything." He pointed to Seifer with his fork.

"Well, that's probably because I should be the one to tell you. Before we left, I had to spend some time with Dr. Kadowaki. I've been having some trouble with GF junctioning." Suddenly, Raijin lost interest in his food.

"Whaddya mean, trouble?" He glanced to Seifer, who was staring off in the distance.

"Well, that's probably because I should be the one to tell you. Before we left, I had to spend some time with Dr. Kadowaki. I've been having some trouble with GF junctioning." Suddenly, Raijin lost interest in his food.

"Well, I had one that just appeared out of nowhere. Found me, I suppose. And now ... I can't un-junctionion it. And it has some weird side-effects. So we're going back so Garden can run some tests and figure out what's going on."

"Side-effects?" He looked to Seifer again, shocked. "What the hell?"

"Nothing serious Raijin. Its elemental properties seem to be wind. So ... sometimes...my head just feels breezy." His face twisted into a deep frown.

"Oh yeah, nothing serious, then." He said sarcastically. "Does it hurt?"

"Only sometimes, but it's not—" She saw Seifer's body snap towards her.

"You didn't say anything about it hurting." Fujin turned to him, finding his eyes full of concern and irritation that he hadn't gotten the full picture. "How is it hurting? How often?"
"Well ... it's a headache, and almost like a..." She paused, finding it hard to describe without scaring them. "A buzz, or a hum, through my whole body. It's almost every day now." She stopped, and looked down at the coffee in her hands. "It was actually going on all morning. It's stopped now, finally."

Raijin looked over to Seifer, who was staring down at the table. Fujin knew he was replaying the morning in his mind and realizing that she'd been in pain while they were doing ... whatever it was they were even doing with each other.

"So Seifer, when are we leaving?" Raijin's voice broke the silence that had settled over them. "Because we need to get that taken care of, ya know?" Seifer nodded, and absentmindedly reached over to place his hand on Fujin's back.

"Well, we're booked here tonight and tomorrow night, but if it's all the same I'd like get out of here first thing tomorrow morning." He turned to face her. "Does that work for you?" His touch made her feel warm, and it took her a second to sort out her thoughts. She shook her head.

"No, I think we should stay both nights. Raijin was just telling me about Caraway's message for Cid." She felt his fingers applying a light pressure. Was he worried? Never, not Seifer. Not the boy who'd piloted that little skiff to the docks all those years ago. But ... he did he seem worried ... maybe she should be too."

"The circumstances are strange. And I hate to work at the end of our vacation, but it might be worth staying and seeing if we can arrange dinner, and maybe gather some more intel. It sounds like you made an impression." Seifer shook his head in disagreement.

"Fujin. I really think we should just go."

"But don't you think it's odd? Why would the leader of the Galbadian army, who has Galbadia's SeeD under his purview, be reaching out to Balamb?" Seifer moved his hand from her back to run it over his face.

"Shit Fuu, you really are a SeeD now." He bit his cheek and looked around the hotel for a minute, weighing their options. "Okay," he finally conceded, "we'll go with your plan. Let's finish out the stay here and do a little reconnaissance work, I guess. What's one extra day?" She nodded in agreement.

"Wait, what do you mean she's a SeeD now?" Raijin exclaimed from the other side of the table. "You guys don't tell me anything, I swear." He grumbled, as he picked up his plate and walked away, leaving them alone for a moment. As soon as he was gone, she felt Seifer's hand on her knee. She looked up to find that tender green gaze of his looking back at her.

"Hey, listen ... I crossed the line earlier. It won't happen again." His earnestness made her panic—she had to let him know that it wasn't him that made her so nervous earlier. The last thing she wanted was for him to feel badly about it. She placed her hand on his.

"Seifer, you left so fast that I—" But it was too late; Raijin reappeared.

"Well, you guys ready to get going?" Seifer's hand squeezed her leg lightly, and then it slipped away. Her stomach dropped at how final it felt.

"Yeah, let's go call General Caraway's room, and see if we can't get dinner scheduled." Seifer stood, and held out his hand to help her out of her chair. "And when we stumble on something epic, Fujin here can buy us something nice with her new SeeD salary." He winked at her, and they walked
together back to their room.
Underway

Chapter Summary

Caraway had certainly been focusing on her a lot throughout dinner. When they arrived at the restaurant to meet him, Seifer and Raijin had received a kind but fairly tepid welcome. Caraway, on the other hand, had been very interested in engaging her in conversation. Mixed in with regaling Seifer and Raijin with stories about the great sorceress war, he'd managed to aim some innocuously phrased personal questions at her that he hadn't bothered to ask anyone else.

Fujin leaned in close to the mirror so that she could apply mascara to her naked lashes. Usually, a stint in front of the mirror meant checking how quickly cuts were healing from training sessions. But since they'd wound up scheduling their rendezvous with General Fury Caraway in Dollet's nicest restaurant, she thought it might be good to gussy up for the occasion.

Looking nice hadn't really been a focus of hers up until recently. She'd been motherless so hadn't learned the talents of makeup from anyone, and her two best friends had been boys. She'd actually never even been friends with a girl ...

But a few years ago, when Seifer and Raijin started to talk about women around her and what they liked about them, she started to pay closer attention. They talked the most about the ones with painted faces, big breasts, and cheerful dispositions, and not very often about the plain girls like her with modest sized chests who traded in sarcastic comments. She paid the closest attention to the ones that Seifer would bring around. They were always beautiful like painted dolls ... and hollow-headed, like dolls. She wasn't sure how he could stand talking to them.

Still, she didn't actually learn how powerful of a tool makeup could be until an all-female Covert Operations class she took at Garden when she was 16 years old. Though most of what SeeD did consisted of general mercenary missions, covert operations came up for those at the top of their game. Which was where she always wanted to be—the best, alongside Seifer.

Her class had a fairly unorthodox female teacher who taught them that their sexuality was actually a powerful weapon. She taught them about body language, self-defense when you're up against a larger man, and of course, the art of appealing to men for gaining intel. She hadn't been good at the social aspects, but her professor told her she wouldn't need to worry about that. These types of men usually like women who are quiet—silent stunners. Fujin wouldn't have even bothered to learn about mascara and eyeliner had it not been for that class. It felt more like war paint after that, and less like putting on the face of a porcelain doll.

"Fujin!" She rolled her eyes as Raijin banged on the door. "You're taking a long time in there, ya know? Can't I just take a piss?"

"Raijin, I'm almost done." She finished swiping on her mascara, and added just a touch of blush on her cheeks—it was easy to overdo it with her pale skin. She took one last look in the mirror, adjusting the plunging neckline and straps of her long black maxi dress. She actually thought she cleaned up pretty good, considering she rarely did this sort of thing.

She took one last look at herself and then opened the door, holding out her hand andmotioning for
Raijin to go in. "It's all yours."

"Yowza, lookin' good Fuu." Raijin whistled as he rushed past her wearing just his boxers and carrying his clothes for the night. She cringed at both the sight of him and the loud door slamming behind her.

"Wow ... " She heard Seifer comment from across the room. He was standing by the window with his hands in the pockets of a pair of well-fitting charcoal colored pants, staring at her wide-eyed. His white shirt was a stark contrast with his summer tanned skin. Now he cleaned up good. He cleared his throat.

"You look really nice, Fuu." He reached up to adjust the knot of his black tie, as she turned away nervously to check herself in the mirror.

"Really? Because you're looking at me like I have six heads." She scrunched her nose. "I feel ridiculous. I wish he'd just take us to the pub."

"You look anything but ridiculous." Seifer kept staring at her and her cheeks flushed. "But there's just one thing..." He walked over to stand behind her and reached down to grab two long strips of fabric on either side of her. "These should probably be tied."

His hands moved to tighten the fabric, twisting the strips into a snug knot at her lower back. "There you go."

"Thanks." She said to him through the mirror as she smoothed the front of her dress. His hand moved up to settle on curve of her neck.

"You're welcome..." They paused, looking back at each other through the mirror. "How's the wind?"

"It's quiet right now. Hopefully it stays that way," Seifer nodded a little, and let his hand fall away from her.

"Good. Let me know if it gets worse, okay? We can always leave early. It's not a mission ... yet, anyway." She nodded in return, as Raijin emerged from the bathroom, dressed in a black shirt and khaki pants.

"Well, aren't we a good lookin' trio?" He came up behind them, nudging his way in the middle and putting his arms around both of them. "We haven't gotten dressed up like this in awhile, ya know? Here's hoping it pays off."

"Well, if it doesn't at least we get to have a nice free dinner with a war hero." Seifer clapped Raijin on the back. "Now get moving. We're gonna be late."

"Well maybe if Fujin hadn't taken so long," Raijin grumbled as he moved to exit the room, opening door and then looking back at them. "Man, I can't believe we're having dinner with this guy. This might be the best part of the whole trip."

Seifer reached out to grab the door from him, and motioned for Fujin to leave next. As she walked by, he placed his hand low on her back, his fingers touching her bare skin, ushering her out the door. She felt a shiver travel through her spine.

"You're both to blame." He smirked, as he nudged her through the exit. "But at least Fujin looks nice. What'd you waste all your time on Raij?" She laughed, and Raijin turned around to flip them off as they made their way to meet the General.
"Well, this has probably been the best dinner conversation I've had in a while." General Caraway pulled his napkin from his lap, and waived for the waiter to come over. "More wine, thank you. And you can start clearing the table?" He made a sweeping motion with his hand at the three of them. "Unless anyone wanted dessert?"

Seifer held up his hand. "No sir, I think we're good. This was plenty generous of you."

"Generous?! It's not every day you get to dine with a member of SeeD." He raised his glass in Fujin's direction, bowing his head slightly. "Not that being a cadet isn't great, you two." He smiled at Raijin and Seifer, and then turned his attention back to Fujin as the waiter returned to fill their glasses.

"Well, I'm not officially in SeeD yet." Fujin corrected him politely, as she discreetly tried to readjust the straps of her dress. "I'm taking some time off first, but I'm hoping to start missions soon."

"But you're in." He took a sip of his wine, keeping his eyes on her. "That's all that matters."

Caraway had certainly been focusing on her a lot throughout dinner. When they arrived at the restaurant to meet him, Seifer and Raijin had received a kind but fairly tepid welcome. Caraway, on the other hand, had been very interested in engaging her in conversation. Mixed in with regaling Seifer and Raijin with stories about the great sorceress war, he'd managed to aim some innocuously phrased personal questions at her that he hadn't bothered to ask anyone else. Do you know where your family is from? Whereabouts do you train other than Balamb Garden? What's your relationship to these two lugs (which had been a little awkward to answer right now)? Have you ever been to the Centra Continent?

She couldn't wrap her head around why—at this lavish dinner with exquisite china and ambient candles, hosting two dinner guests who were hanging on his every word—she would be of interest to him.

Seifer and Raijin had been so star-struck, they didn't seem to notice that Caraway had essentially been interrogating her all evening. She grabbed her own glass of wine and took a sip, pretending not to let on how strange it was.

"So General Caraway, I meant to ask." Seifer interjected. "Have you had a chance to ... er ... reconcile with your daughter yet? I mean ... I hope booking our room long-term is paying off." Of course he'd ask about his daughter, Fujin thought to herself, rolling her eyes internally. Seifer was probably remapping his childhood "dream" of being sorceress' knight now that he knew a general's daughter was on the table. Caraway sighed, and leaned back in his chair.

"Not yet, unfortunately. She's particularly mad at me this time around. When she was little she got angry about not being to have something she wanted, and now that she's grown older it's about my political policies." He chuckled, taking another sip of his wine. "I suppose it's not all that different."

"I suppose not." Seifer smiled at him. "Sorry I asked."

"No, no. It's fine. I love talking about her, even if we're not on good terms. She's well-intentioned, just stubborn and idealistic as hell. She reminds me of her mother."

"Reminds?" Raijin asked. He never had been very good with tone and subtlety.

"Yes." Caraway smiled wistfully. "Julia—my wife—died when my daughter was very young. It's been challenging for us both...it's hard to lose a parent." He stopped himself, looking around at all of them. "But of course, all of you know that."
"Well, we never really lost them, they were just never there." Fujin responded, as she looked to Seifer's direction. "We've always had each other though, for as long as we can remember. We're lucky in that respect."

"Luckier than most orphans, I suppose." Caraway smiled at her, as he pulled his wallet and an envelope from his jacket pocket. "Dinner is on me, of course. It's the least I can do." The three of them politely feigned protest.

"No, no. I insist. I do have one favor to ask though."

"Sure, anything you need." Seifer responded hastily.

"Well, it's actually a request for Fujin." Caraway turned to Seifer and Raijin. "And I hope you don't take offense to this gentleman, but would you mind giving us a few minutes alone? Now that I know Fujin is a member of SeeD, I'd like to speak with her in a more official capacity about the message I'd like to relay to Cid."

Her eyes darted to Seifer, and she caught a flash of disappointment on his face highlighted by the flicker of the candlelight. Caraway had originally wanted to speak with him, but protocol and rank won out. This was what she afraid of when she'd passed her exams and he hadn't—eclipsing him.

The piano player in the background finished up a song, while she calculated the different ways to politely protest in her mind. The patrons clapped, and Seifer's voice cut through their applause, speaking for her.

"Sure, that's fine by us." Duty won out, and he quickly recalibrated his disappointment. He and Raijin stood, Raijin making his way towards Caraway to shake his hand. Seifer leaned over and touched her shoulder.

"We'll meet you back at the hotel Fuu." He applied a light pressure, which was enough for her to confirm she wasn't alone in thinking this was a weird evening. The touch was silent, but said stay safe and be cautious. He then made his way to Caraway to say his goodbyes.

"Thanks for dinner sir, it's been an honor." Caraway reached out for Seifer's hand, clasping it with between both of his. "Great to meet you, Almasy. I'm sure I'll be seeing more of you."

Raijin excitedly needled Seifer in the side as they walked away, no doubt talking about how crazy it was that they ran into the General at all, let alone got to have dinner with him. Then, they disappeared into the night.

"Well, thanks for staying for a minute longer Fujin." Caraway smiled at her, drinking more of his wine.

"Certainly ... " She paused before she spoke, trying to decide which direction she wanted to take this in. "You seemed to be curious about me and my career at Garden anyway. Did you have more questions?"

He arched an eyebrow at her and his lips crooked into a smile. He waived for the waiter to return with more wine.

"I knew you were sharp. You know, there's only so much you can learn about a cadet when you look at their stats." He stopped the conversation as the waiter topped off both of their glasses and stepped away moments later.

"You can learn everything you want about their stamina, their test scores, the number of kills they've
had in training and combat." He moved his hand to pull a cigar out of his coat pocket, lighting it and
taking one puff before speaking again. "But you don't really know how clever they are until you
speak to them. You can study to pass a test, but cleverness? Now that's a natural ability you can't
teach."

"I take it you pulled my file before dinner?" He nodded at her in acknowledgement. She rested her
forearm on the table, and leaned forward into the conversation. He wasn't making
her nervous necessarily, and she didn't feel as if she was in danger, but there was something about
this conversation that was leaving a sour taste in her mouth. "Didn't find what you were looking
for?"

"Not exactly." He smiled, and pointed at her with his cigar. "I may have found a little more than I
bargained for." Her brow furrowed, and Caraway waved his hand at her, palm first, in a motion of
denying wrongdoing.

"Please, don't be alarmed. I truly am here to hand off a message for Cid. I was doing some
preliminary research on your group. I looked into Seifer and discovered he'd been honest about your
group's relationship with Cid. Your friend Raijin didn't have much of a record…but you." He flicked
his ashes onto a nearby empty plate, lacking an ashtray.

"You should tell your physician to redact those medical records of yours from the system as soon as
you get back to Garden."

"My medical records?" Her eyes narrowed in confusion. "How did you even get access to them?
And…how did you even know to look at them?"

"Access isn't an issue for me, and your record in the system is flagged. It probably had something to
do with keeping you out automated SeeD communications until you're inducted officially." He
paused for a moment, as if realizing how off this sounded. "I have highly sensitive data to send to
Cid, and before I decided to send it with you I needed to make sure you weren't flagged for
something behavior related. Sorry, I know how it sounds."

"It sounds invasive." She felt her anger rising and the wind in her beginning to blow gently. She
closed her eyes for just a second to calm herself down.

"I understand, and normally I would have saved myself the trouble and not bothered to tell you I'd
done it." He flicked ashes onto the plate again. "But with this anomaly you're experiencing, with GF
junctions, I felt like I needed to talk with you. Even though it seems incredibly far fetched…I've
learned things never are when you're dealing with sorceresses."

"With sorceresses?" She asked a little too loudly. Caraway held out his hand, indicating to keep her
voice low. "What in Hyne's name are you talking about?"

"This GF of yours—Pandemona. I know it. I remember it from the war… I actually saw it in battle
once." Caraway stared off into the distance for a moment, remembering hard days of the wars that
passed, before reconnecting with hers.

"It belonged to a sorceress who betrayed Adel early on in the fight by delivering intel to Galbadian
Forces—it was instrumental in leading us to victory. Adel had the sorceress murdered when she
found out. I'm not clear on why she betrayed Adel." Caraway blotted the end of his cigar on the
plate.

"In any case, when the sorceress died Adel tried to assume her powers for herself, but she couldn't
locate them. No one could figure out where they'd transferred to. The theory was that with lack of a
better option, she chose instead to merge with the Guardian Force inside of her. With Pandemona.” Fujin froze, her heart pulsing hard against her chest the now strong wind that was blowing through the crevasses of her mind.

"But when the body was inspected and her mind scanned, Pandemona had vanished. That is, until now."

Fujin leaned back in her chair and ran her pale fingers through her hair as she tried to soak Caraway’s story in. Could this new guardian force…also be a sorceress? A sorceress force? She laughed out loud.

"This is insane." She pulled her napkin from her lap and pushed her chair back with her feet. "Even if this were true how would you even explain this guardian force seeking me out? I mean… I'm nobody." She readied herself to stand and walk the hell out of there. "This is crazy."

Caraway reached across the table in a swift motion and grabbed her hand discreetly. "Please, sit down," he insisted, keeping his voice hushed. "We're not through yet. It's important you listen." The urgency in his voice convinced her to say.

"I don't have the slightest idea why she found you, if it's even really her." He leaned in closer to her, as she'd pulled back about a foot from the table. "But my message to Cid is regarding a potential uprising of a new sorceress, trying to form an alliance with President Vinzer Deling. My channels have been receiving intel about her desire to throw our world into chaos, just like Adel did." The panic in his eyes made her feel uneasy. He seemed too…scared…to not be telling the truth.

"I can't get into specifics. It's Cid's place to fill you in, not mine. However, with all of the connections that are being drawn to Balamb Garden…I don't think it's a coincidence that this GF found you. I think you might not just be 'nobody' anymore, Fujin."

"Connections?" She was growing tired of his vagueness. "What do you mean, connections to Balamb Garden. Are we in danger?"

"No, no." He waved her off casually. "No one is in danger yet. It's too early and everything is so unpredictable. Just…deliver this message to Cid, please." He slid the envelope across the table to her. "I'm hoping he can help play a role in heading this off at the pass."

Fujin placed her trembling hand on the envelope as he slid it over to her. He held it in place for a minute so she couldn't slide it away. "And you, my dear, must tell Cid this new information about your troubles." She nodded at him, unable to respond. He smiled, and released the envelope

"Well, I supposed everything is underway now. What fate, that I met you here. It seems we all have role to play." Caraway stood then, buttoning his jacket. "I should get going. People watch me while I'm out…no need to start rumors. Don't hesitate to get in touch with me if you need anything. I already know where to find you." He started to walk away from her, but doubled back once more, forgetting something.

"When you leave tonight, and when you head home to Garden, be sure you're not being followed. I know I don't need to tell you…but it's very important you don't let this envelope out of your sight. Keep your friends safe too, for that matter." And then he was gone, leaving her alone at the table with her thoughts.

She sat stunned as the piano music filtering through her ears sounded more like chimes blowing in the wind. She wondered if Pandemona has been listening to her conversation with Caraway and the sound of the wind was her strong confirmation of Caraway's information. It feels more like a
She clutched the envelope in her hand, determined not to lose it on the short walk between the restaurant and the hotel. Had he really just left her, Fujin Sanada, with this information? It was always something that Garden stressed in their trainings…the burden of responsibility and lives you're in charge of…and oftentimes deciding whose lives are more valuable. But this responsibility…somehow felt different. This is what it must feel like to have the weight of the world on your shoulders.

She slowly stood from her chair, her eyes darting around the room to see if anyone had been watching her, and exited the restaurant as casually as she possibly could. She was so focused on getting back to the hotel in one piece that she didn't see him sitting and waiting for her on a bench just to the left.

"Hey!" A voice yelled in the dark, but it barely registered. Her panic and the howling gale in her mind occupied all space for rational thought.

"Hey, wait up!" A hand grabbed her shoulder and she spun around to instinctively swatted it away, ready to pounce.

"Whoa, what gives?" Seifer took a step back from her, shaking the hand she'd just attacked. "Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you…" His voice trailed off, as he registered her panic. "Shit. What's the matter?"

Even though she'd memorized every curve of his face, it still took her a moment to realize it was him. She grabbed his arm, and scanning the streets nervously.

"Not here. We need to get back to the hotel." Her voice was flat. "We need to get back now."

Normally, Seifer would have needled her a bit for information, but the panic in her eyes made him pause. She felt his hand on her shoulder, steadying her as wobbled a little.

"Okay, Fuu. Easy now." He nudged her forward through the streets, following her lead and keeping an eye out for something that could be lurking in the shadows. "Let's go."
Chapter Summary

She didn't have the energy to engage in this conversation right now. In truth, she wasn't sure what specific thing he'd meant...SeeD? Pandemona? The words they exchanged in the street, or the sting of rejection from the awkward morning they'd had? Caraway fully bringing about the realization that she outranked him now? There were so many things he could be mad about it was hard to keep track.

She stretched out on the bed, the loose fabric of her black dress draping over the edge. A voice, frantic and commanding, echoed in the background but she couldn't bring herself to pay attention to the words. She ran the soft black fabric through her pale fingers idly, her eyes fixed on the ceiling.

*If Caraway was right, and the sorceress was with her, what did she want?* She hadn't passed on her powers like in the old stories Fujin had read about when she was a child. She didn't speak to her, didn't really *harm* her...she just inhabited her. *Was she in danger? Was she putting Seifer and Raijin in danger by being near them?*

"You've got to be fucking kidding me!" The volume of Seifer's voice pulled her back to reality.

"Xu, listen to me." Fujin turned her head to find him pacing across the room, his tie long removed and his shirtsleeves rolled up, as he held the handset of the phone in a white-knuckled grip. "I don't know how else I can say this to you so that you'll get it through your thick head. *I need to speak with Cid.*" He pressed his index finger and his thumb to his temples.

"I can't tell you anything about it. What I need *you* to do is go and find Cid—" Seifer was cut off by a response on the other end of the line.

"Well that's great leadership," he said sarcastically. "I don't care if he's sleeping. WAKE HIM UP."

He was close to combustion.

"Seifer, just get off the phone." Fujin spoke weakly from the bed. He covered the mouthpiece with his hand and glared at her.

"No offense Fujin, but I've had enough of following your lead." She rolled her eyes, and turned back to the ceiling. She could hear the muffled voice of Xu, Cid's trusted assistant, echoing from the handset.

"I told you *I can't tell you anything.* Listen, I'm not calling for me I'm calling for Fuj—hello? Hello?" She'd hung up on him. No doubt Xu had endured even more colorful language when Fujin wasn't listening.

"Mother fucker!" He slammed the handset down with a loud crack, and spun around to stare out the windows, enraged. He took a minute to catch his breath.

"If you had just *told me.*" His arms were crossed, and he tapped his foot anxiously on the carpeted floor. "I could have..."

"You could have what Seifer?" She sighed from the bed, and turned away from him again. She
wasn't sure she was processing this information very well—she felt foggy and numb. The whole ordeal seemed almost comical. She had a sorceress inside of her that wouldn't leave. Another sorceress was threatening a great war. There were more connections to Garden. Her head was spinning. She didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"I could have asked more questions than you did. I would have helped try and figure out what was going on." From the corner of her eye she saw him begin pacing again.

"I shouldn't have left you in there with him, telling you these stories and not getting all the facts. He wouldn't have gotten away with that if I'd been there. Leaving you with all of this information and just walking away." He scoffed, and quickened his pacing around the room. His jealousy was starting to show.

"He didn't have any more information Seifer. I'll talk to Cid when we get back. Just calm down." Fujin was trying not to take the insults on her capabilities too personally.

"Calm down?" He stopped his movements to glare at her. She didn't bother looking back at him—she could feel his eyes burning into her. "You cannot possibly be telling me to calm down right now. We have an information grenade in our hands and you might have a fucking sorceress in your head. Do not tell me to calm down."

"Listen," she covered her eyes with her hand. "Can you just stop making this about you for a minute and go find Raijin and bring him back here? He needs to know what's going on."

"Making this about me?" He marching towards her and glared down at her. She hesitantly lifted her hand from her eyes to stare up at him, meeting his furious emerald gaze. "I'm worried about you, and somehow you think I'm making this about me? Man, you're on a roll lately, you know that?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Fujin rose up to rest on her elbows and challenge him.

"You know exactly what I mean." They stared at each other for an uncomfortably long moment, their eyes silently at war.

She didn't have the energy to engage in this conversation right now. In truth, she wasn't sure what specific thing he'd meant…SeeD? Pandemona? The words they exchanged in the street, or the sting of rejection from the awkward morning they'd had? Caraway fully bringing about the realization that she outranked him now? There were so many things he could be mad about it was hard to keep track.

He was the first to look away, scoffing and shoving his hands angrily in his pockets. He marched away from her to sit in an armchair in the corner of the room, placing his elbows on his knees and laced his fingers together as he turned to look out the window.

"Listen," he exhaled, keeping his gaze fixed on an imaginary object in the distance. "Are you in, or are you out?"

"What are you talking about?" Fujin feigned ignorance, hoping her response would deflate him and the conversation would dissolve into nonexistence.

"Don't be coy with me." He responded, flatly, but his features softened—he still wasn't looking at her. "If you're not in, then it makes things easier. I can separate us from this and at least try to be logical." He grew quiet then, his gaze shifting to fix on the floor in front of him. "But if you're in… then I'm probably going to keep doing crazy shit, like calling Garden in the middle of the night demanding to speak to Cid."
In the midst of all of these revelations, she hadn't really realized that his degrees of worry hinged on where they stood. The concept seemed a little unfair. She laid down on her back again to stare at the ceiling, trying to come up with an adequate answer while the wind howled through her.

"I'm not…not in." She whispered. She heard his starched shirt rustle as he shifted his body in her direction.

"That's not an answer, Fujin." She didn't respond.

"Well, then. At your request I'm going to go find Raijin. Maybe you'll figure it out while I'm gone." She heard footsteps, the familiar sounds of his trench coat being swept onto his broad shoulders, and Hyperion being lifted. And then, the almost as familiar slamming of the door.

She didn't see him come back that night. She'd fallen asleep in the room by herself before they'd returned home, exhausted from the revelations of the day. She woke up to a note from Raijin on the nightstand, telling her that Seifer had the great idea of going on a deep sea fishing "guys trip" on their last day in Dollet. He'd signed the note "We'll see you later - Raijin and Seifer," but she knew the latter had no hand in it.

She could only guess at what ran through his head as he crafted the idea for the trip last night, angry at finding her asleep when they'd returned to the room. I'll show you making this all about me. I'll show you calming down. It was callous and childish…it was the exact sort of thing Seifer would do if he'd felt wronged.

Fujin spent the day wandering aimlessly around Dollet, reminiscing about the better moments they'd had that summer. She popped into a few shops and bought a handful of seaside trinkets to bring back with her in an attempt to keep her mind off of everything she'd learned yesterday. In an attempt to keep her mind off of him, too.

She'd had her eye on a silly, overpriced holiday ornament that she'd seen early on in their trip. It was just little bits of Dollet driftwood bound together with twine, in the shape of an anchor. Seifer and Raijin had been with her the first time she'd seen it. It had actually been Seifer's golden fingers that had plucked it off of its fake tree display, and held it up in front of her face. Look, this is kinda neat Fuu. Whaddya think? It was so homely she'd laughed. C'mon, it's not that bad…I kinda like it.

She'd planned on going back to get it for him to add to the Posse's collection, which they'd curated together over the years in place of the collection any family might've had. An anchor, she'd thought, was very symbolic of what Seifer meant to them. She and Raijin had been drifting alone before he came along—he'd held them steadfast against every tumultuous thing they faced.

She bought the ornament and had it wrapped for him in a plain brown paper, tied with a string. It was simple, like her feelings for him…nothing fancy needed to be said. It was exactly what you saw. Steady devotion, loyalty, and love under it all. Did he really have any question? Didn't he know she was just worried about everything else? She could always count on him to be steady, why couldn't he be that for her right now? Why was he trying to force her to bend?

Probably because he was used to being wanted, and not used to wanting.

She found herself wandering toward the docks with the small package clutched in her hand. Even though she knew they wouldn't be back yet, she could feel Seifer out across the ocean waves, moving closer. She walked across the weathered boards to the very end and sat down. She dangled her feet over the edge, and took in the view of the bay—the wind hummed between her ears.
Yes, I can hear you. She thought to herself, or rather spoke to the thing inside of her. Let's not start this now, I have things to do.

Fujin was still very unclear about what to think about the sorceress—both the one in her head and the one posing an imminent threat. But she'd spent her time alone thinking about the past few days, and realized that maybe it wasn't her place to worry about finding clarity. It was probably better to leave that to those with more experience, like Garden and Cid.

It had dawned on her though, as she'd left the shop with the small gift for Seifer in her hand, that there had been one thing that had happened she could control in all of this chaos. Everything she'd ever wanted was in reach…and she'd been stupidly afraid of reaching out for it.

What do you do when you get everything you've seemingly ever wanted? The familiar thought ran through her mind, with a new thought attached. You bend.

It would be simple then, to give him an answer if he needed it. To say aloud the words that she spoke silently for years, if he needed them said. She could do that for him. Would he still want to hear them?

She didn't stay on the dock very long—she'd have loved to wait for him to get back, but it seemed too desperate. She'd also been deathly afraid to leave the note for Cid alone in the room, so she'd kept it on her knowing it would be safer with her than anywhere else. It was probably best to get it back under the protection of a locked door before nightfall came. She returned to the hotel room, fully intent on telling him that she was very much in.

They returned from their voyage just before sundown. She'd been in the bathroom drying her hair, struggling with makeup again, putting on yet another black dress—shorter and form fitting this time. She'd even put on the pair of silver earrings he and Raijin had bought her for her birthday. For something she'd determined to be simple, she was sure getting elaborate. She'd been anxiously thinking of ways she could casually invite just him out to dinner, when she heard Raijin bumble through the door.

"That was the biggest fish I've ever seen, ya know? Why didn't you keep it?"

"Hyne, what would we do with fish right now, Raijin? Our room doesn't have a fridge, and if it did it still definitely wouldn't have one big enough for a giant fish."

"All the same." Fujin heard the loud creaking of mattress springs, recognizing the sound as the weight of Raijin plopping himself down on the bed. "It would have been cool to show it to Fujin … Fuu, ya here?" Raijin yelled through the door.

"Yep, I'll be out in a second." She placed her hands on the edge of the counter, staring back at herself in the mirror. She was nervous. Her stomach was a mess. Perhaps getting enough courage to do this wasn't so simple after all.

"Everything alright, ya know? I told Seifer I was worried about leavin' you by yourself." She heard Seifer's familiar footsteps moving away from the door, the creaking of mattress springs once again, and Raijin's footsteps trudging close to her. "He said you'd be fine though. Sounds like you are."

"Yep, I think sleeping in was a good thing." Fujin groaned inwardly as she swallowed her pride. "Thanks for not waking me up—I really needed that."

"Hey, we're thinking of heading out to the bar to grab food and drinks on our last night in town, ya know. Do you wanna come—"
She darted toward the door, opening it quickly getting a full view of the room. Raijin stood directly in front of her, and Seifer was in the corner of the room in the same chair he'd been in last night reading a paper he'd picked up on their adventure, his feet propped up on an ottoman. He didn't bother to look her way, and her heart sank a bit.

"Dinner sounds…good." She hesitated, not quite accepting the invitation. "I was thinking—" Raijin's surprised expression caught her off guard.

"Holy Hyne Fuu, you look…um…well, hot actually" He laughed to himself. "Now that sounds weird. Are you going somewhere?"

She'd didn't dare look away from Raijin, but she saw the corner of Seifer's paper dip down to see what the commotion was about. It stayed that way for a few seconds, as Fujin continued to stare at Raijin.

"I was just … waiting for you guys." She smiled. "$I just … felt like getting dressed up for our last night out." The paper rustled and perked up again. She let herself look in his direction—his face was shielded from view.

"Well lucky us, eh Seifer?" Raijin looked back at their friend and then back at Fujin. "$Sometimes I forget just how pretty you are, ya know?" The seemingly back-handed compliment was quickly followed by an unexpected hug from him. She decided not to kick him—he was being genuine, even if it came out terrible.

"Well, lemme through so I can wash up, and we'll get headed. There's a girl I'm supposed to meet anyway. Whaddya say Seif?" Her heart lifted a little again, hearing that Raijin had plans to depart later.

"Sure, whatever." He was definitely still mad at her. She was hoping to change that.

Raijin rushed past her and slamming the door, and the shower was turned on almost instantly.

Seifer didn't look up from his newspaper at first, or even acknowledge that she was in the same space as him. She moved to sit down on the foot of the bed, cleared her throat, and she heard him flip a page.

"So, how's the wind today?" He asked from behind the paper with a slight edge to his voice.

"Good…a little quieter."

"That's great," he flipped another page. She noted that there was no way he could be reading that fast.

"How's the news?" She quipped back. He let the paper droop down again, giving her a sideways glance that wound up scanning her entire body before landing to rest on her face. She knew he was probably hating himself for letting that happen.

"Good." He replied, his jaw stiffened. "Informative."

"Well…that's great." Fujin replied back, angling herself towards him. "$Did you guys…have a good day?" He let out an exasperated sigh and folded the paper up.

"Yep Fujin, great day." He ran his eyes over her again, before standing up to grab a glass from the nearby dresser and stalking over to bang on the bathroom door. She suddenly got the sinking feeling that tonight wasn't going to go as well as she'd hoped.
"Hey Raijin, you done in there yet? I need to get some water."

"Almost done!" Raijin yelled back. "I told you not to get those drinks on the way home man."

*Ahhh*, she thought to herself. *That explains some of it.*

Seifer mumbled something under his breath and was about to return to his chair when he spotted the gift she'd bought sitting on the nightstand next to her bed. He stared at it perplexed.

"What's that?" He asked her, walking over to it quickly and picking it up, shaking it lightly. His mouth moved faster than she could answer.

"Fancy dress, a little gift...all done up." His voice was quiet to avoid Raijin hearing him. "Are you...going out to meet that guy?" Fujin rushed to her feet in a panic, reflexively taking the box from him.

"No, of course not." She could see a small hint of anger in his eyes for having the audacity to take something out of his hands. "I said it already, I was waiting for you guys."

"Ha. Sure Fujin. Whatever you say." Seifer eyes ran over her from head to toe once again. It made him angrier, but instead of saying something hurtful to her like he'd usually do he spun away from her, and went to sit in his chair again. "Raijin, hurry up! I'm ready to go."

"One second, man! Sheesh..." Their comrade yelled back through the door.

She wasn't sure how to approach him at first. She didn't want him to be angry with her, but if he'd already been drinking it was incredibly bad timing for a profession of love. She sighed, and sat down on the ottoman in front of him.

"It's for you." She extended the box to him. "I wanted to...do something nice for you."

"Oh..." There was a hint of relief in his voice. He didn't move to take it so she shook the box a little. He reacted, and reached out his hand. It looked small when he held it, and she suddenly felt incredibly silly.

"It's just...something stupid." Fujin tried to downplay it so his expectations wouldn't be high. "It made me think of you...I thought about you a lot today." She looked back up at him when she didn't hear a reply. The features of his face hadn't softened, he just looked bewildered.

"Okay, Fuu. I mean...that's nice, I guess." He seemed to be having a lengthy internal dialogue. Raijin, with his impeccable timing, swung the bathroom door open.

"Alright, you two. Let's forget about all this sorceress crap for one night and have some fun, ya know?"

Seifer, who was still staring at the small box in his hand, smirked and shook his head before placing it down on a glass end table next to him. He stood up and walked past Fujin, without saying a word.

"Let's go. I'm tired of thinking about all of this serious shit." She heard him march out the door.

"Hey Fuu, you alright?" Raijin asked her, as he grabbed his jacket readying to leave. "If you don't feel good you don't have to come."

"Oh no, I'm fine. Let's get going. Sounds like a fun night." She smiled at him, and looped her arm in his to show enthusiasm. He was giddy.

"Yesss!" Raijin put his hand on her arm, and led her out of the room. From her outward appearance,
no one would know there was anything wrong with her. On the inside, her heart was fractured.
He didn't think he'd ever be able to get close enough to her. Even thoughts of getting as close as they possibly could still didn't seem like it would be close enough. And if he ever did get close, he knew he'd want to stay close. The implications were a little horrifying at his young age, and the fact that she didn't seem to want him to near her made it all the worse. He supposed it was a little scary.

It was the streetlights, he was certain, that were making her look glassy-eyed and on the verge of tears. It definitely wasn't anyone's fault … certainly not his. It wasn't his fault she had this weird Pandemonia thing in her. It wasn't his fault she couldn't multitask her emotions. It wasn't his fault she fucking looked that way tonight and he couldn't stop staring. It was her fault for making him care for her. It wasn't his responsibility to clean up after this Hynelforsaken mess she unwittingly dragged him into. None of this was his fault.

… and even if it was the tiniest bit his fault, so what? According to her he made everything about himself. She wouldn't accept his help and she seemed to think he had no place trying to save her from whatever was going on with her. Clearly she was wrong.

So, if she was going to cry, then let her fucking cry.

Though … he did wish she'd at least have the decency to not do it in front of him. Because for some reason when he'd occasionally, accidentally, connect his gaze with her her aqueous eyes, he felt a deep burning ache in his chest.

It didn't matter anyway, because after spending the day on a boat with Raijin, who was ever-so-concerned with what was going on between them, he'd made up his mind. Seifer was done with this feeling crap. Raijin asked very pointedly why they'd left Fujin alone on the last day of their trip, especially after everything they'd learned. Seifer told him the basics—a couple of things here or there, a little of this a little of that.

Raijin, frustrated, had the gall to once again suggest that Seifer not go anywhere near Fujin unless it was with a well-intentioned commitment. And then Seifer had to begrudgingly admit to his friend that it wasn't him who wasn't committing. Seifer had phrased it as being unable to "seal the deal," and Raijin had rolled his eyes.

Then out of nowhere, Raijin made the most ridiculous observation. Well, Seifer. It's not really a good time to demand stuff and expect things from her just because you suddenly feel a certain way, ya know? Maybe just … be nice. She's probably just scared. Show her she's not like the others.

Seifer then promptly told Raijin to butt out. Exactly why was it any of his business anyway? They may be a Posse but they had their own lives … they could have secrets, couldn't they? He could do what he wanted without fracturing their precious little group. And what exactly was there to be scared of anyway?

Fujin and Raijin were walking slightly in front of him now. He watched with envy as Raijin threw his arm around her shoulders and made some kind of joke, getting her to laugh. Seifer was a little
jealous of how Raijin could just do stuff like that with her and not think about it. A little part of him missed how simple things used to be.

But even though Seifer missed those simple days where all he wanted to do was hang out with her… he'd grown very fond of the idea of more over the years. He couldn't get the smell of her hair or the feeling of her lips out of his mind. And looking at her right now … the only thing he could think about was laying his hands on her and speaking to her softly in the dark …

He didn't think he'd ever be able to get close enough to her. Even thoughts of getting as close as they possibly could still didn't seem like it would be close enough. And if he ever did get close, he knew he'd want to stay close. The implications were a little horrifying at his young age, and the fact that she didn't seem to want him to near her made it all the worse. He supposed it was a little scary.

It occurred to Seifer that he wasn't used to this feeling because he hadn't felt this before. He'd been with plenty of women but he always got what he wanted from them and then moved on. If the situation became complicated it was over. He'd never wanted to be tied down before. But for her … fuck.

This was all her fault.

"Seifer, ya there?" Raijin interrupted his thoughts. "I was just telling Fuu not to walk home alone tonight. I'm probably not gonna be here—you got her?" Raijin turned around to look at him, walking backwards next to Fujin. He mouthed "Be nice," and Seifer rolled his eyes.

"Yes, Raijin." The trio stopped together silently as they approached the entrance to the pub. Seifer made sure to hold his gaze above her head—he didn't need her to know that he was thinking about her. Raijin was the first to speak.

"Well, let's grab a table and get some food." Raijin had his arm around Fujin's shoulders again. Even though Seifer knew it didn't mean anything—and that was only because Raijin had to tell him it didn't mean anything or risk the threat of a punch a couple of years ago—he still got a little agitated. Had this really been going on for this long? Hyne…

"Nah, I'm good. I'm hitting the bar." Seifer snapped.

"Ah…okay. You don't want anything? We barely ate all day." He was glancing from Seifer to Fujin, his eyes pleading with Seifer to just acquiesce and play nice for the night. Seifer hated it when people tried to tell him what to do.

"I had a big breakfast." Seifer marched directly at them, causing them to jump apart. "I'll find you when I want to leave Fujin." He decided to continue not looking at her. He didn't need those eyes wrenching his heart out.

When Seifer made it to the bar, the first thing he did was order a shot of whiskey. The second thing he did was scan the place for the prettiest girl he could find that wasn't Fujin. Anyone but her. Surely someone else could make him feel just like she did. He didn't need her.

The whiskey arrived as he spotted a raven-haired girl on the other side of the room. She was talking with a couple of weird looking guys, neither of whom could be her boyfriend—she was way out of their league. Not out of his though … she'd do.

He twisted the shot glass in a circle on the bar, running the different scenarios through his mind. Was he really resorting to making her jealous? Maybe it was a little too cruel right now, even for him. But … she'd done that to him earlier this week. She'd shamelessly flirted in plain sight with a grifter who
wasn't even in the same class as her… or him. He felt that familiar rage bubbling up again.

The raven-haired girl turned her back towards him, and he noticed a pair of white wings on the back of her blue shirt … a little bit like the ones of the savior in those nightmares he'd been having. It was, admittedly, a stretch. But he'd been looking for a sign, any sign, that would warrant talking to her. He decided it was time to introduce himself.

And if Fujin saw, she saw. Maybe she'd decide that she wanted him with the looming threat of someone else.

When Raijin's date showed up and he reluctantly left Fujin alone, he'd looked knowingly in the direction of Seifer and his new companion. It left Fujin wondering what exactly Seifer had told him on their little fishing expedition. He hedged on leaving her, but she insisted he go. Raijin, I'm fine. Honestly, go enjoy your night, she'd said, pretending to not know what his issue was. I'll watch Seifer.

And when Raijin left, she did watch Seifer.

She watched him with that girl he'd made a beeline for when they'd arrived at the bar. The one with the brunette with dark eyes, and an admittedly enchanting smile. Fujin thought that if she were to draw up the exact opposite version of herself on paper, she would have drawn this girl. Even from a distance, she could feel her carefree lightness. Fujin wasn't even sure how to be light …

When she saw the girl sidle up next to Seifer on a bar stool, accepting a drink from him and laughing at his cheesy pick-up lines and jokes, she knew this night had taken a turn. She knew for certain that she'd be walking back alone … or at least walking back lonely. Alone wasn't really something she could be now that Pandemona was with her.

As the night dragged on the scene was all too familiar. Fujin sat and waited for him to do his work. Seifer gulped down shot after shot. He touched the girl's knee, she whispered in his ear, and before long her lips were on his. She'd even tried to get him to dance, but for some reason Seifer never did that. He brushed her request aside, changing the topic.

The thought of Seifer dancing made her mind circle back to a couple of years ago, when Garden held the annual SeeD ball and the Posse was finally old enough to attend. Raijin was the only one to bring a date—the girl with pigtails from the library whose name she couldn't remember—and Seifer turned everyone down. He and Fujin attended solo … together.

As the four of them awkwardly stood alongside the dance floor, Fujin drank the very first sips of champagne she'd ever had. The bubbly liquid paired with the romantic lighting of the reception hall tricked her into thinking that, perhaps, the impossible could become possible. She boldly placed her hand on Seifer's forearm and asked if he'd dance with her.

To this day Fujin could still feel the waves of embarrassment that overtook her when he scoffed and said no. She tried to discreetly shrug it off and mask her tears as she broke from the group under the guise of getting another drink, and instead escaped onto the balcony to seek solace in the lonely night. It was Raijin who went after her, finding her slumped on the railing sobbing by herself. He pulled her into one of his endlessly comforting bear-hugs and let her cry on his shoulder, stroking her hair with his huge hand and promising that their friend hadn't mean it how it sounded … It was the first time Fujin could ever remember crying like that …

Likely curious about where they'd run off to, and most definitely tired of making small-talk with Raijin's date, Seifer sought them out. They heard his familiar footsteps approach and looked up just
in time to see him with his mouth agape, shocked at the sight of them locked together like that.

"Ah…sorry." He'd muttered, walking away as quickly as he'd shown up. Raijin sighed and apologized for having to leave, as he ran to offer Seifer an explanation. Fujin was too embarrassed to even think about why that was necessary, she was just thankful he didn't see her crying.

When she finally collected herself, she returned to the reception and found her golden and bronze friends leaning against the wall together staring straight ahead and not speaking, their arms crossed. The girl with the pigtails was nowhere to be seen. Seifer's jaw was stiff and his eyes held that ever present quiet rage of his. When he spotted her, he jerked his head at her in a beckoning motion to stand to his left—the opposite side of where Raijin stood. She dutifully took her place beside him, and none of them ever spoke of that night again.

The only thing she could remember taking comfort in that night was seeing that he turned everyone down. Not just her. That was when Fujin decided that dancing must be something that Seifer wasn't good at, and that's also when Fujin realized that Seifer only did things he was good at.

And this, he was good at. It would almost be amazing to watch him work if it wasn't so painful—he got the girl every time. He was effortlessly charming and always handsome, even on his worst day. He was even handsome when he was hurting her…and she loved him even when she hated to look at him.

Fujin watched him from afar now, in the soft light of the pub, as he shook his head at the girl's attempts to drag him from the stool to dance to the jukebox. Instead, he pulled her in close by the waist to whisper to her. She batted him playfully on the shoulder, scolding him for whatever sinful thing had come out of his mouth. It was a completely different reaction than what she'd gotten, all those years ago. That gave her no comfort tonight.

When Seifer stood up and put his hand on the girl's lower back to push her in Fujin's direction, she waved down the bartender and ordered herself two shot of tequila. There was no need to go through this stone sober. It hurt much more this time. He'd almost been hers…and now he was about to be someone else's all over again.

The walk to the hotel where the girl—named Rinoa—was also staying, had been brutal. He barely acknowledged Fujin outside of an obligatory introduction, and when he did speak to her he only made a few cruel remarks:

… Fujin didn't have good luck with meeting any guys in Dollet. The last one was an old divorcee, right Fujin? …

… Fujin here is in SeeD, too—she put her career ahead of everything and look where it got her. Yep, she left everyone in the dust …

… Don't worry, she's not as scary as she looks. …

Seifer knew her so well that his sharp tongue could cut her deeper than any weapon when he wanted it to. When he was cruel to her he was brutally cruel, and when he was kind he was so kind that it almost rendered her heart still—that duality was his most admirable and deplorable quality.

When they made it to the hotel lobby, Seifer's sharp tongue took a break from insulting her and was instead embedded in the mouth of Rinoa the bar girl. As Fujin watched him press her up against the lobby's stained glass window, both laughing and whispering, she almost felt sorry for the girl. This was only meant to be a salve for his wounded pride while simultaneously giving Fujin the biggest
fuck you' he possibly could.

She wordlessly walked away, leaving Seifer with Rinoa attached to him like a leech. Her job was done now—the Posse was mostly accounted for. She and Seifer were safely within the walls of the hotel and Raijin would be back soon from his date. She could go to their room, close her eyes, try to ignore the wind surging in her head and pretend this night never happened … pretend these past few days hadn't happened.

"Oh, goodnight Fujin! It was nice to meet you." The girl yelled out to her, finally realizing they were being rude.

"PLEASURE." Fujin retorted, not turning back to look at them. As she walked away, she could have sworn she heard the girl ask Seifer if something was wrong. But with the wind in her ears, it was impossible to know for sure.

The jingling of keys at the door roused her from her sleep. She heard whoever was on the other side struggling to figure out how to work the lock, dropping the keys on the ground, and muttering "Shit."

She strained her eyes to focus on the red glow of the alarm clock, seeing that just a little over an hour had passed since she'd made her way back to their hotel room. Raijin had come in soon after, drunk and tired from whatever it was that he'd been up to, and had fallen asleep almost immediately on the bed closest to the window. That left only one option for who could be on the other side of that door.

As she heard his struggle with dexterity continue, her anger at not being able to fall back asleep peaked. Throwing the cotton blankets from her body, she navigated her way to the door, cursing him as she tripped on something in the dark.

She stood on the tips of her toes to look through the peep hole, making sure it was him and not what would be the world's worst spy coming to recover Caraway's message for Cid. Predictably, she saw Seifer stumbling a little, trying to hold the key straight enough to get it to work. Hyne, how embarrassing to see him this way. She removed the door's chain lock, and then turned the handle, catching him off-guard on the other side.

"Heeeeey!" He smiled, genuinely glad to see her in his drunken stupor. "I thought you'd be asleep."

"I was asleep Seifer." Fujin glared at him. "I was sound asleep and you woke me up."

"Perfect!" He marched with a bit of a wobble and placed his hand on her shoulder. "Because I have to talk to you." She held a finger in front of her lips, pointing in Raijin's direction.

"We can't talk now." She said in a stern whisper, shaking his hand off of her. "And you should go to sleep."

"But..." his voice trailed off as his inebriated mind searched for the thought. At least he remembered to whisper. "But you should know that it's you. It's you, and I'm not close enough."

"Well, trust me—you're plenty close right now." Fujin reeled back at little at the smell of whiskey on his breath. "Go to sleep Seifer. The bed's yours. I'll share with Raijin." He snagged her wrist in his hand, and pulled her towards him. Before she could register what was happening, he was snaking an arm around her waist and pulling her close.

"Don't do that." Seifer rested his forehead against hers, whispering. "Stay with me." His free hand found her cheek, and he pulled her in for a kiss, sloppy and hard. She felt the weight of his body
forcing her to walk backwards toward the bed. He started peeling off the layers of his clothes, throwing his coat on the floor and breaking away from her to pull his shirt off over his head. It gave her just enough time to push him away.

"What in Hyne's name do you think you're doing?" She'd wanted to yell but with Raijin asleep, she could only speak in a rushed whisper. "You were just with that girl. I don't even want to look at you." He tried to say something, but the words didn't make any sense. She realized it was useless to get on her soapbox right now. It was a miracle he was even standing on his own.

"Here, lay down." She begrudgingly ushered him toward the open bed, even though she'd rather see him topple onto the floor. "Just go to sleep, Seifer." Despite her best efforts, she couldn't control his limbs or stop his hands from removing the rest of his clothing. Luckily he had no balance, and with minimal force she was able to push him over to fall flat on the bed. She groaned, knowing she couldn't leave him like that, and leaned down to wrap her arms around his torso to force him to turn on his side. It was the most of his skin she'd ever touched, and it felt like a cruel joke under these circumstances.

"Stay." Seifer whispered to her, trying to catch her in his arms unsuccessfully.

"Sleep." She replied coldly, even though through her boiling anger, his request touched her heart a little bit. Her face burned with a deep blush as she reached for a sheet to cover him.

A minute passed before it occurred to Fujin that the wind in her head was raging. It was hard to think about where the best sleeping option was. She would normally bunk with Raijin, but there was hardly any room. And sleeping next to Seifer was not an option. It's not something the two of them typically did, and had only happened a handful of times under the direst of circumstances.

Exhausted, and simply wanting the wind to quiet down, she collected the discarded clothing of her friends and pulled together a makeshift bed on the floor. She used Seifer's trench coat as a blanket, and couldn't help but press the fabric to her nose and inhale his scent before quietly crying herself to sleep.
Last night had been fucking brutal, and it was all his fault. His arms could still feel her small body quaking as she slipped into a deep wave of grief. His chest ached when he remembered her flinching at his touch. "This is exactly why I told myself I wouldn't do this," she'd said, as if she'd known all along that he'd betray her.

The present ...

Seifer woke up by himself the next morning with a throbbing headache and a gut full of guilt. Someone had pulled the curtains open—probably Fujin, since she was likely still royally pissed at him—and bright sunlight burned his eyes. He leaned up against the headboard shading his face as he scanned the room.

On the adjacent bed rested two suitcases, one of which was stuffed full in an obvious sign of careless packing. That one belonged to Raijin, who must have returned quietly in the night without waking them.

Fujin's suitcase was packed more neatly, but some of her things were still strewn around the room; a pair of black leggings on the floor, those silver earrings they'd given her for her birthday on the nightstand, and that gift she bought for him still on the glass table next to the armchair. He felt terrible that he'd impacted her thoroughness.

The two suitcases signaled something more significant to Seifer though, which he knew would be more of a problem. Fujin and Raijin had woken up at around the same time, colluded together to swiftly pack their things, and had then disappeared to talk. Raijin would likely ask Fujin what the fuck he'd woken up to last night … and this morning. He wasn't sure if Fujin would divulge the sordid details of their evening. No doubt he'd be the monster in that story if she did … and rightly so.

Well, nothing to do about it now, he supposed. He couldn't be sure where they went, hadn't the slightest idea how long they'd been gone, and if he did find them it would probably only cause a scene. She'd hate that.

Last night had been fucking brutal, and it was all his fault. His arms could still feel her small body quaking as she slipped into a deep wave of grief. His chest ached when he remembered her flinching at his touch. This is exactly why I told myself I wouldn't do this, she'd said, as if she'd known all along that he'd betray her.

But then … she did stay with him through the night, and that had to mean something. He'd woken up a couple of times to find her wrapped close against him, her arm snugly stretched over his chest and her leg entwined with his. Normally he hated the restrictive feeling of someone sleeping in his space. But with her, like everything with her, it felt different. He felt better when she was close like that. He could protect her better, even though it was still unclear to him what exactly he felt he needed to protect her from. The world? Time? From every irrational fear; from all the terrors of life. He'd fucking let her live there if she wanted, tangled next to him and smothering him with her warmth. Hyne … she could have whatever she wanted.
It seemed the only thing he couldn't protect her from was himself. Would she still want him now?

He looked to his left and noticed that she'd folded last night's clothes neatly on the bed for him, and had placed his own small suitcase directly next to them. It wasn't lost on him that she'd placed his coat on the top of the pile with the collar popped, to display the faint red lipstick mark his temporary friend had left behind. Even though he hated the circumstances, he admired her quiet cleverness.

He reached over to fish through the messy contents of his suitcase, pulling out a pair of jeans and a black t-shirt, opting to forego wearing the offending coat. He'd need to clean it and remove the evidence completely before he could wear it again anyway.

He stood, reeling a little as the change in position made his head throb, and slowly pulled the jeans on over his legs and stretched the soft black material of the shirt over his head, running his hand through his hair when the job was complete. That took more effort than expected. He'd had far too much to drink last night.

He reached his hand out to grab his coat when the small gift box on the glass table caught his eye again. A pang of regret rose in his chest as he thought of her sitting on the ottoman across from him, looking absolutely beautiful, trying to make peace and him outright refusing. Curiosity got the better of him as he walked over and picked up the box, slowly removing the string and brown paper and letting it drift to the floor, and lifting its small lid.

An anchor-shaped ornament made of driftwood was perched inside on a bed of white cotton. He recognized it as one he'd pointed out to her at the beginning of the trip, remembering that she'd laughed at him when he suggested they add it to the trio's permanent collection. That's hideous, she'd commented. No way is that going on our tree. He'd only shrugged and put it back, knowing that all things planning—including holiday celebrations—fell in Fujin’s camp. Who was he to force her to bend on her rules?

The guilt in his gut grew exponentially, reaching his throat and making it feel tight. She hadn't made a verbal concession the other night, when he'd asked her to. But this gift had been a symbolic concession. I was thinking about you a lot today, she'd said. I wanted to do something nice. She'd been trying tell him something important, and he'd fucked it up again.

He'd never regretted drinking whiskey more than he did right now. It made him mean, it made him irrational … it made him only think about himself. If he wanted to pursue something with Fujin, there was no way around it being something serious. And if he was going to pursue something serious, he needed to grow up and stop doing things like this. It was easy to say after-the-fact … hopefully not impossible to recover from.

The slow creaking of an opening door made him jump, almost dropping the small box as Raijin and Fujin entered the room. Raijin squinted at him through the sunlight.

"Whoa man, sorry—didn't mean to scare you." Seifer would normally have balked at the implication he feared anything, but he was unfazed by the comment. He was too busy regretting being caught in the middle of opening this small-in-size but grand-in-gesture gift, and realizing how shitty he'd been. This day was just full of regrets.

"It's fine." He craned his neck to look behind Raijin, spotting Fujin waiting for their friend to move out of her way so she could come through. She was being careful not to let her eyes find Seifer.

"Morning Fuu," he spoke, his voice already heavy with apology. Raijin's face twisted into a look of warning, but Seifer ignored it. "Can we uh … talk for a minute?"
"Seif, maybe not right now, ya know?" Raijin put his hands in his pockets, and tried to shield Fujin from his view. *Hyne, these two … at least they were always protecting each other from him.* "We saw General Caraway and his daughter at breakfast today." Seifer's brow furrowed.

"Okay, and?" Fujin, quiet and stone-faced, slinked out from behind Raijin and into the bathroom without saying hello.

"Well … his daughter came over to talk to Fujin for a minute."

"Okay, well why would Caraway's daughter talk to Fujin?" Seifer flipped his hand out, palm facing upward, waiting for more information.

"Because … uh… well, Caraway's daughter is that girl you were with at the bar last night." Seifer's eyes grew wide. "Yeah man, small world, ya know?" Raijin shrugged his shoulders, unsure of what to say.

"I need to talk to her." Seifer started towards the bathroom door, but Raijin stepped in front of him cautiously. His eyes were full of concern for their mutual silver friend.

"Seifer man, I don't know … Maybe leave it alone—"

"Raijin, I'm not *asking you.*" Seifer wasn't interested in having someone physically stand in his way of getting to Fujin, but he tried not to let anger edge his voice, knowing that Raijin was only trying to keep the peace. "Can you … take off for a while? This is between the two of us."

Raijin stood in his way for only a second more before conceding reluctantly. In that moment, it dawned on them that the group's dynamic was forever changed. This was between *Seifer and Fujin* and that's how most things would be from now on. The trifecta was now coming second to a hidden pair.

"Fine, I'll go. But for the record, you're kinda being an asshole, ya know?" Seifer nodded slightly in agreement.

"Yep—already knew that, but thanks for keeping me honest."

"Yeah, well I thought someone should probably tell you. I mean Fujin will probably tell you, too." Raijin smirked and patted him on the shoulder, before turning to walk towards the door. "Need anything while I'm out?"

"A time machine?" Seifer pressed on his throbbing forehead.

"Ha, yeah, I'll see what I can do." Raijin closed the door behind him, leaving Seifer and Fujin alone. Seifer didn't waste a moment more, approaching the bathroom door cautiously to hear feet shuffling and the faucet running.

"Fuu?" He wrapped his knuckles lightly against wood. "Can we talk?" The faucet switched off but she didn't answer him.

"I'm sorry about this morning … about the girl. Clearly, I didn't think about the logistics." Hyne, the logistics? As if they were two mission objectives that needed to be shuffled past each other. *He was terrible at this.*

Seifer lowered his face to the door, as if she'd feel the intensity of his words the closer he got to her. "What you saw was all that happened. Hyne … she isn't anyone." He sighed, as his free hand snuck down to jiggle door handle to find it locked. *Damn.* "I was mad, and I just let it out in the wrong
way." The doorknob was ripped from his hand and the door flew open, startling him.

"MAD?" She stood in front of him, defiant. "RETAILIATION, ALWAYS IN THIS WAY? INTENTIONAL HURT?"

"No, of course not. I was drunk and it was a mistake." He reached his hand out for her arm, but Fujin took a step back.

"NOT MISTAKE, INTENTIONAL." She pointed a finger at him as she parsed his words, and he saw that her hand was shaking. "CRUEL."

"Okay, you're right. It wasn't a mistake … I meant to do it." She scoffed at his answer and dodged him when he reached for her again. "Fuu, I'm sorry. I swear, nothing else happened."

"NOT THE POINT. WOUNDED ON PURPOSE."

"I was trying to make you jealous, I guess." His gaze drifted to the floor, embarrassed to look her in the eye. A man, fully grown enough to be training for combat, had resorted to attempting to make her jealous. Parts of those outlandish nightmares of his were true—he was still a boy in so many ways. "I wasn't trying to hurt you."

"WOUNDED." Fujin's hand flew to her chest to cover her heart. "NOTHING LEFT TO DISCUSS ANYWAY. NO CLAIMS MADE." Her free arm snapped out to shut the door, but he placed his body in front of it to block it from moving.

"You don't mean that." His voice was gentle and apologetic. "And even if you think you mean that, I can't let you mean that."

"Well, I mean it." Her eyes grew watery but the tears didn't come, and she crossed her arms to hide her shaking hands. "What we're up to. This. It's a mistake." He heard the tiniest nervous wobble in her voice, betraying her strong words, and his chest grew tight with guilt.

"We need to get back to Garden. I'm worried about Pandemonia and the things that Caraway said. I can't worry about this too. You don't even understand how long I've—" She stopped herself, and looked away from him.

"But I do understand." Seifer bridged the space between them, catching her off-guard and gently encircling her elbow with his hand. "I'm sorry about the girl."

"The girl." Fujin reached up to wipe a tear from her eye. Deep remorse settled in and his heart ached for her—his heart had never ached on anyone else's behalf before. "You know, she actually wanted me to tell you that … " The words caught in her throat. "That she had a great night, and that she can't wait to see you again."

"Fujin," His brow furrowed. "I have no clue what she's talking about. I made no plans to see her again. That wasn't even the point of all that anyway." She closed her eyes and she sighed.

"She's very pretty ... " Fujin glanced at her own reflection in the mirror, just quickly enough so that he caught her making the comparison. "Why wouldn't you want to see her again?" She whispered the question lowly under her breath, not even asking him so much as asking herself. Up until now, he'd only thought about the shallow hurt of his mistake; seeing him kiss a girl, right in front of her, and the things that were implied when he brought the girl back to her room. He hadn't once thought about the inevitable comparisons, and the deep pain of feeling like she'd lost the draw.

"Because she's not you, Fujin. That's why." He slid his hand from her elbow along her arm, tracing
his thumb along the curves of her muscle, and he boldly stepped closer and touched her cheek. She closed her eyes.

"But she'd give you everything you want, all in one night. Everything." She spoke quietly and shook her head, in a weak attempt to pull away from him. "I can't even answer a simple question."

"I'm not interested in one night with you, and I was wrong to ask you the question to begin with. What I should've done is tell you the truth … which is that I'm all in." He leaned down to kiss her forehead lightly. "There's nobody else that compares. Not that girl, not any girl."

He waited for protest his touch, but none came. And when he pulled her close, he knew the fight was over when her muscles relaxed and her hand moved to rest tenderly just below his ribcage. He remembered Raijin's words from yesterday, when he'd lectured him about the timing of his demands. He shouldn't push her towards something—she'd move in her own time.

"Last night was awful …" Fujin spoke, barely above a whisper. "I don't want things to get like that again." She leaned her head against his chest, and he wrapped his arms around her.

"I promise. No more drinking. No more bad decisions. Be mad at me all you want about last night. I deserve it. But don't write this off because I'm a fucking idiot." He slid his hand along her neck, running his fingers through her hair as he cradled her head against him. Hyne, it felt so good when she stood close that it almost hurt.

"I hate it when you're mad at me." He kissed the top of her head and sighed. "It's weird … I miss you when you're mad at me. We can even be in the same room and it's like … I just fucking miss you."

"Me too." She whispered, wrapping her arms around him in kind. "Let's just not talk about it anymore, okay? Any of it. Can't we just … live, and see what happens?"

"That sounds good to me … but I still need to apologize for, uh … coming on a little strong." He pulled away from her to look at her earnestly. "I was just excited to be near you. I wasn't really thinking. And I … don't really handle rejection well." He couldn't help but smile when he saw her cheeks turn a deep shade of pink. "I'll slow things down on my end."

"It's fine … I've been a mess because of this thing going on with me. That had more to do with it than anything. It wasn't you at all." She looked away from him, the blush seeming to intensify, and his whole body tingled at the implication. But today wasn't the day. Not after a fight like that, not in the bathroom of a hotel in Dollet with Raijin waiting in the wings. That wasn't going to be part of their story; his romantic dream.

"Well, I'm sorry all the same. I'm sorry for everything." His fingers gently tilted her chin up so that he could kiss her. It started soft, but grew more passionate when his tongue parted the softness of her lips to taste her mouth. She returned the gesture timidly; it made him feel weak.

He pulled away from her, breathless, and kissed her cheek once before taking a step back and placing one hand on her waist. If he didn't want this day to be part of their story, he needed to put some space between them.

"Hyne," Seifer lightly laughed, touching his bottom lip with his index finger. "What have we even been doing, all these years?"

"We've been like ships passing in the night." Fujin whispered, reaching out to touch his face on her own accord, her thumb running over the prickly stubble on his cheek. He turned his head to kiss her
"Well, we should've been doing more of this." She blushed and he leaned in to kiss her again, quickly and softly, before grabbing her hand to move them both towards his waiting suitcase.

"I hate to stop, but I should probably get my bag packed up, huh?" He ushered her to sit down on the bed near him, and his hands busied themselves with putting his clothes in his bag. It helped keep his mind off busying them with her. Plus, she seemed to be craving a little normalcy ... just living. He could give her that.

"What time do we leave again?" She asked, nervously grabbing a couple of his poorly packed t-shirts and folding them on her lap.

"We have a just under a couple of hours. Did I mention to you that we have a pretty swanky room booked on the boat? It's all they had available ... a suite of some kind, though I have to admit I wasn't really paying attention to the details or the price. Good thing we got our money back from the hotel." Seifer tried to keep the conversation casual for her, and tried not to immediately go back to touching her again, even though it was all he could think about.

"Wow. How'd that happen?"

"It's some sort of small cruise ship. One of the guests cancelled early and they had an opening. Took me forever to find space on anything."

"Thanks for doing all that, by the way. I don't think I've said that yet." Fujin placed the folded clothes in the bottom of his suitcase. "If you hadn't just done it, I would've stayed all summer."

"I know you would have. I wish we were going directly to Garden and not doing an overnight at the port near Deling. Damn cruise." He scoffed. "How's the wind today anyway?"

"It's fine today ... it was out of control last night though. I was actually awake when you came to get me off the floor." He gave her a wry smile, and was about to get back to packing when he noticed the small brown box sitting on the bed behind her.

"Oh, hey, I um ... I opened your gift this morning. Hope you don't mind. Thanks for letting me have one." Seifer nodded at the box and she turned, picking the ornament up by the string and letting the anchor spin in the air.

"It's hideous," she said, giving him a small smile back for the first time that morning. "But you should get to pick them too. I'm glad you like it." She set the ornament down and reached over his bag for another item of clothing to fold, forgetting she'd placed his coat there earlier in the day. When she pulled it up, her eyes fell on the stain on the collar.

"Oh ... yeah. I meant to clean this. Before you came back ... " Seifer made a flippant motion with his hand. "I just didn't get a chance yet." He reached out to take the coat from her, intending to stuff it in his suitcase to be dealt with on a better day. But before he got the chance, she was standing and moving towards the bathroom.

"Here, I'll do it. You don't know how and you'll ruin it."

"No Fuu, seriously. You don't have to. I'll get it later."

"It's fine." She touched his arm to emphasize that it didn't bother her. "It's your favorite. Let me help." As she walked into the bathroom to turn on the water and gently dab the offending stain, he couldn't help but admire her ability to rise above. That was just another quality of hers that he loved.
Seifer followed her, hovering close behind until she was finished and the mark was dulled to a faint pink stain.

"There, I'll give it another pass later." Fujin turned around to hand it to him, and was surprised to find him standing behind her, his green eyes staring back at her softly.

"You know, we don't really have *that much* to pack." He took the coat from her and tossed it on the floor, smirking. "Let's make up for lost time." And then, he kissed her again.
All Aboard

Chapter Summary

She stopped at the bottom of the gangway to get one more glimpse of Dollet, knowing she’d miss it even though their time there had been fraught. Her heart already ached for their hotel room, the weather beaten docks that creaked with the rocking of the waves, and walking home together on cobblestone streets under the lamplight that weaved among the salt-slicked buildings. She didn't know what they'd be returning home to, but she knew it wouldn't be this.

As she watched Raijin and Seifer climb the gangway to board their ship home, she couldn't help but feel she was living in an alternate reality. There they went, her friend Raijin and her … Seifer, having a casual conversation about how much of a nightmare the packed boat would be. As if nothing had happened; as if their universe hadn't seismically shifted this morning.

She was surprised by how normal everything still was, despite the fact that Seifer's mouth had been on hers just minutes ago. Despite the fact that his hands had reached under her thighs to lift her onto the bathroom counter effortlessly, and that her legs had wrapped around his waist to pull him closer. Despite the fact that they'd only stopped to laugh briefly, when somewhere in between it all he hit his head on the wall sconce, sending light refracting in the mirror and sparking across his face. Karma, she'd said, touching the injured spot gently with her pale fingers. Worth it, he'd said huskily, before slanting his lips against hers again.

It was Raijin who'd interrupted them, knocking on the door of the hotel room cautiously. You guys okay in here? It's almost time to leave, ya know? He'd probably anticipated coming back to a fight, but instead walked in to find his friends scrambling out of the bathroom like they'd been caught committing a crime. Seifer's lips were pink with use, and the skin on Fujin's chin felt raw from friction with his unshaven face.

But Raijin didn't press the issue, understanding the sensitivity, and only asked them if they were ready to leave. All three of them looked around the room to Fujin and Seifer's unpacked things; the unboxed gift on the bed, earrings still on the nightstand, and Fujin's blue coat that had somehow been discarded and tossed just outside the bathroom door. Their unpreparedness was the confession that no one needed to verbalize.

With Raijin moving swiftly to tidy things up, Fujin's face red from a fresh blush, and Seifer rubbing his head to alleviate his throbbing headache, the trio worked in tandem to prepare for their voyage. Fujin's fingers delicately finished packing Seifer's clothes, placing the gift she'd bought him safely on top. Raijin snaked a pair of Fujin's black leggings off of the floor and stuffed them in an exterior compartment of her suitcase, and then snagged the silver earrings off of the dresser and reached out to place them in her hand. Fujin turned to see Seifer bending down to grab their coats from the floor before stopping to stare at the spot they'd just occupied on the counter, smiling wistfully as he reached out to straighten the now tilted sconce.

Outwardly, it seemed that not much had changed between them at all, save for Seifer's hands draping her coat over her shoulders and his fingers gently prying her suitcase from her hand when it was time to leave. I've got it, he'd said quietly when she began to protest. Raijin only smiled, more than likely
wondering how long they were planning on keeping this charade up.

Inwardly … now that was a different story. Fujin had a very present feeling of disbelief that his hands had just been on her in that way, and that now they were just standing here boarding a boat for home as if it were all normal. As if it hadn't been something she'd been dreaming of for the better part of a decade.

In the midst of the giddiness, waves of panic that it was just a dream washed over her; a moment never to be replicated unless her mind deigned it important enough to dream again. But, the strong seaward wind stung against the rawness of her chin, where his face had been pressed to hers … it had to be real.

She stopped at the bottom of the gangway to get one more glimpse of Dollet, knowing she'd miss it even though their time there had been fraught. Her heart already ached for their hotel room, the weather beaten docks that creaked with the rocking of the waves, and walking home together on cobblestone streets under the lamplight that weaved among the salt-slicked buildings. She didn't know what they'd be returning home to, but she knew it wouldn't be this.

"Fuu, you forget something?" Seifer's voice called to her from the deck. She turned to see him looking down at her with the sun bright in the sky behind him—she had to shield her eyes. He looked overburdened, carrying two suitcases and his white coat slung over his shoulder. "If you did you may as well call the hotel and have it shipped home—this thing's taking off soon." Her mouth crooked into a small smile at the irrational worry in his voice that she'd be left behind.

"NO. SAYING GOODBYE."

"Well, can you say goodbye from up here? I mean, I will swim back for you if I have to. But if we can avoid that it'd be great." One of the bags slipped a little in his grip.

"COMING." She walked towards him, and his expression softened as she stepped onto the deck.

"Here, Raijin went this way." He jerked his head to his left, and they walked together through the throngs of tightly packed cruise-goers in the midst of their vacation. It was mostly people older than them, in their 40s and 50s, enjoying music and cocktails on the deck or sunning in chairs along the aisles of the boat. They walked by an outdoor dining area, just off of a main dining room.

"Hey, we should come grab dinner up here later instead of going out in Deling." Seifer stopped to survey the spot, and she halted alongside him, a little overwhelmed with all the foot traffic compared to the sleepy summer streets of their seaside getaway. "Nice lighting, the ocean air …"

"Yeah, sure." She shrugged her shoulders at him, not really caring at the moment where they would have dinner. "Looks nice."

"Great," Seifer smiled and nudged her forward towards the check-in desk with his elbow. "It's a date then."

"A date?" She arched a pale eyebrow at him, inadvertently asking the question like she was unsure of the definition of the word.

"Yeah … unless you don't want to." Fujin's hesitance made him second guess himself.

"N-no, of course. That would … be nice." Fujin fumbled her words as his green eyes looked into her own. *Hyne, she could get lost forever in those eyes.*

"Good, let's find out what time they serve dinner—I'll tell Raijin we have plans. But before we go
anywhere I want the three of us to sit down and hash out what we're doing when we get back to Garden." They began to walk again, and she spotted Raijin excitedly waving a folder in the air at them.

"What do you suppose that's all about?" Fujin squinted to try and make out the words he was mouthing to them.

"The room, probably. Didn't I tell you it was nice?"

"Seifer," she groaned. "How much did this trip home cost, exactly?" He smirked, and increased his pace to avoid the question.

"This is what happens when you let me plan things, Fuu. It's always a little over the top."

"You always have to be the hero, don't you?" She yelled after him, and he turned to wink at her before rushing to meet Raijin.

Even though this day was far from normal, it still felt right. Fujin allowed herself to hope.

"Holy crap …" Raijin was the first to enter their suite, stopping in the doorway to stare in awe and blocking them from entering. "This is huge, ya know?"

Seifer followed next, nudging his way past Raijin and setting the two suitcases down on the floor, with Fujin just steps behind. She found herself standing in a clean and modern living room with a fireplace, sofa, a small round table, and a long wall of glass windows.

"Check out this view!" Raijin scurried to the far side of the room, opening the shades to reveal a panorama of the ocean and a small private deck.

"Wow …" Seifer walked to the sofa, inspecting it for a minute before laying down. "Not too shabby."

Fujin turned to her right and opened a door leading to a large bedroom. It had another wall of windows, and a breathtaking view of the water.

"Seifer, seriously. How much did this cost?" She returned to the living room to disapprovingly glare at him.

"It doesn't matter." He reassured her, as he folded his arms behind his head. "What's done is done. Just enjoy it."

"No worries here, ya know," Raijin chimed in from the deck, before his eyes grew wide at the sight of another door. "Is that another room?" Raijin bolted back inside through the door, and his voice echoed out to them. "Yep, sorry guys. I'm totally taking this one." Seifer rolled his eyes.

"I'll take the sofa, Fuu. That room's all yours." He pointed to the space behind her.

"But Seifer the sofa is tiny. That's silly, I'll take it."

"No, you take the room. Besides, I'm sure it pulls out … a sleeper sofa, probably." Seifer inspected the side of the sofa for evidence that it expanded in anyway.

"It doesn't, and your feet are hanging off the end. Let me—" But he cut her off, ignoring her request.

"Raijin, come back out here for a minute." Seifer yelled to their bronze friend, standing from the sofa
and made his way to sit down at the table. "We need to talk about what's going to happen when we get back." Fujin followed suit, without command, and settled in the chair beside him. Raijin reluctantly emerged from his room, and plunked into the chair across from Seifer.

"Man, I don't want to talk about this. Can't we just … pretend we don't know anything, ya know? Drop Caraway's message in the ocean …" Raijin released an imaginary object with his hand, and Seifer shook his head.

"With other things in play now …" His eyes darted to Fujin, and then back to Raijin. "Inaction just isn't an option for us." Raijin nodded, and laced his fingers together on the table.

"When we get back, we need to head right to see Cid and hand off the message, but …" He paused for a moment to choose his words wisely. Fujin could tell he didn't want to scare her. "I can't decide if we should tell him about what's going on with you yet, Fuu."

"I have to meet with Kadowaki when I get back though, and at least get her to redact my records … don't you think she'll be obligated to tell Cid?" Seifer shook his head and sighed.

"She's not supposed to tell him, if her oath as a medical professional means anything at all. And for Kadowaki, I think it does. We should be okay."

"Why don't you want Cid to know, Seif?" Raijin questioned, his brow furrowing. "He's a decent guy, ya know. Trustworthy."

"I just have this weird feeling … " Seifer leaned back in his chair.

"Seifer …" Fujin interrupted him, tugging nervously at the sleeves of her coat, knowing how averse to differing opinions he was. "I think Cid needs to know, at some point."

"But why?" His eyes narrowed slightly as he considered her position. "You don't actually think these things are related, do you? I mean, I know Caraway's all worried about fate of the world, and was spouting off some seriously hyperbolic shit at dinner. But I think it sounds a little crazy. And regardless of that, it's always the three of us first, the rest of the world second." Fujin saw Raijin nodding in agreement with Seifer out of the corner of her eye. "We're our collective top priority, and I don't think giving all of our information away is putting us first." Fujin reluctantly nodded in agreement as she process his opinion.

"So … maybe for now we meet with Cid to give him Caraway's note and see if we get any additional intel. Then reassess once we have a clearer picture?" She proposed hesitantly, and Seifer's eyebrows lifted in interest.

"Are you saying that we should work the headmaster of Balamb Garden?" She held up her palm to stop him from talking.

"No … well, not explicitly. I think that I'll need to tell Cid everything eventually, but you're right—there's no use in jumping the gun. Maybe we should take a staggered approach." Fujin placed her forearms on the table and leaned forward.

"I'll schedule an appointment with Kadowaki right when we get back—she was worried about me when we left, and I know she'll make time for me. I'll check in with her about my symptoms and see if she can keep them off the record. I'll have to decide if I can trust her enough to reveal this alleged history of Pandemona yet. After that, we'll deliver the message to Cid and see where the conversation goes." Seifer smiled and then looked to Raijin, pointing his finger at Fujin.

"You see that Raij—that's a stone-cold mercenary right there. Hyne Fuu, you don't even have your
stripes yet and you're already carrying out clandestine operations against our commander in chief." He turned back to wink at her and she groaned as Raijin chuckled along with him.

"Okay, okay—sorry. All joking aside." He leaned forward in his chair, and rested his arms on the table, mirroring her position. "The plan's good, but let's make sure we keep touching base before each step, okay?" He looked directly into Fujin's eyes. "No taking on the burden of responsibility. We don't make choices on our own for the group as a whole." She knew he was referencing her decision to not tell them about this to begin with. She nodded in agreement, knowing he was right.

"Okay." She agreed.

"Good. We'll get things in motion as soon as we get back. Now … Raijin…" Seifer pivoted towards their friend. "You and I are going to go on deck for a minute. I wanted to check something out."

"Check what out? We're on a boat dude." Raijin held his hand out, as if presenting the ocean to Seifer. "This is basically it, ya know?"

"Just come with me," Seifer groaned. "Let's see what time we're getting to Deling, Fuu, why don't you get settled here. Catch up on some sleep if you can …" his voice trailed off, sorry he'd brought up the fact that she hadn't slept well. "I think tomorrow's going to be a long day. C'mon Raijin, let's go." Seifer clapped Raijin's shoulder, and both stood up and walked towards the door.

"When will you be back?" She called after them, turning in her chair.

"Not sure. Dinner's at 6 p.m., okay?" He looked back to smile at her, and the two of them walked out the door. When it was closed, she could hear Raijin's voice echoing in the hallway as he playfully mocked their golden friend.

"Oh Fuu, hopefully you rest up. Oh Fuu, take the big room. Ya got something to tell me?" She could hear Seifer mutter at him, and Raijin's laughter echoed down the hallway, becoming faint as they made their way to the deck.

Panic washed over her again, as she realized that Seifer had likely gone off with Raijin to tell him about how they were … something now. It's not that she didn't want that—Hyne knows, that wasn't the case. But somehow, more people knowing about them made it feel risky … more fragile.

She pushed the thoughts out of her mind and decided that taking a nap while the wind in her head was quiet would be a better idea than worrying about things she had no control over. She made her way to her room, and fell soundly asleep.
"I was wondering if…” He reached out to grab her hand gently, and brought his eyes to hers. "If you'd like to dance with me?"

When five o'clock rolled around and Seifer didn't see signs of light coming from under her door, it occurred to him that she might not actually wake up in time for their rendezvous. They'd had a few sleepless nights between the conflict and the wind—he wasn't surprised she was exhausted. He grappled with the idea of rousing her since she'd need time to get ready. But … going into her room and nudging her awake to be on time for something seemed … more like something he'd do for a mission, and not very romantic. He'd thought momentarily about sending Raijin in, but that would probably have the same effect.

Seifer was also pretty certain he was feeling anxious about this, and he hadn't felt anxious about much in his life, so the feeling of a knotted stomach always took him a while to recognize. When he did get anxious, he'd usually get restless and start pacing, and if Raijin and Fujin were lucky enough to be around him he'd talk non-stop to them—pushing words out of his mouth in hopes that the knotted feelings would come out with them.

Seifer wasn't allowing himself to pace then though, as he was irrationally concerned that the scuffing of his boots would wake her. He so badly wanted the night to start, but he was also hellishly afraid it would go wrong.

His concern about noise didn't stop Raijin from making general bumbling sounds as he was readying to leave. He was busying himself getting dressed for a night on the town in Deling, when Seifer spoke up from his spot at the table. Hey man, keep it down.

Raijin, endearingly oafish and oddly perceptive, paused his preparations to join him at the table. Let's just wake her up man—she'll feel terrible if we don't. Trust me.

Seifer shook his head at their friend, looking down to his hands and cracking his knuckles. It felt odd to get a pep-talk from Raijin in this area of their lives. Nah, she should rest if she can. She hasn't been sleeping. Raijin nodded, understanding Seifer's hesitation—they both loved her, in their own ways, and were both concerned she wasn't taking care of herself.

Screw dinner then, ya know? Set something up here. Have it ready for when she wakes up. I'll be out late. I have friends in Deling I need to see, anyway.

But Seifer scoffed at that idea, Hyne Raijin, here? That's not … good enough.

Raijin canted forward and his face grew serious. I dunno. That seems more like you guys, ya know? Not going out in front of everyone for a fancy dinner. That sounds like someone else's night …

Their group's dynamic was deceptive—no one would ever guess that Raijin was the hidden backbone of their trio; the guard at the gates of the walls that Seifer and Fujin had placed around themselves, even to keep each other out. In his well-meaning way, Raijin carefully curated the
interactions between the two of them; their conduit, and the one who picked up the pieces when one of them (Seifer, always Seifer) caused hurt.

Which was why it made Seifer feel incredibly guilty when Raijin sat across from him now and retold the story of that SeeD ball they'd all gone to a couple of years back. The one where Seifer had thought he and Fujin were going together, even though he'd never asked her. He could still so clearly when Raijin's date had mentioned something about them both being there solo, and Fujin had nodded in agreement.

It was the smallest thing, but he just couldn't stop his childish penchant for morphing hurt into anger. When Fujin had asked him to dance shortly after, his wounded pride spoke for him— flatly and cruelly telling her no. She'd left them all in a hurry, with Raijin wide-eyed and Seifer locking his jaw stiffly to hide his regret.

Raijin had glared at him for the sinful action—it was a crime, in his eyes, to intentionally hurt Fujin. It only took a few minutes for their bronze friend to excuse himself to go find her. Raijin's date wondered aloud if there was something between the two of them. Did you see his face? The girl, playing the victim to get Seifer's attention, moaned. Maybe he loves her. Seifer had scoffed.

At the time, he told himself he'd gone to find them both because he was tired of the small talk with Raijin's nerd of a date. In hindsight, he knew it had been worry that Raijin did love her.

Seifer found them outside on the balcony that night, with Raijin's arms wrapped tightly around Fujin in a warm embrace. The terrible cocktail of feelings he experienced in that moment stuck with him to this day. He'd been confused … because he was sure that he'd detected something reciprocal from her. But above all else, Raijin's place in the moment made him blind with rage—Seifer felt like he'd been betrayed by his own brother.

He'd walked away in shock, and returned to his spot leaning against the wall next to Raijin's ever-so-lonesome date. Raijin quickly came after him to explain, but was only met by one of Seifer's angry hands grabbing the neck of his shirt and shoving him against that very same wall. His other hand was balled into a fist, aiming at Raijin's face.

Seif, calm down man. Raijin's hand tried to free himself from Seifer's golden grip. I know about you; I'd never do that. I was trying to tell her you didn't mean it, ya know? Seifer didn't understand the depths of Raijin's care for them at that age—their gate keeper loved them separately and fiercely, and already knew that they wanted to let each other in.

But Raijin's matter-of-fact I know about you still scared the crap out of Seifer, because he thought he'd hidden it so well. He released his grip on Raijin's shirt, and his friend indignantly straightened out his collar as he looked for his date, groaning when he realized she was gone. Seifer leaned on the wall next to him, embarrassed, and didn't say a word. Fujin returned shortly after, and they never talked about it again … until now.

As Seifer drummed his fingers on the table, an ache in his chest swelled as Raijin told him about Fujin that night. About how he'd found her shattered and slumped on the balcony crying by herself, just from a simple rejection of a dance. She only wanted a few minutes, ya know? I think you're missing the point … You'll be fine. I don't think ya can go wrong tonight, no matter what ya do.

Seifer nodded in thanks, keeping his eyes on his own drumming fingers, as Raijin clapped his shoulder with is hand warmly, readying to leave. It was then that Seifer realized just how much he appreciated Raijin—as the brother he never had who knew him best, and who always seemed to know what was best for him.
Hey Raijin … Thanks. Seifer called back to him, in a rare showing of gratitude for his friend's kindness. Raijin's feet paused for a moment, soaking in the praise, before wordlessly shuffling out the door.

And now, the passing minutes had turned to hours, and Seifer stood outside of her door working up the courage to wake her. He turned around to survey the room once more, checking to make sure everything was in place. The room service, complete in it's warming dishes, was set up in a rolling cart near the table. A small CD player sat on an end-table that he'd pulled away from the sofa to sit more towards the center of the room. The dining table was set for dinner, with two plates and two champagne glasses. He'd opted not to bother with flowers or candles … he thought it would be too much for a quiet night in. It was probably too much already …

The pacing started—back and forth in front of her door, as one of his hands was in his pocket fiddling with a loose coin. Why was he so nervous? He knew Fujin better than he knew himself. He knew she'd be sleeping on the left side of the bed when he went in. He knew she'd smile at him when he woke her up. He knew she'd be happy with what he'd planned. But still … still …

Her absence from his general proximity made him long for her. Pushing aside cowardice, he moved his hand, sweaty-palmed and shaky, to reach out and open the door …

Fujin was asleep on the bed, curled up in a small ball and facing leftward towards the wall of windows and the starry night sky. His breath caught in his throat as the wan light of the moon touched her face. He thought back on the man in the bar that night, who'd called her a silver siren. Hyne, he'd been right.

Seifer moved to sit on the edge of the bed beside her, and placed his hand on her shoulder, giving her a gentle squeeze.

"Hey, Fuu." A muted laughter escaped his lips as her eyes cracked open in confusion.

"I can't believe you slept through our first date," he joked, as he slid his hand down to her back, pressing gently against the fabric of her blue coat. "Now that's an embarrassing story I'm never telling anyone. Can't let it get out that I put you to sleep." His free hand moved to tuck her hair behind her ear, just before her eyes grew wide and she quickly scrambled to sit upright.

"Shoot! I'm sorry—I should have set an alarm." In a panic, she reached out to tilt the alarm clock on the nightstand towards her, and her disappointment visible.

"Calm down. I let you sleep." He ran his hand through his hair. "You know, I thought about waking you up way earlier so we'd get there on time, but then I felt bad that you didn't get any sleep because … well, you know. That was kinda my fault." He sheepishly rubbed the back of his neck.

"And then, I was wondering if I should even wake you up because it was supposed to be a date and I felt like only a friend would come in and do that, not someone you'd never even been on date with before. I don't know—I was having a real moment while you were in here sleeping peacefully." Seifer looked down at the bed, feeling a little embarrassed. "But … then I just wanted to see you."

"I'm really sorry—let me get up and get changed. We can still go have dinner if you want. I'm sure they're still open." He placed his hand on her thigh, and chuckled again at her panic. At least it helped alleviate some of his nervousness.

"No, it's fine. I had a better idea. Well, Raijin did … technically. It was half and half." He was talking too quickly again and rambling on.
"Well, this is off to a terrible start." Fujin smiled at him apologetically, placing her hand on his. "I feel awful. I'll at least get changed."

"Nah, don't worry about it. Let's just … keep it low-key." He leaned in to kiss her cheek, his face lingering next to hers for a few extra moments, causing her to blush. He squeezed her hand.

"Hyne, you'd think we just met. C'mere." He stood, his shaking hand pulling her up with him, and leading her into the adjacent room.

Seifer walked ahead of her, intentionally not wanting to get a read her face when she saw the private dinner he'd planned for the two of them—he hoped she'd like it. No other people, no one else to make them feel uncomfortable. They could say anything they wanted without feeling the weight of prying eyes on them. It seemed right … it felt right to him. This was the hard part about finally dating someone you'd known for years—there was no excuse to get it wrong.

"Wow … Seifer." His arm was tugged, bringing him to a gentle halt, and he turned to find her eyes welling up as she looked around the room. "I … now I feel really awful." He laughed, and led her closer to the table.

"Well that's not what I'm going for." He turned to grab both of her hands in his. "Do you like this? More than going out somewhere, I mean … We can still do that if you want … I just thought—"

"No. It's great … it's … really, really nice." Fujin's cheeks turned a bright red.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing at all … I just … You did all of this … for me?" It shocked him that she was surprised, and he wondered if she still didn't know how he really felt. He supposed he'd have to tell her, one of these days … and Hyne, the thought of that—of really laying it all out there in concrete words—was horrifying.

"Of course I did. There's more too … though, you might wind up hating me for it. I'm not really sure yet. It's a little bit of a wild card." Seifer scratched the back of his neck awkwardly and set the now empty case back down on the end table, flashing an old CD at her briefly before inserting it into the stereo. "It's not exactly what I was picturing … but, it'll work I guess."

"Seifer?" He turned around to find her standing with her arms crossed and her brow furrowed.

"Now, take off your jacket." He commanded lightly, before realizing how it sounded. He corrected course. "I mean, you'll probably want to be a little more comfortable … I'm not being devious, scout's honor."

Fujin arched an eyebrow at him but complied, unlatching the long row of buttons on her blue jacket. He watched her intently as she removed the layer—revealing her usual black tank top—and walked to lay the coat on the sofa.

He pivoted away from her to turn off the overhead light switch, causing the room to go dark, save for the two flames burning underneath the chafing dishes for their dinner, and the light coming through
the windows from the moon shining in the sky.

"What are you up to?" She repeated, sounding nervous too … it made him feel better, knowing he wasn't the only one.

"Just … one more second." Seifer stretched his hand out to press a button on the stereo. The sound of soft and sweet violin music played through the speakers.

"Ha, well I'll be damned." He stepped towards her, the light from the moon highlighting the curves of his face. "This actually … sounds pretty good. And the ambient light wasn't even planned." He sighed, just low enough so she wouldn't hear him. Enough talking Seifer, go get your girl. He paused for a moment as he weighted the right way to approach her, before taking a few more steps forward to close the space between them.

"I was wondering if…" He reached out to grab her hand gently, and brought his eyes to hers. "If you'd like to dance with me?"

Fujin's eyes, remarkable bright blue and deep crimson, grew wide in surprise. The look on her face conveyed that her answer would be anything but yes. Seifer backpedaled a little.

"I mean...you don't have to," Seifer backpedaled a little. "It's a stupid idea probably. It's just, Raijin reminded me about something that..." He caught himself talking too quickly again, and stopped to take a deep breath. "I had a chance to do this before, but I missed out. And I've always wondered since then … what it would have been like."

"It's not stupid," Fujin shook her head at him, her eyes welling up again. "I'd love to." Seifer smiled, relieved, and moved his hand to her waist.

"Now, full disclosure. I've never actually danced with anyone before. There's a good chance I have two left feet. So, don't get too excited."

"We won't make it too complicated then." Fujin put her arms around him, lacing her fingers together behind his neck—his body tingled at the light touch. "Let's keep it simple."

"I can do simple." Seifer wrapped his arms around her waist, drawing her close against him. He felt her shiver as his hands found a home low on her back. He smirked at her, and leaned down to kiss her quickly as they swayed to the music.

"I waited all day to do that," he sighed. "Hyne, the willpower it took to let you sleep. I deserve a medal." Fujin smiled back and laid her head against his chest. His heart ached again from fullness … and not from longing anymore.

They swayed through a few songs, locked together in each other's arms. Seifer's hands would occasionally wander to grip her hip, glide over her arm, or softly caress her ribs. Fujin barely moved, only intent on staying close, and murmured every now and then at his gentle movements or when he kissed the top of her head. He could feel the steady, fast-paced beating of her small heart against him as she pressed into him with each deep breath she took. He could tell that a few tears had escaped her eyes by the feeling of a tiny cold patch that had formed on his chest, but he decided not to mention it. Instead, he lifted one hand to cradle her face against him, kissing the top of her head before resting his cheek there.

"Fuu … do you remember when we were kids, that day you, Raijin and I went to Balamb beach by ourselves? Hyne, Garden was lax back then. I think we were 12 or 13, maybe? I can't remember now." Fujin sniffled before she answered him.
"Yeah, I do—that's the day we took that tiny boat out into the ocean."

"Yep, that's right …" He chuckled, and ran his free hand down her back. She shivered again. "We hadn't been to the beach since the summer before that, and you needed to stop in town to buy a bathing suit because you'd grown out of yours, remember?"

"Barely," she chuckled against him. "Why in Hyne's name do you?"

"Well, because it took you forever to find one that fit you, and you were really upset about it … Raijin and I couldn't figure out what was taking so long. And we were a little pissed about it because you were cramping our style."

"You guys were so rude to me sometimes." Fujin chuckled and nuzzled against him.

"Yeah, well get ready. This story gets worse." His hand moved to rest on the middle of her back then, keeping her close.

"So you finally found something, and you were in such a terrible mood when you went off to change. Heck, at first we were just happy you were off doing your own thing for a minute. But then … man, we were glad you to see you come back." He laughed against her again, and shook his head. "You see, you grew up that year. It's why you needed a new suit, and Raijin and I were beside ourselves." Fujin pulled away to glare up at him.

"Are you kidding me?" He laughed, as she shook head at him before resting it back against his chest.

"Nope. You were wearing a blue two-piece bathing suit. It had white polka dots on it. It was the best thing our 13-year-old eyes had ever seen. I think you were embarrassed. Anyway, I remember Raijin and I looking at each other when you walked past us, completely baffled that we had to go and like … be friends with you while you looked like that."

"I don't remember that. I remember you giving me your t-shirt though."

"Yeah, Raijin didn't need to be looking at you." She chuckled against him. "Even back then I was selfish. Anyway, that little boat adventure you and I took? That was all part of an elaborate scheme to try and kiss you that day."

"What?" She pulled back again to stare up at him. He smirked down at her and he rolled his eyes, embarrassed.

"I know, I know … I risked our lives that day because I had grand designs to kiss you while you were wearing that bikini. I lost my nerve though—one of my biggest childhood regrets." Fujin's eyebrows drew together as she thought back on that day.

"I never knew. I actually wasn't even sure you knew how dangerous being out there was."

"Oh yeah, I knew. The second that storm rolled in I knew we'd be fucked if we didn't get back soon. But … I couldn't let you know I was scared." Seifer shrugged his shoulders, and smiled warmly at her. "I still planned on kissing you, and that would have ruined it for sure."

"Why didn't you? And all these years … why didn't you ever do it?" Her face was serious, but her eyes were soft. He hoped she understood what he'd been trying to tell her—that he'd loved her just as long as she'd loved him—if not longer.

"Well, what would have happened if you'd said no? Get turned down by beautiful Fujin, who stole my heart the day she wore that blue bikini?" Seifer laughed, and moved his hand to touch her chin.
"Not much changed over the years, I guess." He leaned in to kiss her quickly.

Unexpectedly, her hand reached up to touch his cheek and she kissed him back passionately. Her tongue, own its own accord, parted his lips and made gentle contact his own. She pressed against his body firmly, and he gasped at the sensation, pulling away slowly to catch his breath.

"Wow. I would have told you that story forever ago if I'd known it'd get you to do that." He smiled down at her.

"Seifer … no more jokes." Fujin gazed into his eyes, her voice hemmed with a low tone he didn't recognize. His eyes searched hers for the hidden meaning, and his smile faded when he realized what she was trying to convey.

"Fuu … I'm really not pushing for that. I know it's really soon." His insistence was sincere, but he still couldn't stop his hands from gripping low on her back and his thumb from pressing gently on her hip bone.

"Soon? I've known you all my life." Fujin's hand hadn't left his cheek—her palm was warm against his face. "What if I … want to?"

He grappled with desire and chivalry as she hovered below him with hooded eyes, waiting for a reply to a question that made it feel like a bomb had just gone off under his skin. He exhaled through his nose and his jaw locked, as he looked away from her to gain composure. His body betrayed him—his breath becoming jagged and his chest heaving.

"If you want to?" Seifer asked himself her question aloud, almost laughing, before leaning back down to kiss her.

They were in motion then—two bodies moving in tandem as they slowly made their way back to her bedroom. His lips were on hers, and her fingers snuck under his shirt to touch his bare stomach, brushing timidly over his abs. Seifer shivered when her shaking hands ran along the soft, lower section of his waist. He broke away from her lips to kiss her neck, and his body ached at the faint sounds of affirmation she made as his lips reached her ear.

His heart was racing when they finally made it to the bedroom, as Fujin's hands moved hurriedly to pull his shirt over his head, and nervously got stuck at his belt buckle, unable to unlatch it.

"Here, let me help." Seifer chuckled, and tenderly moved her fingers aside with his own. Fujin placed her hand on his chest as he unbuckled the belt and loosened his jeans, letting them fall to the floor along with his boxers. He slowly kicked his feet free, as she leaned in delicately to kiss his collarbone. A deep red blush spread across her cheeks. That damn blush of hers was going to be his undoing.

With Fujin still standing close, Seifer's hands slowly peeled her shirt over her head, and he leaned in to kiss her as he reached to unclasp her bra. She trembled as his hands slowly worked to slide the straps from her shoulders.

He only stopped kissing her for a moment to let his eyes roam downward—he didn't want his gawking to make her even more nervous. But despite his best efforts, his breath caught in his throat at sight the newly revealed pale skin. "Hyne above," he laughed lightly, as his hand grazed her breast. "Younger me would be incredibly jealous right now." Seifer thought he heard her laugh too, but it was barely audible through her labored breathing. He kissed her again lightly, and gently rubbed her back to calm her nerves.
"I hate to ruin the moment," he kissed her cheek. "But I wasn't really ready for this. I need to go find —" But Fujin cut him off as her fingertip meekly traced the outline of his ribs.

"No, it's okay. I'm … seeing Dr. Kadowaki tomorrow. I'll get something from her." She looked up at him timidly.

"Fuu …" He reached up to cup her face, as the deep burning low in his stomach intensified. "Are you sure?"

Her confirming nod made Seifer lose control to his primal self—the part that only thought about being close. He laid his hands on her hurriedly, moving to slide her leggings down, lowering himself to his knees as he looped his fingers to remove her underwear with them in one motion. Her hand rested on his shoulder, steadying herself as he helped free her feet from the fabric. Seifer stayed there for a moment, knelt low to let his eyes wander over her. He smirked up at her as he placed a row of quick kisses on the crease just above her thigh, before standing again and taking her in his arms to lead her toward the bed.

As soon as she was under him, his lips traveled over her body. Fujin gasped at the new feeling of a soft touch. She arched her back when he found her breasts, and jumped when he moved southward and finally arrived at the flesh a few inches below stomach. Her trembling hand reached down to grab his shoulder and stop him from going any farther. In his excitement, Seifer had forgotten for a moment that she'd never done any of this before. Not ready for that yet, apparently. He returned to kiss her lips and whisper in her ear. "Sorry. Another time?" She nodded bashfully in agreement, and kissed his cheek before moving her legs to wrap around him, and allow him space between them.

"You still want to?" Seifer whispered, keeping his eyes locked on hers as he hovered above her, resting on one forearm as his hand moved to touch her face. Fujin nodded, breathing heavily as she gripped his side.

His thumb caressed her cheekbone as he rolled his hips slowly; the need to be gentle for her coming to him easily. Pain flashed on her face when he pressed forward, and the bucking reflex of her body at the shock of the sensation took him aback at first—he'd never found himself in a situation like this before. It was both the most amazing and most terrible he'd ever felt wrapped in one single moment. That feeling. That feeling summed up everything he felt about her. Being near her felt so good that it almost hurt, and hurting her to get close felt so terrible that it fractured his soul.

One of Fujin's hands gripped his side to hold him at bay while she adjusted to him, while her other found a home on his back, her fingernails digging into him lightly. Seifer only whispered assurances softly, kissing her as he pressed his forehead to hers as he waited for approval to proceed.

"Fuu," he whispered after a few quiet moments passed, touching his nose to hers. Seifer was the one who was trembling now. He wanted to tell her that he loved her, but his senses were overloaded, and he couldn't get the words to come out.

"I know." She whispered, as tilted her head to touch her lips to his. Her hand loosened on his side, and then she arched her hips against him.

Seifer, with shaking shoulders and a full heart, finally got close to her like he'd been craving all these years. It felt so good that it hurt. No more dancing around it, no more needing her closeness so badly that he lashed out and poured salt in old wounds. He laid his hands on her and murmured comforts in her ear to assuage the pain of new love, and she touched his face to look into his eyes when his body eventually gave way to pleasure and stiffened against her. And afterward when they laid together exhausted in the dark, he held her close to keep her warm as the gentle rocking of the boat reminded him of all those years ago, when all he wanted to do was kiss her.
"Did you like it?" He asked her afterward with a sly smile, breathless and lying flat on his back with his neck crooked to read her face. She felt her cheeks flushing, embarrassed and unsure why, as she gave him a confirming nod through her own labored breathing. He laughed and reached out to pull her snugly against his him. "I told you so."

"Fuu, wake up." Warm fingers grasped the bare skin on her side as a voice, his voice, spoke to her from the other side of the bed. She groggily arched her hips to roll over and navigate her way to his arms in the dark.

It was the second time he'd roused her tonight, and she'd already woken up once on her own accord in a panic that she'd dreamed it all. She'd calmed down once her drowsy eyes had focused on the hard lines of his face lying just inches away from hers, with an arm draped lazily over her waist. The rapid beating of her heart had slowed to a steady, rhythmic drumming. It hadn't been a dream.

Her chest had filled with warmth at the memory of Seifer's gentleness and how he'd repeatedly asked her in a hushed tone if she was okay; if what he was doing was okay. He'd kept his forehead touched to hers, and kissed her gently, as his thumb traced her cheekbone—it was everything she needed, without knowing she ever needed it. When his shoulders shook and his breath grew ragged, she signaled that it was okay if he needed to go faster. He'd only smiled and whispered I want to go slow against her lips. And when he was finished, he pulled her close to him—her heart ached at the thought of how sublime it had been.

It was even perfect afterward, when her stomach growled and Seifer brushed her hair from her face. I guess we did this whole date a little backwards, huh? Let me get us some food. He'd grabbed his t-shirt from the floor to playfully tug it over her head, and he wrapped himself in a sheet as he left to grab their dinner.

I know you're not an eat-in-bed kind of person, he'd admitted as he slid next to her upon his return, and handed her a plate. But who knows when Raijin will come back. And honestly, I can't think straight after what just happened so I'm not sure I could come up with a good cover story…

A thought that had always troubled her about the reality of her and Seifer was she was worried they wouldn't know what to say to each other after this happened. She was relieved when that proved to be untrue. They talked, just as they normally talked—the only change was that the conversation was rife with answers to the past; of things Seifer always thought about her that she never knew. Like how he'd told her to wear the eye-patch when they were kids because it made her look tough—he thought she needed that because she was so small. And how the idea for her stilted way of speech was born from the same worry. I wasn't trying to change you, he insisted. I wanted to help you find your strength.

I've always felt like I needed to protect you. Seifer had smiled at her, taking her emptied plate from her hand to stack it on top of his and set both on the nightstand.

I just always thought that it had something to do with your 'dreams' of being a knight—you know,
practicing for it. She'd smirked at him, and he rolled his eyes at the need to clarify. Fujin always loved embarrassing him with this topic.

It's not about being a knight in the literal sense—well, not anymore. Not since I was a kid. It's about being noble … about loyalty. I like the idea of being devoted to a cause, to an ideal … to a person. It gives me purpose.

'Gives you,' as in currently? I thought you were still chasing that—maybe you've found it with SeeD? Seifer made a disapproving face at her mocking tone, and threw his arms around her to drag her down in a tight grip against his chest.

Well, it was leading our Posse. He yawned against the top of her head. You know very well what my cause is now, though … smartass. He kissed her temple and at a loss for words she placed her hand knowingly on his chest, and they drifted off to sleep.

The second time he woke her in the night … now that was a little different. Fujin's cheeks flushed at the memory of him kissing her awake, and sitting up against the headboard so he could pull her onto his lap. Her muscles tensed as she stared at him wide-eyed. Don't be nervous; you're gonna like it, he'd whispered with a smirk as his fingers gripped the bottom of the t-shirt he'd given her, pulling it over her head and tossing it to the floor. He stretched one arm behind her back to wrap his fingers in her hair, while his other hand guided himself inside of her before his fingers moved to place pressure in a swift, small circle between her legs. Her whole body arched and tensed, and with each revolution her mind melted into nothing but want. Want for his hands not to stop, want of staying in his warm arms, want of hearing his voice low and husky, and seeing that small smile on his face and his hooded eyes as he did these things to her. She'd cried out when it ended, tensing against him and over him, withdrawing a low moan from his throat. He rolled her back onto the bed then, as her legs shook, and took her again with a fever.

Did you like it? Seifer asked her afterward with a sly smile, breathless and lying flat on his back with his neck crooked to read her face. She felt her cheeks flushing, embarrassed and unsure why, as she gave him a confirming nod through her own labored breathing. He laughed and reached out to pull her snugly against his him. I told you so.

He was always arrogant, but seldom unjustifiably so … and this was no exception. It seemed a little far-fetched that he'd be waking her up again now for the same reasons. But it was Seifer, she supposed. He'd always been capable of more than most mere mortals …

"Fujin—I need you to open your eyes right now and tell me if I'm hallucinating." The quiet panic in his voice caused her combat reflexes kick in. Instinctively, her body snapped upwards but his strong arms held her against him. It took a bit for her eyes to adjust to the darkness, but somewhere through the wind she heard the faint sound of something akin to chiming.

Through the wind?

When the blur of sound sleep had disappeared from her eyes, she saw … spinning. A circling of wind around the room, gently rattling the dishes on the nightstand next to them. It was glowing with a faint white light—she could see individual tendrils of the luminescent zephyr wafting around them.

"Fuu?" Seifer whispered lowly as his hand subconsciously tensed and reached to his side for Hyperion, falling on the bed in a fist when his muscle memory realized his weapon wasn't there. "Do you see it?"

"Yes," she whispered, as the cacophony of a gentle song, or an echoing voice, reverberated in her head. It sounded incredibly distant … from another time; from the past, from the future … from a
"It's the wind from those dreams I've been having." Seifer stated quietly as his arms tensed around her without realizing it, before he corrected his statement. "From the nightmares." She squeezed one arm free of his grasp to place a hand on his chest.

"It's Pandemona." The light grew strong and bright at the mention of the name. His grip on her loosened, as she pulled a sheet around herself and sat up in bed in awe. "She's beautiful."

"Shit … did you summon it?" Seifer asked, and the light dimmed.

"No, I didn't summon anything. I was asleep." Fujin said absentmindedly, as she leaned forward cautiously to adjust the sheet wrapped around her, allowing her legs to move so she could stand. "And she didn't seem to like your question … or your phrasing."

"Hey, don't." Seifer grabbed her shoulder, looking at her sternly. "We don't know what this is.

"She's not going to hurt me. She would have done it by now." Fujin placed her hand on Seifer's as the light in the wind grew brighter. "Plus it's not Pandemona, exactly. She looks different. I think it's … the sorceress."

The wind surged and the light flashed at her words, alternating between dim and bright, as Fujin slipped away from him and walked to stand at the edge of the circle—the gentle breeze tousling her hair. Behind her, Seifer searched frantically through a pile of clothes on the floor to find his boxers, sliding them on to quickly scramble beside her.

"Do you think she's trying to communicate?" Fujin asked, reaching her hand out slowly towards the light.

"Fujin." The tone in his voice didn't require him reaching out to grab her hand. That was Seifer's last straw tone. That so help me Hyne, if you do that thing I don't want you to do you'll feel my wrath tone … she knew better than test it without explanation.

"Fine, I won't … but just so you know—"

As she spoke, the wind grew stronger and the circle expanded and contracted, making contact with her hand and retreating again. Fujin turned to raise a pale eyebrow at his shocked face.

"Holy Hyne." He whispered, stretching his hand out into the breeze, pushing its light around his fingers and creating a ripple of luminescent waves. "I think it's actually listening to us." Fujin nodded, as the ethereal figure flashed at Seifer's words. She placed her hand next to his; the disturbance cut through the wind and light, and caused a spark.

"I wonder what she wants?" Fujin asked aloud, tightening the now falling sheet around her body. As if on cue, the light contracted inward. It wound in close around them and hesitated for a moment, before continuing to shrink in tightly around Seifer and shine brightly.

"Seifer … What about Seifer?" Fujin whispered, reaching through the wall of wind to grab his arm. His eyes connected with hers, speaking silently to her that he was fine. Though she wasn't afraid of Pandemona, or whoever she was speaking to … she loved him so deeply; why not keep a hand on him … just in case.

In a burst of energy, the wind circled faster and once again expanded around the two of them, pushing outward in a gentle explosion—its light falling in streaks around them like dying stars. They were left standing together with Fujin clutching Seifer's forearm in deep thought, and Seifer
frantically looking around to see if Pandemona had shifted to a new shape somewhere else in the room.

"What the hell was that?" He slid away from her to open the bedroom door and quickly search the living room, returning with Hyperion in hand after finding nothing.

"I don't know …" Fujin sat on the foot of the bed, gathering the sheets tightly around herself. "But, it was … saying something. Something about you." She paused to stare up at him—he was only half-listening to her. His eyes were focused on the window, searching to see if the force had somehow turned into a gale over the dark expanse of restless ocean waves.

"Seifer … what could it be trying to tell me about you? And … why is Pandemona in your nightmares?" The confusion and worry in her voice drew his gaze to her, and he moved to join her on the foot of the bed.

"I have no clue. But … don't worry. I'm sure we'll find out more when once we're home." The hesitation in his voice betrayed his confidence.

"Mmmm." She agreed halfheartedly, placing her hand against her forehead as she realized that she could still hear the wind blowing.

"You okay?" Seifer placed his hand on her thigh.

"Yeah, I'm fine. It's just … I can still hear it, and I'm suddenly really tired. I think I need to lay down."

"Here." He moved out of her way so she could scoot back on the bed. Once she reached her soft pillow, she felt him stretching a blanket over her.

"I'm going to stay up for a bit. I'm sure we're fine. But … I just want to be sure. At least until I hear Raijin come home … I don't think he's back yet." She nodded as he leaned down to kiss her forehead and then moved to sit on watch in a nearby chair, with Hyperion in hand.
And it wouldn't have bothered him as much if he couldn't also feel the currents shifting. A wave of change was coming their way—he could feel it deep in his bones. It's what had kept him awake all night, left him restless and walking the moonlit streets late into the evening all summer, and feeling agitated and anxious for the past year. He felt like he'd been running from the surf for so long now, trying not to drown. This distraction with Fujin somehow made him miss the fact that they might already be drowning.

It wasn't the wind that troubled him so, or even the fact that he'd awoke to realize his nightmare had manifested in front of his eyes. It wasn't even the foreboding feeling of something coming after him that made his heart race in fear.

No, not fear for himself … fear for her.

This, Seifer thought, as his grip tightened around Hyperion's familiar handle, was the problem with love. Just a couple of years ago he would have hunted that wind from his nightmares down ferociously. The warrior in him would have unleashed his wrath on it just for daring to imply a threat. He would have defeated it at all costs.

But now he didn't even need to add it up to know the costs were too great. He was only a sentry, allowing the wind to be an untraceable ghost just to keep her safe.

It hadn't even presented itself as a choice. Grabbing Hyperion with the intent of sitting watch, using Raijin's late evening absence as an excuse to alleviate any fear she might have, was just the first thing he did. A natural function, like breathing, blinking, and the beating of a heart.

As the sun rose over the water and burned his bloodshot eyes, he wondered if things would've been different if they hadn't just slept together. If they hadn't just completed what felt like a ritual for the fusing of souls.

The answer, of course, was no. He'd started to love her ages ago … the feelings weren't new.

But the nightmare he'd had in his brief moments of sleep was a new one, and it came with new fear. It looked exactly the same as the moment they'd lived last night—a cyclone around them and the sound of a voice … a voice low and humming, warning of fate and impending danger.

It's your destiny. You can't escape it. She'll need to learn …. death will come for you both in time.

For you both. Seifer couldn't shake that. If it came for him, fine. He was confident he could outmatch death. But her … he didn't even want her to need to.

And it wouldn't have bothered him as much if he couldn't also feel the currents shifting. A wave of change was coming their way—he could feel it deep in his bones. It's what had kept him awake all night, left him restless and walking the moonlit streets late into the evening all summer, and feeling agitated and anxious for the past year. He felt like he'd been running from the surf for so long now, trying not to drown. This distraction with Fujin somehow made him miss the fact that they
might already be drowning.

And that, he sighed as he caught a silver streak stirring out of the corner of his eye, was the problem with love. It made you weak. It distracted you. It meant you had something to lose.

"Have you been awake all night?" Fujin's voice chimed from across the room. He turned to face her, unable to stop a small smile from creeping onto his face as she groggily lifted herself from the bed, bashfully clutching the white sheet against her chest.

"No, I've slept off and on." He lied, reaching one hand up to rub his eyes. "Not the most comfortable, but it worked."

"Why didn't you just come to bed?" She squinted at him through the bright light reflecting off the water. He thought he detected a nervousness in her voice, possibly reading his reasons for not joining her incorrectly. "And … did Raijin make it back?"

"Yeah, he made it back not long after you fell asleep." Seifer decided to be honest, weighing the cost of lying and saving his pride—while also potentially hurting her feelings—with the cost of telling her the truth. He rested Hyperion against the wall and leaned forward to place his forearms on his knees and lace his fingers together.

"I was worried after what happened. Worried it would come back. I wanted to keep an eye on things … on you." Fujin looked from him to the alarm clock, noting the time and more than likely calculating how many hours he'd been awake.

"Hey," he spoke gently in an attempt to distract her from worrying about him. "How are you feeling? You were drained last night, after that happened." She nodded, and ran her fingers through her hair.

"Yeah … you know, I felt like my energy was completely depleted. But …" She broke eye contact with him and sheepishly looked down to the bed, her feet fidgeting and rustling beneath the blankets. "It's not like we slept much before that anyway. That could have been part of it."

He chuckled quietly, tilting his head to gaze at her absentmindedly as she struggled with the awkwardness of waking up to their new world together.

"I guess we didn't, did we?" Fujin looked up to meet his eyes, and he couldn't stop that small smile on his face from stretching into a sly grin. "It was worth every minute of lost sleep, though. I think we have a lot of sleepless nights ahead of us." She blushed, causing him to erupt in a chuckle again.

"C'mon, babe. It's me. The only difference now is that we literally do everything together." She smiled at the new pet name that escaped from his lips without a second thought.

"True, I suppose." She fiddled with a loose thread on the edge of the sheets self-consciously. Seifer could tell she needed more reassurance, he just wasn't sure how to give it to her. Comforting words weren't really his forte. Was it his prior experience, maybe, that was making her worry how she measured up? He pressed on, wanting her to know that she was everything to him.

"So … last night …" He leaned on his arms a little more, and kept his eyes locked on hers, his smile staying firmly in place. "Hyne, I've never felt like that before." The memory of their night together played through his mind, and his chest burned as he continued.

"You know, I always watched those romantic scenes in movies growing up, wondering if it would really be like that. But then when it happened for me it wasn't like that at all. Sure it was nice, but … I started to think all that 'passion' stuff wasn't real." His heart started to race a little as eloquence failed him; he was talking quickly and with his hands, revealing his own nervousness.
"But … you. Last night … now *that* lived up to the expectations." Fujin smiled at him, her blush spreading down onto her neck.

"I have nothing to compare it to," her voice sounded soft as it projected gently from the far side of the room. "But even if I did I think it would be … incomparable. You were really nice … very sweet." Seifer's smile widened and he broke away from her gaze in his own awkwardness at the compliment, to look briefly down at his hands and then back up to meet her eyes again.

"Well … I'm glad, Fuu." They sat in silence for a moment, before he cleared his throat.

"So, switching gears a little. Do we want to try and analyze what the fuck happened with that wind last night?"

"Ugh," she pressed her hand to her forehead and her shoulders slumped. "How about I order us some coffee first?" Seifer nodded in agreement.

"Hyne, coffee sounds good. Order extra. I think we'll need it today." She gathered the sheet to stand from the bed, and busied herself with finding her clothes. When she'd collected them in a pile on the mattress, she paused and seemed to grow anxious as she realized that his eyes were still on her. He waited for her to ask him to leave the room, unsure of what stage they were at in this wonderful little undefined mess they'd gotten themselves into.

But to his surprise, the request didn't come. Fujin dropped the white sheet to the floor, and allowed him to look at her as the bright sun illuminated her pearlescent skin. He leaned back in his chair for a better view, his entire body tingling, as his eyes ran over her and memorized the curves and colors of her body in the bright light of day. The contour of her neck, the fullness of her breasts, and the light blue bruises forming on her backside in the shape of his fingerprints.

"You look even better today. *How is that possible*?" He mused, sighing shakily and running his hand through his hair as her fingers worked, unrushed but still unsteady, to cover herself. She pulled her tank top over her head before walking over to touch his face. *That. That touch. What was the problem with love again?* He couldn't remember.

"You're delirious. That's why." Fujin leaned down to kiss him, and placed his hand on the contour of her neck he'd just committed to memory, holding her close as he returned the favor greedily. He kissed the tip of her nose when she broke away from him.

"No, it's not delirium. It's something else." Seifer stared at her for a moment, almost saying the words it was probably too soon to tell her for fear of scaring her. Instead he smiled, moving his hand and letting her stand up straight again.

"Exhaustion then." She touched his shoulder before walking towards the door. "I'll go order coffee … " She paused, and he raised an eyebrow at her.

"What's the matter?"

"Well it's just … what are we telling Raijin? It's a little obvious at this point … that we … " He smiled and waved his hand at her.

"Well for starters, don't worry. We don't *have* to tell him anything if you don't want to." He stood from the chair, raising his arms behind his head and groaning as he stretched his back. He'd been sitting for longer than he'd realized. "I'm coming with you anyway, I'll take care of it if he asks."

He could tell it wasn't the answer she'd been looking for, as disappointment briefly flashed on her face. She nodded at him, all the same, and pulled the door open. He walked close behind her,
regretting not defining what they were before they left that space. He'd have to remedy that.

When they entered the room they found Raijin sitting and having breakfast with a newspaper folded in half on the table in front of him. The remains of last night's dinner had been cleaned up and taken away, replaced with new fresh food waiting for them in a buffet-style setup. When their friend saw them, he grinned and closed the paper, tossing it onto the floor before reaching out to grab a pot of hot coffee from the center of the table, pouring some into two mugs for them.

"Well, good morning you two." He looked up at them again, causing him to spill on the white tablecloth. "Did you sleep okay? The boat was rocking pretty bad last night, ya know?" Raijin was giddy at his own cleverness. Seifer wondered if he'd been holding onto that joke all morning until they emerged.

"Was it?" Seifer's eyebrows drew together as he glared at Raijin, signaling for him to knock it off. "I didn't notice anything." Raijin only shrugged his shoulders, feigning ignorance and dropping the topic to take a bite of his breakfast.

"Sit down and have coffee you guys." He said between bites, dialing down his grin and motioning to the chairs. "I could get used to these fancy boats. They called us this morning asking when we'd want this delivered. Sorry, I couldn't wait for ya."

Seifer watched Fujin as she nervously slid into one of the empty chairs, and he flowed suit. They each thankfully grabbed their respective coffees.

"How was your night on the town in Deling, Raij? I heard you come back pretty late." Seifer asked, as Fujin avoided conversation and took a long sip of black coffee.

"I've been waiting for you to get up so I could tell ya. Deling was actually pretty interesting—it's probably a good thing I went. It was really busy in town … on account of a sorceress visiting."

"A sorceress visiting?" Fujin asked, shocked. Raijin pivoted in his chair to answer her.

"Yep. Apparently she came to see President Deling about something. Anyway, all of the people were really excited and curious. It's not every day one comes out publically, ya know …" He turned back to Seifer, the smile he'd greeted them with having completely faded from his face. "I tried to get as much information about it as I could, but no one really knew what was going on or why she was there." Seifer glanced in Fujin's direction. She was listening to Raijin intently, with her mouth slightly agape.

"All I know is that it seems fishy, given the timing and the stuff Caraway told ya Fuu, ya know?" Seifer nodded, spinning his coffee cup in a circle on the table before raising it to his lips.

"Did it seem like the fist time she'd been there?" He asked, between sips.

"I dunno. Everyone seemed surprised … some excited, some a little shaken." Raijin pointed in the direction of the city with his fork. "I've never seen Deling so busy. The streets were packed. But I still got a look at her. She was real pretty … in a creepy way."

"Did you catch her name?" Fujin asked, and he shook his head.

"I didn't. Everyone was just calling her the sorceress. Like she didn't even have a name, ya know."

"Hmmm …" Seifer mused, as he looked to Fujin, silently asking her if he could bring up the events from last night. She nodded and her cheeks flushed a little, knowing that the mission required it but that the details would betray any semblance of secrecy they were trying to hang onto.
"Fujin and I actually had a little incident last night … that seems relevant, now that you mentioned there was a sorceress in Deling." Raijin arched an eyebrow, as he worriedly looked in Fujin's direction. Her eyes were focused calmly on the contents of her mug, but her heightened nervousness this morning led her pale fingers to lightly drum against the glass.

"An incident? Everything okay, Fuu?"

"She's fine." Seifer held his hand up to stop Raijin's panicked thoughts. "We were just woken up last night by what seemed to be … uh… the physical manifestation of the wind Fujin's been hearing." Confusion spread across Raijin's face.

"What in holy Hyne does that mean?"

"Well …" Seifer paused as he tried to think of a way to succinctly explain what was frankly one of the craziest moments he'd experienced. "I was asleep and having a dream … about this wind. And when I woke up, it was there. Circling around us in the bedroom." Raijin's eyes grew wide in disbelief at the story, while also simultaneously realizing Seifer had just admitted that he and Fujin had slept together last night.

"And when I woke Fuu up, it tried to communicate with us. Or with just her, maybe. I'm not sure. It was saying something about me, I think."

"It was definitely saying something about you." Fujin spoke before taking another sip of coffee. Raijin looked to both of his friends with fresh concern.

"How do ya know it was a sorceress? What if it was just Pandemona going rogue somehow?" He asked, and Fujin shook her head.

"I've summoned Pandemona before. This looked and felt completely different. I could hear a voice while it was there, too. I couldn't make out the words … but I could hear something."

"Yeah, uh … Fuu. I forgot to mention that I heard a voice in my dream, too." Seifer's eyes connected with hers, knowing the information would cause everyone to panic. If it didn't all seem connected, he wouldn't have bothered to tell them. But with Fujin hearing a voice too, and with Raijin telling them about the sorceress in Deling, the well-being of the Posse came before protecting everyone's feelings. The information might change their plan of attack once they returned to Garden. He cleared his throat.

"The voice … it said something about my destiny, and something about you needing to learn, Fuu." He looked away from her, fixing his gaze on a few seagulls wafting in the breeze as the vessel carrying them made its way to Balamb. "It also said death was coming for us."

His comrades grew quiet, as the gentle clinking of Fujin's drumming fingers halted and Raijin set his fork down on the table. They both stared at Seifer, as his eyes avoided theirs … hers … mostly hers.

Fujin wouldn't allow it though, as her formerly drumming fingers timidly found his forearm. He turned to look at her and smiled wryly, placing his hand on hers as Raijin watched them from across the table.

"But who knows that that's about." He shook his head at her. "Don't think about it."

"I wish you'd told me last night," she said only to him, her fingers pressing into him and the expression in her eyes growing soft when she finally understood why he'd stayed awake though the evening. "We're in over our heads on this one. Come see Kadowaki with me today and we'll tell her everything. Get her opinion on what to tell Cid, and then we'll move forward from there."
"Sure, Fuu. Whatever you want." Seifer forgot himself, and moved his free hand to her chin, tilting her face towards his and leaning in to kiss her quickly. "Just do me a favor and don't worry—everything's going to be okay."

The sound of Raijin choking on his coffee at the sight of their new affection caused them to jolt and look in his direction. He smiled at them through a fit of coughing, as he pounded his chest. Seifer shrugged and flashed Fujin a thinly apologetic look—he wasn't really sorry. Raijin would find out sooner or later, anyway.

"You guys a thing now?" Rajin managed to speak between gasps for air. "Like, a couple?" Seifer turned to look at her, smiling.

"Yeah … we are." She nodded hurriedly in agreement, embarrassed for her business to be the center of attention, but glad to hear him commit to a solid definition.

"Finally." Raijin replied, exasperated, as he picked up his fork to resume eating. "I'm just glad we can stop playing musical chairs with beds, ya know?" He eyed the two of them, before a grin stretched across his face from ear to ear. "So, last night was really a crazy night then, huh?" He wiggled his eyebrows at them.

"C'mon man." Seifer scowled, before reaching to steal a piece of bacon from Raijin's plate. "New topic."

"No way!" Raijin laughed, as he pulled his plate towards himself and shielded it with his hand to prevent further pilfering. "I've been waiting forever, ya know. You guys gotta tell me something … how'd you find out about each oth—OUCH!" Fujin's boot, more gentle than normal but still forceful, connected with Raijin's shin under the table.

Seifer laughed heartily, placing his hand on Fujin's thigh out of their friend's sight, squeezing her reassuringly.

*And this was the problem with love—the wonderful, ridiculous, undeniably worth-it problem with love, Seifer thought to himself. No matter the cost, losing wasn't an option.*

*And maybe that wasn't actually a problem at all … maybe it's exactly what they needed to survive what was coming for them. They were in over their heads, sure, but they weren't drowning yet.*
Chapter Summary

She felt a pang of nostalgia, as the bright afternoon sun stung her eyes and the salty sea air wafted through the rolled down windows; she was transported to summers of the past, when they were young and invincible. When sorceresses were just fictional things in the movies Seifer watched, and Raijin regaled them with the story of kissing a girl for the first time—he'd beaten Seifer to it. Meanwhile, Seifer would sit on the dock with her, planning more sailing trips … all a guise to be the next one to score a kiss.

As they waited in the infirmary for Dr. Kadowaki to emerge from an appointment with another patient, the anxiety that Fujin had worked so expertly to bury over the past few days started to bubble up in the pit of her stomach. Somehow, this moment of reckoning made it more real … and it seemed like they'd arrived at there faster than she'd wanted to. Of course, she wanted to tell someone at Garden about these problems. Of course she did. But she had just found peace with Seifer… of course she had. Things were supposed to be easier now …

Time ran at warp speed earlier in the morning. After breakfast they'd packed up their things quickly. Despite the joyous news of Fujin and Seifer finally being an item, a heaviness hung over them as the reality of the situation sank in. Fujin, for her own part, couldn't stop thinking about how the recent information hinged heavily on Seifer. And by the look in his eyes—that nervous darting they did when he was panicked about something and trying not to show it—she could tell he was doing the opposite. Seifer was worrying about how the news hinged on her.

Fujin thought it was Raijin who had the worst of it though, in some respects. He was left to worry for both of them, not having seen what they'd experienced and not having the depth of understanding that they had. He stood separate from them, an outsider looking in on his two best friends as danger built up around them.

Raijin also seemed to vacillate between giddiness that they'd finally found happiness, and a silent moping that they'd found happiness without him. He'd smiled when Seifer gabbed Fujin's bag as they disembarked from the boat, and grew quiet and she and Seifer weaved together through the busy Balamb streets to rent a car for their journey home and talked about going to see Dr. Kadowaki. Fujin could tell it was going to be a hard transition for him.

Which was why she allowed Raijin to take shotgun and ride next to Seifer on the journey to Garden, staying quiet as the two of them talked about lighter things—killing bite bugs, food in the cafeteria … anything that wasn't sorceress-related, or Seifer-Fujin related. She felt a pang of nostalgia, as the bright afternoon sun stung her eyes and the salty sea air wafted through the rolled down windows; she was transported to summers of the past, when they were young and invincible. When sorceresses were just fictional things in the movies Seifer watched, and Raijin regaled them with the story of kissing a girl for the first time—he'd beaten Seifer to it. Meanwhile, Seifer would sit on the dock with her, planning more sailing trips … all a guise to be the next one to score a kiss.

The memory of those days brought back the feeling of sand under her toes, the smell of seagrass drying in the sun, and that one night when Seifer kept her out late to show her what nautical twilight was. He'd been right—you could see the light of the sun, the moon, and the stars all at once.
You're awfully quiet back there … Seifer stated, looking into the rearview mirror after laughing raucously with Raijin about a joke she'd missed while lost in thought.

Just listening. Her eyes connected with his for a moment, before Raijin turned around to look at her.

That's our Fuu. Always listening. He'd reached back to slap her knee, and she smiled at his mention of 'our Fuu.' You probably know every secret in the world by now … you hear everything, ya know. Seifer glanced sideways at Raijin with a feigned look of panic at the idea of an all-knowing Fujin. Raijin snickered, and she could tell the brief moment of normalcy gave him a little peace.

When they made it to the parking garage, Raijin and Seifer stepped out of the car first—both stretching their legs before moving to the trunk to grab their bags. Raijin asked Seifer if he wanted to meet up in the Disciplinary Committee office later to 'catch up on paperwork,' which just meant hanging out. Seifer agreed, as he peered through her window and tapped on the roof of the car.

Hey Fuu, you planning on driving away or are you coming with us? His fingers gripped the handle of her door, prying it open and holding his hand out for hers. Raijin sidled up behind Seifer, clapping his shoulder and smiling down at them.

I'm gonna go ahead, ya know. Get settled in our room. His expression changed then, knowing the question would let on that he was worried he'd be left out. … Can you guys come get me, after you meet with Dr. K?

Of course Raijin, Fujin spoke from the back seat, peering past Seifer. She'd bring him with them if she didn't also have to address other, more personal matters with Kadowaki.

Yeah man, you're our first stop after that. Seifer turned to grasp Raijin's shoulder in kind, the two of them sharing a knowing look. You're coming with us to see Cid, too. This involves all three of us. Raijin nodded, smiling.

Okay, I'll be in our room then man. You want me to do anything while you're gone?

Drawing up a report on what you saw in Deling would be good. Seifer shrugged, and looked to Fujin as she nodded in agreement. They'll want that when we tell them about it … if we tell them about it. And with that, Raijin nodded and left them together in the garage.

C'mere. Seifer smirked, as he grabbed Fujin's hand and pulled her out of the car, closing the door behind her. He dropped their bags to the ground, and wrapped his arms around her waist.

You doing okay? You were quiet the whole way home. Something on your mind … other than the impending apocalypse? His dark humor made her smile. Everything about him made her smile.

Raijin. She sighed, reaching into her pocket to fish out her eye patch instinctively now that they were back at Garden. He let go of her so she could place it over her eye. I just want to make sure we don't forget him.

Of course. Seifer leaned down to grab their bags with one hand, and touched her lower back with the other to urge her forward down the corridor. We'll be careful with him. Now, let's get to your room and call Kadowaki.

As they turned right at the end of the hallway to make the short walk to the dorms, throngs of women stopped to say hi to Seifer. He only nodded at them, embarrassed as they stared at him and glared at Fujin. He made a point to stop at the entry to the dorms to pull her in for a deep kiss, just in case one of them had any question to where his allegiances lay.
You're making a scene. She'd nudged him away.

He laughed and reached down to hold her hand, lacing his fingers in hers. Get used to it.

When they'd arrived back at Fujin's dorm to find her roommate gone, Seifer's hands—without needing to ask—made quick work of removing Fujin's pants. He'd lifted her and pressed her up against the door as her legs wrapped around him; it had been fast and with such a fever she'd barely had time to get the door closed. Hyne, he'd exhaled shakily afterward, and wiped sweat from his brow as he kissed her and pulled away to gently let her feet touch the ground again. I still can't believe we get to do this now.

Get used to it. She mimicked him, breathless, picking up her discarded clothing and walking towards her bathroom to take a shower. She heard his footsteps following her after she closed the door, and the light thud of his hand against the hollow wood as he pressed his palm against it.

Hey Fuu, do you think that maybe when you talk to Dr. K today ... we should get you on something? She chuckled at his delicate vagueness. It's just, I plan on doing a lot more of this .... and we're playing it a little fast and loose here.

She opened the door a crack, and he craned his neck so his green eyes could peer at her.

I mean, no pressure. His fingers wrapped around the edge of the door to pull it open a bit more so he could read her face. She smiled at his uncomfortableness with the topic. Seifer Almasy, made nervous by women's issues. That would be the thing that made him uncomfortable.

Yes, Seifer. That's on my list of asks today. He nodded, relieved.

Hey ... he hesitated, as a smirk stretched across his face as he nodded to the shower stall. Think I could join you? I was planning on getting cleaned up anyway ... two birds, one stone. It's strategic, really.

And now, wet haired and tired, they waited in the infirmary for the good doctor to emerge from dealing with the patient who'd beaten them to the punch while they were busy with each other. They could hear Kadowaki's voice murmuring from one of the adjacent rooms.

"Hey, isn't it weird that she doesn't have chairs or something to sit on that aren't behind her desk?" Seifer gestured around the room and then kicked the bench they sat on with his heel. "I mean really; I'd see everything she entered into that computer from here." Seifer's attempt at small talk to calm her nerves was minimally impactful at best—Fujin's stomach was in knots.

"You'd have to have good vision." She mused, motioning to the screen. "That's six feet away; the print is too tiny."

"Oh ye of little faith." Seifer touched her knee. "I have perfect vision."

"Of course you do." She rolled her eyes. "Is there anything about you that isn't perf—"

Fujin stopped talking abruptly when Dr. Kadowaki emerged from a room to their left—her hair pulled back into a tight brown bun and a clipboard clutched in her hand.

"Well, I think you're in good shape then. Don't come back to see me unless you don't feel well," Kadowaki spoke, as she made a few final notes on her paperwork. When Fujin saw who the patient sauntering out with doctor was, she glanced sideways at Seifer. He arched an eyebrow and crossed his arms over his chest, muttering something under his breath.
"Oh! Fujin, isn't this a surprise." Dr. Kadowaki finally looked up from her paperwork, realizing that more people had filtered into her office. "And you too, Seifer..." She reluctantly acknowledged him and he waved back at her without turning his head. "I thought your crew had gone off for the summer on a vacation. I'm surprised to see you back so soon."

"Well Dr. K, we came back just to see you." Seifer turned to look at her smirking. "But if you need to keep bottle feeding Leonhart, we can come back later." Squall Leonhart—the only other gunblade specialist at Garden besides Seifer, and thus Seifer's self-proclaimed arch rival—only crossed his arms over his chest and shook his head at the remark.

"Seifer, no unnecessary barbs." Dr. Kadowaki scolded him as she moved to sit in her chair.

"Can I go now?" Squall threw his hand up in the air flippantly, palm first, growing agitated with Seifer's mere presence in the room.

"Be patient, Squall. Let me enter this information and get you scheduled for a physical next year." The room grew silent as the doctor typed the notes into the computer, and discussed the next date she'd see Squall. Seifer leaned close to Fujin's ear to whisper.

"See, I'm ninety percent sure she just typed 'delayed puberty.'" Fujin began to chuckle, and swatted his arm. "I'm telling you, that's what it said."

"Stop—we don't need a fight right now." He made a face at her suggestion that it would even be a fight.

"Hey Squall," Seifer raised his chin as Kadowaki handed Squall a slip and he readied to leave. "Wanna spar sometime this week? I think I got the upper hand last time—care to try again?"

"You got the upper hand because you fight dirty." Squall folded the paper and shoved it in his pocket. "If you let it be a fair match, I'll win again."

"What, you think that in a real battle everyone's just going to follow the rules? Going to be fair?" Seifer's smirk grew wider. "I fight how real men fight. I'm only trying to teach you how to not get killed."

"Well thanks professor," Squall turned his back and walked towards the exit. "Maybe when you actually pass the SeeD exam I'll take tips from you." He was gone before Seifer could come up with a witty retort.

"Fucking Leonhart." Seifer spat. Kadowaki wheeled around in her chair.

"Language, Seifer. Watch your language. And by the way, you shouldn't be talking about sparring off-campus with another student in front of me. It's against the rules and you know it." Seifer leaned back against the wall, grumbling, as Dr. Kadowaki shifted her focus to Fujin.

"So, which one of you am I seeing today?"

"BOTH." Fujin spoke, forgetting herself now that she was in the walls of Garden. "Both of us." Dr. Kadowaki's eyebrows furrowed.

"Well, if it's all the same I'd like to speak with you first, separately." Kadowaki motioned to Fujin before spinning around in her chair to pull up her file.

"It's okay Dr. Kadowaki—Seifer knows everything." The doctor nodded with her back turned to the two of them.
"Yes, yes. I knew he would. I'd like to speak with you one-on-one first, all the same." She spun back around to look at the both of them as Seifer began to protest. "It's a common patient privacy practice, Seifer. I know your group is attached at the hip, but I follow my rules. Not yours." She smiled as he rolled his eyes.

"Come now, Fujin." She tapped Fujin's knee with her pen. "Let's catch up."

Seifer crossed his arms indignantly, as Dr. Kadowaki led her into the room that Squall Leonhart had just departed, and closed the door behind them.

"I'm glad you came by." Kadowaki motioned for Fujin to sit down on the examination table, and moved to sit in an adjacent office chair. "You've been on my mind. Have things gotten worse?" Fujin sighed, placing her palms on her knees and kicking her heels against the metal table.

"Well, before we get into that … I'm actually partially here because I had unprotected sex yesterday … and today." Kadowaki raised her eyebrows.

"Okay. Well this is an interesting start to the review of your summer. Can't wait to hear what the other news is." She leaned back in her chair. "We'll get you a pill to take before you go. No unprotected sex for seven days, and ideally never, by the way. And—"

"I know, I know. I learned about it all in my Covert Ops class." Fujin waved her hand to stop the conversation. It already felt awkward enough, no need to go into the details.

"Yes, I forgot they teach you this." She sighed and shook her head at the complicated pitfalls of being a successful member of SeeD. "So, do you want to go on something long-term? I recommend the implant for female SeeD—especially when they're going out on missions."

"Long-term. The implant would be fine."

"Okay, we'll get that going for you too. Now …" Kadowaki paused, making more notes on her clipboard. "Would you like to be tested for STDs? I'd recommend it." It honestly hadn't occurred to her that it would be necessary. Fujin furrowed her brow as she tried to remember if Seifer ever mentioned anything about tests.

"I don't think I do …" Her gaze darted to the door absentmindedly, and Kadowaki's eyes lit up at the realization that Seifer was here with her as the other half of the irresponsible pair.

"Oh Hyne Fujin, Seifer Almasy?" She placed her clipboard in her lap and peered over her glasses. "I know this is overstepping, but that boy is nothing but trouble." Fujin shrugged, and continued to kick her heels against the table.

"Well, we'll at least get you on that birth control straight away." Kadowaki said in a tone that also seemed to be saying you'll need it, as she picked her clipboard back up and pressed the center of her glasses with one finger to push them onto the bridge of her nose. "He is a bit of dreamboat, I suppose." She arched an eyebrow at Fujin as the corner of her mouth rose into a small smile. Fujin blushed, and abruptly changed the subject.

"Dr. Kadowaki—before I talk with you about anything else, I need to ask you if we can keep this off the record. And … if we can go back and redact any record of mine involving … the problems I was having when I left." Kadowaki, perplexed, took off her glasses and let them hang round her neck.

"Sure, Fujin. Do you have privacy concerns?"

"I do, actually—General Caraway from Galbadia somehow accessed my file and told me about it
when we had dinner with him in Dollett. He told me …” Her voice trailed off, realizing she hadn’t received a firm answer to her question.

"General Caraway? But why would—” Fujin interrupted her.

"Listen, I just need to know that we can remove that information and that I can trust you."

"Of course Fujin, on both counts. We can go to my computer right now if you want. You're starting to alarm me a bit, though. Is everything okay?” Kadowaki placed her hand on Fujin's knee, which finally caused her feet to cease their incessant swinging. "You can trust me."

"No … I don't think everything is okay." This past week, Fujin hadn't really let herself feel the fear in the back of her mind. But under the florescent lights of the infirmary, with the gentle and helpful voice of Dr. Kadowaki urging her to lay her problems down on her, the fear was tangible. "We should probably include Seifer though—he's a big part of this too."

"Alright, let's go back into the waiting area and I'll lock the infirmary door. We can continue this conversation with Seifer while I correct your file." Fujin nodded, and stood from the table to walk out of the room only to find that her knees were weak. She wobbled a little, as Dr. Kadowaki placed a hand on her arm to steady her, her eyes heavy with concern.

"Seifer," Dr. Kadowaki said as she entered the room with Fujin. "Pull that bench closer to my desk—I feel as if we're in for a long chat. And be a dear and help Fujin have a seat." Seifer stood quickly, dragging the wooden bench across the floor before darting over to grab Fujin.

"Hey," Seifer leaned in close to wrap his arm around her shoulder. "Hyne, you look paler than normal, which is really freaking me out." Fujin heard the click of the lock on the door, as Seifer led her to the bench to sink down beside him. When he kissed her temple, Dr. Kadowaki sighed. "Well, don't you two make a handsome couple?" Fujin flashed her a wry smile, and Dr. Kadowaki clapped her hands together. "Alright, where should we begin?"

When Fujin couldn't speak, Seifer filled the silent space with his own version of events. He started the tale in a Seifer-centric manner—in hopes that Fujin would decide to speak up at some point—by describing the nightmares he’d been having for the better half of a year, and how they seemed so incredibly real—the horror of being chased, being surrounded by the cold void of space and stars, and then being rescued by a warm white wind.

Fujin continued to stay silent, so Seifer assumed his natural leadership role and spoke for her. He worried that Kadowaki would think he was being controlling instead of being helpful, so he made sure to keep looking at Fujin and asking her if that he was correctly relaying the information. He wondered if he would've even thought about the perception at all if they weren't dating now. He didn't want people to get the idea that he mistreated her. He didn't want people to think—as Dr. Kadowaki clearly seemed to think—that Fujin would be better off without him … and then convince her of that too.

Seifer carefully talked about the night Fujin revealed she'd passed her SeeD exam, and how he’d first learned about Pandemona through Fujin’s intoxicated admission that she could hear the wind blowing through her ears. The streets were dead quiet, Seifer had noted, barely a breeze and Fujin talked the whole way home about a howling tornado. He told Dr. Kadowaki that Fujin had admitted that it was painful at times, and that he could see changes in her that others might not notice—she was paler than normal, she was exhausted but didn’t sleep well, and she was a little more emotional than normal. At the sound of an aggravated huff from Fujin, he clarified that they'd been going
through some difficult transitions within the Posse so that could have had something to do with the emotions.

The dinner with General Caraway, and the message for Cid about the potential threat of a new sorceress, just sounded even weirder when explained within the context of everything else. Seifer hadn't realized just how connected everything seemed to be. He'd been telling Fujin to calm down, when she'd probably been right to worry.

The odd thing was that Kadowaki seemed to covered her mouth in feigned shock—or at least misplaced shock—at the news from Caraway and the suggestion that Pandemona was a hybrid of a Guardian Force and the spirit of a sorceress. There was a suspicious lack of surprise. Seifer even thought that'd he spied a sort've recognition, or acknowledgement, in her eyes. He glazed over it for the sake of getting through the story, but he was sure as hell going to circle back around to that.

As he described their last night on the boat together, Dr. Kadowaki canted forward her in chair and listened with bated breath. She had the most questions about that bit—So the dream and the event happened simultaneously? Are you sure it was trying to talk to you? That it was trying to say something about you? Her brow furrowed at the mention of the voice talking about destiny, death and time—as if the three, which were already inextricably linked, shared an even greater meaning within their story.

The look on the doctor's face made him uneasy, but he was mostly irritated that it seemed to be making Fujin more upset. Every second Kadowaki betrayed her usual professional façade, Fujin's leg shook and she grew even more distant. Seifer squeezed her knee several times to try and bring her back to reality—if anything just to make sure he wasn't missing important details that would be relevant.

"Fuu, did you hear all of that? Did I get everything?" She jumped a little, and nodded.

"Yeah, I think that's everything. Sorry—I'm a little out of it today. Yesterday took a lot out of me." Kadowaki leaned away from them again and crossed her arms.

"I'm so sorry the two of you have been dealing with this on your own. And about General Caraway. He never has been very concerned about tact, I suppose." There it was again—that hesitation was resonating in the doctor's voice now, not just in her facial expressions.

"It's okay Dr. K.—Fujin's pretty tough, and you already know I can handle a little crazy." Seifer let go of Fujin's knee, and leaned into the space that the doctor had just evacuated, looking at her intently. "What I don't appreciate is you advising her to not tell me about all this. Who knows what could've happened this summer. You kinda made her go through this on her own."

"Seifer, it wasn't just Dr. Kadowaki. I—" Seifer waved her off.

"Sure Fuu, I know. You didn't want to tell me about SeeD. Conveniently it wound up working as a dual excuse though." Dr. Kadowaki folded her hands on top of the clipboard that rested in her lap, and waited for Seifer to ask her the question she knew had been coming.

"You know, you don't seem very surprised about Pandemona, or by any of this really." Seifer arched an eyebrow and his jaw stiffened as his temper began to flare a bit, edging his voice. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you already knew about the sorceress."

"Seifer." Fujin's fingers touched his forearm. "That's not true. This isn't a conspiracy."

"Actually … " Kadowaki let out a heavy sigh, and looked directly at Fujin with apologetic eyes. "It
was a theory we'd floated.

"We?" Seifer's rage began to peak.

"Headmaster Cid and I." Kadowaki turned to place her clipboard on her desk. "And we need to include Cid in this conversation if you want to know more."

Of course Cid and Kadowaki already knew. Of course Garden, in all of it's ethical glory, was morally ambiguous when it came to protecting their students first. Seifer wasn't surprised, he was just royally fucking pissed.

He glanced over to Fujin to discover her staring down at her boots in shock at the deep betrayal. It struck a chord in his chest, to see her taken by surprise without any of her defenses up. She'd seemed so vulnerable lately … or maybe, it's just that his eyes were looking at her through newer, more tender lenses.

Rather than unleashing a verbal assault on the good doctor, Seifer instead chose to sling his arm around Fujin's shoulder and pull her close. Reacting how he'd normally react would only cause her more pain and confusion, and not get them the answers they wanted. The deception was worthy of a tirade, but instead he put what was better for her first. Hyne, how much he'd changed this summer.

"Well, then let's go see Cid right now and get some answers." He made a point to glare at Kadowaki. "But first we need to get Raijin—the three of us are doing this together now; that's how we always do things. We follow our rules … not yours."

"AFFIRMATIVE." Fujin agreed with him in the tone she reserved for people she didn't like—which was most people. She was renewed by his shared strength as she reached up to absentmindedly grab his wrist that dangled around her shoulder. "RAJIN COMES TOO."

"That's fine." Dr. Kadowaki stood from her chair to lean towards her phone, pressing a button to activate her intercom. "Rajin Kazeno, please report to the infirmary as soon as possible." The message played over the loudspeaker.

"Fujin, it was a hard choice to keep it from you." The doctor folded her arms over her chest. "I'm very sorry. … let me call Cid's office and get in touch with Xu while we wait for Raijin."

Kadowaki busied herself at the phone to schedule an on-the-fly meeting with the Headmaster. Seifer didn't listen to anything she said—he only continued to gaze at Fujin, whose eyes were fixed on an imaginary point in the distance.

"Fuu, you in there?" She blinked and turned to face him, and he reached up to tuck her hair behind her ear with his free hand, revealing her eyepatch. He'd forgotten she'd put it back on after the shower. He playfully slid his finger under the string and snapped it lightly. "You're quiet, even for you. Did I cover everything you wanted covered?"

"Yes, you did great." She released his wrist, and moved to touch his chest. "Sorry … I feel like this is just … about to spiral out of control." Seifer nodded, and glanced at Dr. Kadowaki as she talked sternly and lowly over the phone with what must have been Xu resisting a last-minute meeting.

"I feel the same way. But hey … as long as we have each other, we have nothing to worry about. Strength in numbers." As if on cue, the doorknob to the infirmary jiggled, and Raijin knocked in frustration upon finding it locked.

"Dr. K., ya just called me ya know?" He whined from the other side. "How can ya be closed?" Seifer, in what was becoming a habit, kissed Fujin's temple before standing to let their friend in the
Now the Posse was at its strongest—they were going into this as a unified fleet. Which was a good thing, because Seifer genuinely had no fucking clue what was going on.
It hadn't occurred to Seifer until now just how much they communicated silently—the three of them had their own language, composed of knowledge of each others habits over the years and so much time spent in each other's company. They made subtle movements in the moments before the doors opened that felt like a conversation to Seifer. Fujin crossed her arms over her chest and placed one foot on the back wall of the elevator, balancing casually on one graceful leg. Raijin cracked his knuckles, and sheepishly smiled at Seifer who grimaced at the sound—he hated it when Raijin did that. Seifer stretched his leg and discreetly tapped Fujin's boot with his own, offering her a wry smile as she looked up at him. If the three of them had their own language, he and Fujin had their own dialect within it.

"First thing's first." Cid ambled from behind his desk to stand in front of Seifer, Fujin and Raijin, who were dutifully lined up at attention with their hands behind their backs. "Let's see this letter from General Caraway." He held his hand out to Seifer, who coughed awkwardly and jerked his head toward Fujin. She pulled the travel worn envelope from the pocket of her blue coat, and stretched her hand out to Cid.

"Oh, of course." Cid's fingers intercepted the letter as he smiled that obliging, friendly smile of his that gave Seifer the chills. No one was that nice. He grabbed a letter opener from his desk, and began to run it along the edge of the envelope.

"I'm sorry about Caraway," Cid looked up to both of them as the sharp edge of the opener got stuck on the far corner of the envelope. "Sometimes he acts too quickly. I wish he'd thought before involving you all. You're in it for good now, I'm afraid." He sighed, as his uncalloused fingers carefully unfolded the letter. Seifer wondered how long it had actually been since the great Headmaster Cid had seen a battle. That was a longstanding issue he had with the general concept of Cid—a man who ran Garden, but as far as he knew hadn't seen a fight. Seifer had a hard time respecting a man like that, who sent countless students and mercenaries out on missions but didn't have the slightest clue what it meant.

"Well, what's done is done. Thanks for delivering this Fujin, and thanks to all of you for taking it upon yourselves to intercept the intel. You're obviously a skilled group." He pointed to Seifer as he pivoted to place the letter on his desk. "Which reminds me ... I wanted to congratulate you on leveling up those gunblade skills. I've been enjoying seeing the friendly competition between you and Squall. I'm the only Garden headmaster who gets to boast two gunblade specialists at fundraisers."

Seifer wanted to tell Cid that even remotely implying it was a competition was incredibly insulting. But, given that he still needed the man's approval to become a full-fledged member of SeeD, he had to pretend it was a compliment.

"Well, glad we can serve as good dinner conversation, I suppose." He couldn't completely stop himself from being a smartass. "Anything to entertain the philanthropists." Cid took a deep breath and nodded as he walked behind his desk again and opened the bottom drawer to pull out a few
"Sorry, Dr. Kadowaki—I only have four glasses." The stopper on the decanter plunked with the release of pressure when Cid's delicate fingers removed it.

"Fine by me, Cid. You know I don't touch the stuff."

"And Hyne bless you for that doctor." Cid smiled as he poured a tawny liquid into the four glasses, leaving one on his desk and delivering the other three to the trio sitting in front of him.

"What's this, a last drink?" Seifer took the glass hesitantly from Cid's hand. The headmaster laughed and returned to his chair. Seifer quickly glanced at Fujin, who looked just as bewildered.

"No, not a last drink Seifer. Hyne, we're not putting you down." He rubbed his eyes as he leaned back in his chair, emitting a slow, stark creak. "This is to calm our nerves, or at least mine."

"LETTER." Seifer jumped as Fujin's voice emerged from nowhere like a jack-in-the-box. She'd been so quiet all day and had left him do all the talking with Kadowaki, he'd hardly expected her to speak in front of Cid. He gulped down the whiskey quickly and discreetly placed it on the edge of the desk. *Calm his nerves, indeed.*

"Yes, let's get down to business—the letter. It contained essentially what Caraway told you. The only additional comments were regarding a potential upcoming visit a sorceress would be making to Deling."

"VISIT OCCURRED." Fujin motioned to Raijin, who jumped out of his chair to place a folder on Cid's desk. *REPORT COMPILED OF SORCERESS SIGHTING IN DELING, ON RETURN HOME.*

"Ah," Cid reached across his desk and slid the folder closer to himself so he could take a look. Seifer watched the man's features carefully as he read Raijin's report with deep interest, his eyes narrowing and his brow furrowing as he scanned the document.

"You saw her then?" Cid looked up to Raijin before thumbing to the next page.

"Yes sir, ah—Headmaster. She was real pretty. A lot of people seemed pretty taken with her, ya know?" Seifer thought he saw the corner of Cid's mouth curl into a small smile.

"Is that so? Well, it's not every day you see a sorceress I suppose." Raijin nodded, as he awkwardly finished the whiskey the headmaster had given him and placed the glass on the desk, as Seifer had.

"Lemme know if you can't read my handwriting." Raijin motioned to the document. "I had to finish it up fast when Dr. K. called me to the infirmary."

"The meat of it's legible. That's all that matters." Cid closed the folder, setting it down on his desk and placing his palm on top of it. "Now, anything else to report on this topic specifically?"

Fujin looked back and forth to Seifer and Raijin. *CONCLUDED.*

"Okay then," Cid, who had long since finished his drink, poured himself a second glass. "Let's talk about Pandemona then. Fujin, I wanted to offer you the opportunity to speak with me privately. His eyes darted to Seifer. "I know you'll turn me down, but I'm obligated to offer all the same."

"FINE TOGETHER." Fujin motioned to her two friends. *NO SECRETS. SPEAK FREELY.*
"Well," Cid leaned back farther and swirled his drink, keeping his eyes on her. "As you and your friends surmised, Dr. Kadowaki and I did take an educated guess at what's been ailing you—about the fusion of Pandemona with a sorceress. We didn't mean to keep it from you—we were fully intent on telling you when you returned."

"EDUCATED?" Cid's words rolled around in her mind as she processed them. "HOW?"

"Because we know a bit about your history. How you wound up here at Garden—how you became an orphan."

"I thought most of us here at Garden were orphans because of the war …" Seifer leaned forward in his chair.

"And you are, Seifer. All three of you are, and most of the cadets your age at Garden are. Fujin is a little different though—she came here under different circumstances, shortly after most of you arrived." Cid set his glass down on his desk, and leaned forward to rest on his forearms.

"The story that Caraway told you about the sorceress that helped the Galbadian army is true. She was killed by Adel, sadly, and her husband died in the war as well." He removed his glasses momentarily to clean the lenses with his shirtsleeve. "When she died, no one could figure out where her powers were transferred to. It's an essential part of the process, you see. Each sorceress must pass on their powers before they can die in peace. Their spirits will roam the world in pain until they do." Seifer glanced sideways at Fujin, whose gaze was cool as steel and whose hands looked sure and steady—though he did notice she hadn't touched her drink yet. Her fingers clutched it tightly as it rested on her knee.

"There were a couple of theories as to what happened. One being what we're seeing right now—that her powers joined with her Guardian Force, Pandemona. The other theory …" Cid paused and cleared his throat, looking over to Seifer. "Was that she passed them on to her newborn daughter."

Seifer’s body tensed under Cid’s weighted glance. If Fujin had made the connection, it didn't show—she was still stoic and steady as every; an unshakable and formidable force that he was suddenly fiercely proud of … and unfathomably heartbroken for.

"Per Adel's command, the Estharian government kept the child captive throughout the war under strict observation by a well-known and well respected scientist named Dr. Odine, who never found any evidence the girl had inherited her mother's powers. When the war was finally over they kept the girl in Esthar with the doctor and his staff for quite some time." Cid sighed, and shook his head in dismay.

"There were just so many children left behind—there was nowhere for her to go, and it was hard to know what the right thing to do was." Seifer saw the liquid in Fujin's glass beginning to move—a slow ripple expanded in small brown waves as her hand began to shake.

"When Garden opened its doors a few short years later, orphans from the far corners of the world started pouring in. Odine had the girl delivered to the nearest orphanage, one on the southern Centra coast, in hopes she'd have a better life." He smiled at Seifer and Fujin, motioning at the two of them. "It was actually the same orphanage you came from, Seifer. The two of you overlapped there for just a month or so, before you were enrolled at Balamb. And the girl … Fujin. You came to Garden just under a year later. You were fast friends as children at the orphanage … and it was quite amazing to see you come together here at Garden, too."

Seifer reached over to grab the glass from her hand, setting it on the edge of the desk, before placing his palm over her now clenched fist. Raijin followed suit, gripping her shoulder. This was a familiar
habit of theirs—*connecting* like this. It made Seifer think of a chain linked together to distribute the weight of whatever burden they were bearing—a symbolic sharing of strength and pain.

"She was … *my mother*?" Fujin's hand unencumbered by Seifer's vice-like grip moved to rest on her chest, as if trying to feel the force inside of herself. Cid, alarmed by her gentle speaking voice, paused for a moment before answering.

"Yes, Fujin—she was. And from all accounts of the events, she was very brave woman. I'll share what we have on file with you. You seem to take after her quite a bit." Fujin was silent.

"Uh …" Seifer squeezed her hand. "So, how did she find her? How did Pandemona even get here?"

"I don't have an answer for that, I'm afraid. She seems to have the ability to choose who she joins with and for how long … there's a good chance she junctioned herself to a member of SeeD on a mission to Centra. It could also just as easily have been any passerby with reason to visit Garden, really." Fujin's hand absentmindedly shifted to lace her fingers with Seifer's, and squeezed back.

"The only thing that's clear is that it was deliberate. There was no indication that you would be hurt though …" Cid folded his hands in his lap and leaned back in his chair. "So we planned on waiting to tell you until your return."

"And what are the *implications* of this?" Seifer briefly thought about whether or not Fujin would be comfortable with him asking questions like this while she was processing things, but he needed to be sure she was safe—everything else came second to that. "What exactly does Garden plan on doing now that they know Fujin has a sorceress in her head?"

"*Easy now*, Seifer." His voice must've had an edge to it, as Cid responded by holding his hands up in surrender. "We're not telling anyone *anything*, and we're not taking any actions. I'm actually disappointed that General Caraway found out. I'm going to need to start a line of communication with him anyway—I'll be sure to let him know this is a confidential topic." Seifer ran his hand over his face, and turned to look at Fujin again, who only stared off into the distance.

"So then *what is this about?* What do you need from us?" Seifer, unable to ratchet down his frustration, pulled his hand away from Fujin and motioned angrily at Cid. "What the fuck are you dancing around?"

"*Seifer*, watch yourself." Dr. Kadowaki's voice rang out from the other side of the room. Cid waved her off, and Fujin's hand darted out to grab Seifer's again—it was the only sign she'd given that she was still listening.

"It's *okay*." Cid interjected. "I understand why you're upset. You're worried for her. I understand that more than you know." His voice trailed off and he sighed heavily.

"And you're right—I *do* need to ask something of you now. You're the only other people at Garden besides the doctor and I that know about the sorceress threat Caraway mentioned. In the interest of keeping the operation close to the vest, I'm going to need you three to help me keep a dialogue open with the General, as well as continue gathering intel in Deling until the term begins." Cid opened the top drawer of his desk, and slid a folder across to Fujin.

"I know you wanted to delay this, but I'm afraid we have no choice—your SeeD documentation is in that folder; you're active as of right now. And I understand this is unorthodox, but …" Cid held out two fingers and pointed to Seifer and Raijin. "Seifer and Raijin will be operatives under your command. Upon completion of this mission, they will have earned their SeeD candidacy." Fujin straightened her back, and stretched her free hand to Cid's desk to grab the folder.
"This is essentially an undercover mission—everything must appear unimpeachably normal. Now, Seifer's exam status is, unfortunately, fairly high profile," Seifer grimaced as Cid struggled to find the correct phrasing. "As a result of that, the two of you would still need to participate in next year's exam so we don't arouse suspicions. And the three of you can never talk about this publicly." Fujin placed the folder in her lap, letting go of Seifer's hand to flip through it's contents as Cid spoke. "It's a tall order to ask of a new SeeD, who's also going through what you're going through. But I'm confident that you'll be successful with Seifer and Raijin at your side to—" Seifer, unimpressed as ever, interrupted him.

"Are you insane? She's sick. She needs to be here." His eyes darted to Fujin, waiting for her to agree.

Instead the room was graced with a long silence from her, as her palm pressed against the folder and she rolled the mission directive around in her head. Seifer could tell by the small movements of her face that she was turning the idea over in her mind, examining the angles, calculating the risks; reworking it and grinding away the unpleasant edges to extract the basic facts and shaping it into something smoother, like a stone leavened by the ebb and flow of the tide.

"And Seifer and Raijin will earn their status as SeeDs?" Cid nodded in affirmation. Her response, perfectly mulled and rounded, fell from her lips matter-of-factly, as if there had never been a question at all.

"We'll do it."

"I would expect nothing less," Cid smiled at her, and stood from his desk to walk over and shake her hand. "I'd like you to take off in a couple of days. I still need to go over a few details with you, and I'll also need to brainstorm some natural scenarios to put you in the same room as the General." Fujin shook her head.

"That won't be necessary sir, we already have an open channel with Caraway." She turned to look at Seifer, whose brow furrowed in confusion. "Seifer already knows Caraway's daughter."

She sure as hell couldn't mean what she was implying. Seifer, forgetting there were other people in the room, covered her hand with both of his.

"You can't be serious. I don't want to do this at all, and there's no way I'm going anywhere near that girl when you and I are …" Fujin gave him a stern look to remind him that people were watching, and he narrowed his eyes.

"What, you think I care what these people hear?" Seifer jerked his head at Cid to emphasize which specific person he meant. "No way are we doing this, and no way are we doing this like that."

"Seifer … the decision isn't yours," Cid leaned on his desk. "Fujin is your commanding officer—please tell me that I can trust you'll respect her."

"Of course I'll fucking respect her. That's what I'm trying to do right now." He was angry to be scolded by Cid, angry Fujin made the choice without him, and angry that she didn't need him to make the choice anyway. This was exactly why she hadn't told him about passing the exam—her fears he wouldn't be accepting hadn't been completely unfounded after all.

"Almasy, your tone needs to improve quickly or it will just be Fujin and Raijin on this mission," Cid warned sternly, casting a silence over the room. "Now, what was the nature of the relationship, with Caraway's daughter?"
"It was just a drunken casual hookup at a Dollet bar that didn't mean anything—there's no substance there." Fujin scoffed at his answer.

"She wanted to see you again. It's viable and you know it." She released his hand, and crossed her arms over her chest. "Believe me, I don't like it any more than you do. But … I need to know if there's anything else …" She didn't finish her sentence, and she didn't need to for his sake anyway. This story now ran like a taught thread through their past and present, and tied to something far in the future that they both felt was on the verge of coming unraveled. Seifer sighed, knowing he was already defeated.

"If something already exists, it would be convenient." Cid's eyes connected with Fujin's. "I don't have to tell you that the goals of the mission are paramount above all else. If we use the General's daughter as mark, we need to maintain it … at all costs." Fujin blushed and nodded, embarrassed and insulted that Cid wound imply she'd think otherwise.

"Very good—why don't I let the three of you get settled and get some rest. Maybe Seifer and Raijin could help you move into your new single dormitory, Fujin. You're a SeeD now, and it'll provide a secure location for meetings when you're back at Garden." Cid handed her a new keycard.

"We'll help her out, ya know." Raijin piped up after being silent for a long while. "Headmaster … is it safe for Fuu to go out the way she is right now?" Cid smiled at Raijin.

"Well Raijin, if I'm being honest, we can't do much for her here at Garden—she's just as safe out there as she is here. The force in her seems to be most active when it's near the sorceress, if you think about it. Of all the times that Seifer and Fujin have been in a room together, it showed itself when the sorceress was just a stone's throw away. The only way we'll learn more about what's going on is if we continue to draw that out." Cid shrugged. "It's the only thing that makes sense right now, but I genuinely have no clue." Raijin didn't seem pleased with the answer, but he nodded in agreement anyway.

"Alright, well why don't the three of you take a break. Fujin, I'll send for you tomorrow afternoon at some point. If you have any thoughts on the mission, we can go over them then."

"Yes sir." Fujin stood and saluted, and Seifer and Raijin reluctantly did the same. Cid gripped Fujin's arm, and smiled. "Good. I'll give you the file on your mother then, too." She nodded hesitantly, and pivoted to walk out of Cid's office with Seifer and Raijin close behind.

She kept her pace ahead of them as they made their way towards the elevator. When the doors to Cid's office closed and they were out of earshot, Seifer called out to her.

"Hey Fuu—slow down." Seifer quickened his stride as she arrived at the elevator and pressed the button impatiently.

"Yeah, you can only get so far, ya know?" Raijin held back a little allowing Seifer the space to arrive first. Fujin didn't turn to look at them, and kept her pale finger pressed on the button.

"Fuu …" When he finally caught up to her he couldn't get a look at her face, but he saw her chest rising and falling as she worked her way through hard breathing, and more than likely the fighting back of tears. They were at Garden, after all, and she couldn't show weakness in those hallways on the walk back to the dorms.

Seifer held up one finger to Raijin to stop him from interrupting, and placed his other hand on the familiar curve of her neck. She wordlessly complied with the gentle tugging of his touch as he pulled her against his chest.
Seifer nodded for Raijin to go first when the elevator arrived, and then shuffled himself and Fujin on board behind him. He cradled her head against his chest as she stood stiffly against him with her arms at her sides and her fists balled. Raijin leaned on the opposite wall of the elevator, staring down at his own hands.

The Posse had never dealt with grief before, and had never even talked much about their parents. They'd never known the details of what happened to them, and as far as they knew they could secretly still be alive somewhere. Not knowing allowed them to naively pretend that death hadn’t occurred. But Cid had just obliterated that myth for Fujin—her parents had died. It was a fact that she was an orphan, not just a theory.

Seifer bit his cheek and shot a glance to Raijin, who he wished wasn't there. He wasn't keen on Raijin seeing the side of himself he reserved only for Fujin. But, Raijin knew the score—he kept his eyes fixed on the floor as he reached out to press the emergency stop button on the elevator, bringing them to a light, jerking halt just before reaching the bottom floor. Seifer placed his free hand between her shoulder blades, and rested his chin on top of her head.

"I'm sorry …" He whispered, trying not to look at Raijin who was awkwardly scuffing his shoe on the floor to create anything else to look at besides this private moment. "It's going to be okay." Seifer felt her tremble, and he shook his head.

"You can't do this here, though. Not here in this elevator, not with that long walk back to the dorms. You've worked too hard to build up this reputation for yourself." She exhaled as he rubbed her back. "You're Fujin Sanada—you're invincible … you can do anything. Get through anything. And I'm not saying that because I lo—" He looked at Raijin again, whose cheeks seemed to be turning a slight shade of pink under his bronzed skin, and he felt Fujin's head angle upwards towards him. Seifer retreated from the sentiment quickly, clearing his throat.

"Let's just make it five more minutes, from point A to point B, okay? Then I'll let you do this." Fujin exhaled one, shaky long breath and nodded before pulling away from him and leaning against the back wall of the elevator. Seifer jerked his head towards Raijin, and their bronze friend released the emergency button to restart their journey downward.

It hadn't occurred to Seifer until now just how much they communicated silently—the three of them had their own language, composed of knowledge of each others habits over the years and so much time spent in each other's company. They made subtle movements in the moments before the doors opened that felt like a conversation. Fujin crossed her arms over her chest and placed one foot on the back wall of the elevator, balancing casually on one graceful leg. Raijin cracked his knuckles, and sheepishly smiled at Seifer who grimaced at the sound—he hated it when Raijin did that. Seifer stretched his leg and discreetly tapped Fujin's boot with his own, offering her a wry smile as she looked up at him. If the three of them had their own language, he and Fujin had their own dialect within it.

When the doors opened Seifer exited first, his white coat billowing out behind him. Raijin followed second, cracking his neck and glancing sideways back at Fujin, who was smoothing out her coat. She pushed off of the back wall with her foot, elegantly falling into step behind them.

Seifer led the march to the safety of Fujin's new room, flanked by Fujin and Raijin on either side. Even though he wasn't the ranking member of their party anymore, he always naturally fell into the role of leader. He supposed some things never changed. They fell into this rhythm together, always, and he usually relished leading them.

Today though, he woefully wished the responsibility wasn't his; how was he going to fix any of this for her? Some leader …
When they arrived, Fujin fumbled with the new keycard in her pocket and eventually scanned them in, immediately making her way towards her new bedroom. Seifer was about to follow after her when he felt Raijin's hand on his shoulder.

"Hey man, I … think this one's all you, ya know?" Seifer ran his hand over his face and nodded.

"Yeah, I think you're right. And hey, sorry about the elevator. I tried not to be too …." Raijin smiled and held up his hands.

"No worries Seif; I've always known you were a softie." Raijin chuckled as Seifer punched his arm lightly. "No really—I get it. Things are different now." Seifer shook his head and sighed.

"Alright," Raijin backed away. "Why don't I go to Fuu's old room and get started on packing some things up. Come over when you're ready … let's just have her stay put."

"Great plan Raij—I'll come find you." Raijin smiled and clapped Seifer on the shoulder, and then he was gone.

Seifer found her sitting on her mattress, staring out the window at her new view—she was on one of the better sides of the dorm, with the trees to the West and the faint skyline of Balamb in the distance. She'd taken off her jacket and her eye patch, letting the sun hit her pale skin.

"Can I sit with you?" Seifer asked her as he leaned against the doorframe. She turned to him, her face blank.

"Where's Raijin?" He stepped inside despite the lack of invitation—he wasn't sure he needed one anymore.

"He went to your old room to start packing … he thought that maybe you'd only want me here right now." Her head bobbed in agreement. That was his invitation. He sidled up next to her and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. She leaned against him gratefully, resting against his chest only for a moment before collapsing and sliding down farther to place her head in his lap, curling her body up into a small ball.

"Fuu …" Seifer's hand moved to stroke her hair, and under his touch he felt the tremor of fresh grief on old wounds. "I'm so sorry … I wish it weren't true." She shook harder as he rubbed her back.

"She's been stuck." Fujin said between quick breaths. "And in pain." Seifer had forgotten that Cid mentioned pain when he regaled them with sorceress history. It had clearly resonated loudly with her.

"And now she's stuck with me and I don't know how to free her. It's my fault …"

"It's not your fault Fujin." The late afternoon sun filtered in through her window, making her silver hair shine platinum—he tucked a few stray strands behind her ear. "Don't put that on yourself. You didn't start the war."

"It's my fault she's still here." She disagreed with him, her tears beginning to soak through his clothes. He tried to calculate how many times they'd found themselves in situations like this over the past week. Poor Fujin was being ripped apart lately …

"Hey, I mean it—don't say that." Seifer's voice was stern but he made sure his touch was gentle. "She chose to wait for you. She chose to find you, and out of all of us she's the only one who knows what's going on … She wouldn't want you to feel guilty, I know it."
"I don't even know what she wants. What kind of daughter..." Her voice trailed off as she shook.

"Fujin, don't." Seifer grew tired of the distance between them and pulled her up against his chest again, wrapping his arms around her. "You're expecting too much from yourself. We just found all this out."

"But I felt her. I knew something was different." Her hands clenched the fabric of his shirt.

"But you didn't know Fujin. You told me a few days ago that you had no clue what was going on. Don't let yourself forget that." She nodded, and pressed her face into his chest.

"And you shouldn't worry because we're gonna figure it out. I promise we will—we won't stop until we get some answers."

He thought back on last night, and to this morning too, when he'd almost said it. And then in the elevator, just moments ago when he would have said it had Raijin not been there. Who was he fooling anyway? What was he waiting for? They'd silently been devoted to each other for years. And even though silence was usually all they needed, this was one thing that had to be said... and one thing that might just make her feel better right now. He swallowed the lump that had formed in his throat.

"...I love you, Fuu. You know I'll do anything for you. We'll figure this out." Seifer heard her take a single, sharp breath before sniffling and moving to wipe tears from her cheeks. She pulled herself from his arms to look into his eyes.

"You what?" She asked, like she hadn't heard him correctly the first time. He smiled, and touched her chin. Before he could repeat himself, he was interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Fujin!" The familiar voice of Dr. Kadowaki called from outside her room. "Are you here? You forgot to take your medication with you earlier..." Fujin closed her eyes and sighed.

"I completely forgot..." She whispered to Seifer as she started pull away from him. "I need to get that." He put his hand on her thigh to stop her.

"I'll take care of it—stay here. You've talked to enough people today, I think." She nodded, still in shock at his confession, and let him go.

Seifer ran his hand through his hair nervously—he had to admit he wasn't feeling quite on top of his social game. He'd just told Fujin that he fucking loved her and didn't get a chance to hear what she thought about it. Dr. Kadowaki sure had impeccable timing...

"Hello, Dr. K." His voice was saturated with a mix of annoyance and anxiousness, as the opening door slowly revealed the doctor's face. "What can I do for you?"

"Is Fujin here?" Kadowaki tried to peer past him. "I have something to give her."

"She's here... but she's not really up for company. I'll take it though." He could tell the universal doctor code of ethics was spinning through her head at the thought of leaving someone else's medicine with him.

"Do you know what this is?" She asked him, holding up a small white envelope.

"Yup... I do." Seifer nodded, feeling slightly embarrassed on top of his nervousness now.
"Good, she needs to take it now." He reflexively nodded again and extended his hand to grab the envelope from her, but she jerked it out of his reach.

"Ah-ah." Kadowaki pulled another small brown bag out of the pocket of her white coat and handed it to him. "First, do you know what these are?" He arched an eyebrow and parted the edges of the bag with his fingers and groaned.

"Yes, Dr. Kadowaki, I do. You've made your point … good guess on the size." Seifer smirked and she rolled her eyes.

"I went off of height and gossip." She handed him the smaller white envelope as he closed the brown bag, and then swatted his arm. "And if you know what they are then use them. And if she has any questions tell her to come see me."

"That I will, doctor." Seifer mock-saluted and started to close the door.

"Seifer …" Dr. Kadowaki reached out to place her hand on top of his.

"Yeah?"

"You take care of her, okay?" The stern look in Kadowaki's brown eyes was usurped by concern.

"Of course I will." He dropped his usual mocking tone. She gave him a quick, knowing smile, and walked away.

Seifer doubled back into the room in search of a glass—finding one in the bathroom, and filling it with water. He heard Fujin emerge from the bedroom, her footsteps scuffing on the carpeted floor.

"Here," he held the envelope and glass of water out for her, suddenly feeling awkward about being the one to hand her this particular pill. "You should take it now." Shit, did that sound too demanding? He backpedaled.

"I mean, if you want to take it you should take it now. I'm not telling you to take it now. I don't want you to take it." Fujin gave him a horrified look as she quickly took both the envelope and the water from his hands. Their fingers brushed during the transfer, and the feeling ran through him like a shock.

"I mean, I want you to want to take it. Fuck." He rubbed his neck awkwardly as she chuckled.

"Calm down, Seifer. I'm taking this pill on under zero duress." She opened the envelope and popped the pill into her mouth, washing it down with a quick swig of water. "I don't think a child is something we need to add to our list of problems right now. Can you imagine..." She scoffed and looked down to the floor as the present and more pressing issues resurfaced in her mind.

Seifer actually could imagine it, but she didn't need to know about that. Not yet. He shook his head. Hyne, when he fell, he fell hard.

"Well, no fear. Dr. Kadowaki just handed me a whole bag of appropriately sized condoms … which is a sentence I'd never thought I'd say. So there's that." Fujin blushed and rubbed her eyes before covering her face.

"Dear Hyne, I never knew this many people would know so much about my personal life … and would be so incredibly involved." Seifer smiled and closed the space between them by wrapping his arms around her waist.
"Are you okay? Honestly." Fujin nodded.

"I will be … it's ridiculous anyway isn't it? I already knew I was an orphan …"

"It's not ridiculous." Seifer leaned in to kiss her cheek as her hands fell away from her face. "It's awful. It's worse than not knowing." She rested her head against him and murmured in agreement. He pulled her closer; her warmth spread over him and made him forget what he'd been anxiousness about in the first place.

"Seifer …" Fujin's voice reverberated against him and tickled his skin through his shirt.

"Mmmmm?" He looked down to meet her eyes and that was it—he was done for. All those problems with love that he'd come up with this morning ... he couldn't even remember what they were. All he wanted was to feel her warmth and to hear her voice. All he wanted was more.

"I love you, too."
He loved her? Her. Fujin. Seifer, the sun personified, actually in love with the pallid, parentless, ghost of Garden? The girl with the wind howling through her bones and a mother-sorcerer actively carving out space to live in her head.

When Seifer told her he loved her, it knocked the wind out of her. She’d been right relieved when Dr. Kadowaki came to the door, awkward subject and all, if only to give her a moment to process it. He loved her? Her. Fujin.

Seifer, the sun personified, actually in love with the pallid, parentless, ghost of Garden? The girl with the wind howling through her bones and a mother-sorcerer actively carving out space to live in her head. Could he have picked a worse person to fall in love with? And furthermore, how was he so sure?

There was no question in her mind that she loved him, but she didn’t think she’d ever heard him say he’d loved anything but an inanimate object before. He loved Hyperion. He loved his trench coat. He loved the ocean, and when monsters dropped a Mega-Elixir after battle. He loved it when they had pizza for breakfast in the cafeteria …

And sure, Seifer was a romantic… but not like that. Not flowers, candles, and red hearts romantic. He was an otherworldly romantic. He had grand, poetic, sweeping, ideas about life—the beauty of struggle, and being part of something bigger than himself. He’d never put it quite as eloquently, but that’s what romance was to him. Of course, he had just pulled off a pretty classically romantic evening last night …

Fujin stood back, stunned, as he peered through the door to talk with Dr. Kadowaki. In all those days that had passed over the summer, she hadn’t realized just how much older he seemed. The angles of his face had become more defined, his shoulders broader—if that were even possible—even his hands looked surer and stronger as they clutched the edges of the door. Was it over the summer, or just over this past week? Hard to tell, honestly.

When he returned to her, pill in hand and adorably awkward about it, she’d wanted to poke fun at his childishness on these topics. The great Seifer Almasy with his foot in his mouth about something she saw as a clear nonissue.

But then, as she tossed the drug into her mouth to casually swallow it …. she caught him in the act of dreaming. A whole possible future flashed behind his eyes; a what-if scenario. Not a wanted-right-in-this-moment future, but a possible future.

And that’s when she knew. That was the moment she realized that Seifer wasn’t a boy anymore. Seifer was a man now, with ideas of things he wanted. He’d managed to pass the threshold of manhood discreetly, too. With how much she watched him, how had that been possible? He had a chiseled jaw, strong purposeful hands, and he thought about things like the future. And he thought about that future with her. Fujin. Who he said he loved.
Fujin grew up a little on her own in that minute, too. They hadn't even been together a day … but then … they'd been together forever. It was a blurry line; it was a clear line … yet it wasn't even linear. She decided to tell him she loved him back, in its own stand-alone and pointed sentence, so he'd know there was no question.

He'd been pleased—his lips on hers told her so.

The night marched forward, and at some point Seifer decided it was time to come up for air and go help Raijin pack up her room and so she could get moved in. Hyne knows how long they'd kept him waiting. Fujin offered to help but he insisted she stay behind. *We've got it under control. Don't put yourself through talking to your roommate right now.*

The three of them sat together now at her small standard-issue kitchen table, eating a pizza that Seifer had gone to get from the cafeteria as Raijin helped her place some of her things around her new suite. They'd moved everything, helped her get unpacked, and she was *eternally grateful* as she wasn't sure she had the bandwidth to figure out where everything should even go. Fujin lived light, thankfully—she didn't have much in the way of clutter to carry with her.

She watched the two of them quietly as they talked about getting in some time in the training center tomorrow, both commenting that they felt rusty after taking it easy in Dollet. Raijin began to laugh garrulously as he recounted an incident in the training center before they left.

"Man, it was hilarious." He cracked himself up as he told the tale. "Dincht didn't see it coming—in the middle of fighting an Ochu he just got *slimed from behind* by a Grat. It was a bad day for him, I think."

"Did you help him?" Seifer asked. "I wouldn't have helped him. Hyne, *that guy*. He's so … small and *jumpy*.

"Well that's why I had'ta help. He couldn't move. He—" Raijin started to laugh again, snorting. "He was just flailing his arms around, tryin' to get free. That Ochu would have swallowed the little guy up in *one bite*, ya know. Man, I don't know how people get caught in situations like that."

Fujin smiled, more at how animated he was than at the story itself. She was glad to have Raijin's light and cheerful presence around tonight. She was glad to have Raijin's light and cheerful presence around tonight—his buoyancy provided a nice counterweight to Seifer's dreamy depths and her brooding practicality. Everything had been so heavy and serious with her and Seifer, and with her life in general … she was glad to talk about anything but *feelings*.

"Say Fuu—remember when Dincht asked you to go to that movie in the Quad with him that one time?" Raijin pivoted towards her, and she nodded and rolled her eyes at the memory.

"*Wait*, what happened?" Seifer asked, perplexed.

"Dincht asked Fuu out on a date. What was it, last year or the year before, when you guys had that martial arts class together? Guess he liked your moves." Raijin winked at her and she shoved him.

"*Zell Dincht*?" Seifer scoffed as he reached to take a sip of his soda. "*Did he cry when you said no?*" Raijin bit back a grin and gave her a sideways glance, and Seifer's perplexed face shifted to shock. "*You didn't*, right?"

"He didn't say it was a *date*. He invited me, Raijin and that girlfriend of yours … what was her name, Bridget?" Fujin held out her hand in expectation of name from Raijin.

"I dunno Fuu, I can't remember. All I remember Zell puttin' his arm around you one minute, and the next minute him being flat on the ground." Raijin chuckled as he made a sweeping, laying flat
gesture with his arm.

"Combat reflexes." She shrugged. "You don't sneak up on a mercenary in training."

"Where was I for this?" Seifer leaned forward, his elbows on the table.

"I dunno … we might not have told ya we went." Raijin was breathless with laughter, and Fujin began to chuckle too. She caught a flash of a grimace on Seifer's face, but it disappeared quickly.

"Man, time sure flies." Raijin's laughter dissipated, as he crumpled up his napkin to set it on his plate. "Martial arts class to SeeD—I'm proud of ya Fuu. The perks are great too. I'm gonna have to use your new place as a getaway for my lady friends." Raijin wiggled his eyebrows at her.

"Uh, Raijin …" Seifer paused mid-bite. "I'll probably be over here a lot. Not gonna have to worry about it, pal."

"AHHHH, right." It took Raijin a minute to make the connection. Fujin blushed and Seifer smirked as he took a bite of his pizza. She wondered why he had to be so forward about everything in front of Raijin. But, she supposed it wasn't much different than how Seifer would normally act when talking about his escapades. The only difference was that she was the escapade. Come to think of it, he was being fairly restrained.

"So …" Raijin sensed a shift in mood, and an opportunity to get some clarity. "Have you thought about Deling at all? How we're gonna pull it all off?"

"Nope." Fujin answered firmly, placing the remaining crust of her pizza down on her napkin. "And I really don't want to talk about that tonight."

"Okay, Fuu. But since we're all here, I just thought we—"

"Raijin," Seifer waved his hand at their friend to get him to stop. "She doesn't want to talk about it—just drop it."

The hurt expression on Raijin's face from being scolded by both of his friends made Fujin feel incredibly guilty, especially after all the work he'd just done for her and how kind he'd been this past week. She shook her head and backpedaled a bit.

"No, it's fine. I'm sorry Raij, I'm kinda a mess still." She reached over to touch his hand. "You and I are mainly going to do some recon work—pretty basic. Seifer has the trickier job, obviously, of keeping our channel to Caraway open …" Her voice trailed off, as Seifer quietly took another bite and stared down at Fujin's hand resting on Raijin's.

"Right … I forgot about that part. Sorry." Raijin tried to change the subject and stay upbeat. "Well, maybe you and I can have some fun while we're in Deling, huh? I hear they have some mean card players there."

"Yeah, I hear they do." She smiled and squeezed his hand.

"Hey, so it's getting kinda late. Think we should pack it in?" Seifer stood up abruptly to start clearing their plates, closing the pizza box and setting it on the counter. Raijin shrugged, and stood to stretch his back.

"Uh … yeah, I suppose so—I guess it's been a long day, ya know. What time do you want to get together tomorrow?" He asked Fujin directly as a sign of respect for their new mission hierarchy.
"I'll just come find you Raijin. I have some stuff to go over with Cid first, and Seifer and I …" She wasn't sure how to finish the sentence without making everyone feel awkward, so she decided to pretend she never said it at all. "I'll come find you—just stay on campus." He moved behind her to rest his hands on her shoulders.

"Sounds good—you ready Seif?" Raijin looked to Seifer, who was still leaning against the kitchenette counter and starting off into the distance absentmindedly.

"Yeah man, let's get a move on." Raijin backed away toward the door and Fujin stood up to say goodbye to Seifer, disappointed to learn he was leaving. Raijin exited first, distracted when a couple of Fujin's new neighbors waved hello to him.

"Sorry about him …" Seifer rolled his eyes and jerked his head in Raijin's direction. "Sometimes I think he's doing it on purpose." Fujin made a doubtful face at him—unsure of what he meant and too tired to care—and sighed.

"It's fine … normally we'd dive right into the mission details. It's not abnormal to ask about it." Seifer raised his eyebrows and shot her a disapproving look, but dropped it quickly in pursuit of other conversation.

"So …" He leaned against the doorframe, crossing his arms over his chest and craning his neck to watch Raijin disappear down the hallway a few feet. "Did you want me to stay with you tonight? I mean I get it if you want to be alone." He kept his voice low, and held his hand out, making a circling motion to illustrate his *casualness* with the question. "I know you've had a lot of people in your business today, so if you need some space I—"

"No, not from you." Fujin mirrored him, leaning against the wall and reaching out to press her hand to his chest, her disappointment happily ameliorated. The corner of Seifer's mouth curled into a crooked half-smile. He looked over his shoulder to check for Raijin, who'd just stopped to chat with a couple of girls that lived just a few doors down. Deeming it safe, he leaned in slyly to kiss her. When he pulled away he pressed his lips together and made a low and husky *pleased* sound that made her stomach flutter.

"Why don't I go grab a few things then. And hey, how about a movie? Let's try to relax a little—put on some pajamas … have a normal night while we can." She could feel her face beginning to flush, but if he saw it he didn't let on. "I'll be back in 10 minutes or so."

"That sounds nice." She let her hand slide away from him as he took a step backward and pivoted to walk after Raijin. He shoved his hands in the pockets of his coat, turning around to take a few more backward steps to keep her in view. Raijin, finished with his conversation, spied Seifer's current vulnerable state and took him by surprise with a powerful shove.

"Alright, Romeo. Get movin'. You'll probably be back in a few minutes anyway, ya know." Seifer scowled at the comment, and Raijin waved to Fujin as the pair made their way down the hall. "See ya tomorrow Fuu-sama!" She waved back, and watched them disappear before retreating into her room.

Fujin closed the door behind her and pressed her back up against it, only resting there for a moment before wrapping her mind around the fact that Seifer was *coming back to stay over*, and that there were still things to do. Not much though—the only thing they *hadn't* done when pulling her whole room together tonight was make her bed. She moved to her bedroom to finish the task.

Outside of Seifer being *her* Seifer now—and that of course being the undisputable *best thing*—she also felt incredibly lucky to have the two of them as friends. Even with the Pandemonia, the
sorceress, and the wind … and the fact that she finally knew the fate of her parents after all these years …

She decided not to think about that right now, though, and instead thought about her new space, her new position as a member of SeeD, and Seifer and Raijin following close behind. And then just Seifer…

*Seifer said that he loved her. He'd been the *first* to say it. What sadness could even touch that?*

*… Maybe having to turn around in a couple of days and let him date the beautiful girl from the bar as part of their mission. Maybe that could touch it.*

Fujin knew she was going to have a hard time justifying to him *why* she'd mentioned Rinoa so quickly as an answer to getting easier access to General Caraway. She wasn't even positive it would work, given that the General indicated they had a fraught relationship. But, sitting exposed and vulnerable at the news of her mother and father, she'd at least needed to appear professional and not break down in a fit of sobs in front of Cid Kramer. What could be more professional than putting your own interests aside for the better of a mission? She wasn't sure Seifer would understand any of that …

She sighed and placed her pillows, now properly encased, back on the freshly made bed, before moving towards her new dresser to find appropriate pajamas. As she picked through the articles of clothing, she found mostly too-large t-shirts with ridiculous sayings on them that Raijin had given to her as gifts over the years. Punny ones that said things like "Have a GRAT Summer" with a large picture of said Grat, or "Do You Even Chocobo?" with an image of a confused bird on it … she wasn't even sure what that one meant.

*These wouldn't do….*

Fujin dug deeper in the drawer to recover a thin, purple, jersey t-shirt she'd normally wear for working out, and a pair of small black cotton shorts she'd never worn *anywhere*, but had been *meant* for a gym class of some sort a few years ago. They were the least offensive or childish items of sleep clothing she could come up with. She'd have to go shopping for something more presentable at some point, she supposed.

As she stripped down to change and simultaneously contemplated burning her entire wardrobe, a bright orange object perched on her bedroom windowsill caught her eye. Fujin pulled on the shorts and snaked the t-shirt over her head as she walked closer to examine it.

She was mortified to find that it was the tiny stuffed animal that Seifer had won her at the Balamb Carnival, many more years ago than she'd like to admit. The carnival worker had told them it was a "Moomba," but they'd never seen one before and hadn't seen one since. She was pretty sure they weren't real.

Propped up next to the toy was a picture of the two of them together in the cafeteria, late in the evening on the night of that infamous SeeD ball—the one where everyone's hearts were apparently broken for a variety of reasons and *no one ever talked about it again*. They were still dressed up in the photo, and Seifer's arm was slung around the back of her chair—not touching her in the slightest, but hovering just out of reach, encircling her.

Fujin kept those sorts of nostalgic things *privately* stashed away, tucked in a box under her bed. *Why were they out?* She groaned and blushed, even though no one was there to witness her embarrassment. *Seifer had found it, of course. What funny little games he liked to play.* She decided to leave the items where they were and not mention that she noticed them at all … she could play
those games too. She also decided not to search for the box and see what else was in it … that would only lead to more embarrassment and she didn't need anything else to make her feel more anxious today.

As if on cue, the sound of knuckles wrapping on the door caused her to jump.

"Hey, back faster than I thought." Seifer yelled in to her as he opened the door. "I don't have very many movies … and I know it runs the risk of being a little insensitive buuuuut 'The Sorceress' Knight' seemed kinda hilarious right now so that's what I brought." Fujin moved to the doorway of her bedroom and gazed out at him, clad in the same clothes he'd left in—clearly he was not concerned about clothing protocol for adult sleepovers. She thought for a moment that maybe she'd misinterpreted his intent to stay over altogether, until she saw him place a handful of things down on her small kitchen table—a toothbrush and some sort of masculine looking face wash being among them.

"I should've known you'd pick that campy old thing." She shook her head. He walked past her her, movie in hand and his face twisted in put-on shock at her comment as he motioned for her to take a seat on the bed. She climbed up and crossed her legs, leaning over to watch him as he started the movie.

"Hey, this is a classic. A little dated? Sure. But campy … no way." Fujin laughed at his weak attempt to defend one of his childhood favorites. "Okay, so it's a little campy. But you know I love it, so just humor me." Seifer grabbed the remote from the top of her dresser, and made his way to the bed. Before settling next to her, he paused momentarily to set the remote down and peel off his clothes, leaving nothing on but a pair of small black boxer briefs. So that was his sleeping attire this evening.

Her eyes took in the sight of him as he made quick work of messily folding each discarded item; that old silver necklace of his hung away from his body and rang out a steely sound as he leaned to set his clothes on her desk. Hyne, she'd never seen him lit up like that before from a good viewing distance when it was just the two of them—she spotted that faint trail of hair traveling downward from his belly button, and the movements of his lean muscles, even in the smallest and simplest gestures of folding a t-shirt. Sure, she'd been graced with seeing him like this on days off at the beach, or when patching up a wound in the field, and even over these past couple of days … but that was different; that had been rushed. This showing of skin came with slow intention, not by circumstance or mistake.

She wasn't sure where to move when Seifer climbed onto the bed behind her, so she sat deathly still as his long and muscular legs stretched out on either side of her. With his Fujin's in social distress senses piqued, he wrapped an arm around her to pull her back against him as he settled in at the head of the bed, casually raising one knee.

He switched off the light on her nightstand and then reached for the remote and pressed play, tossing it on the bed next to the pillows that he'd pushed behind himself. Her heart skipped at the feeling of his weight against her back. She awkwardly adjusted her arms to find a comfortable but unobtrusive place for them, deciding to loop one over his raised leg. She felt his chest move against her in a hushed chuckle—he definitely noticed how tense she was, but he didn't say a word. Instead, he reached one sinewy arm over her chest and leaned his cheek against her head. Fujin was continually amazed by how expert and confident he was with his movements.

"Alright, get ready to have you mind blown by some Grade A cinema." She realized she had to speak back to him at some point, before he thought she'd gone completely mute.

"Are you planning on reciting the whole movie like usual?" Fujin quipped as casually as she
possibly could, and he scoffed playfully.

"Do you even know me at all?" He rubbed her arm absently. *Hyne, she wished she was as comfortable as he was.*

As the movie played on, and Seifer animatedly acted out his favorite parts and interjected facts about the film she’d heard countless times before, she found herself intermittently slipping away in thought—despite how captivating he was. She hoped that it wasn’t the reason he’d finally stopped talking, leaving them sitting together in silence with the blue light of the film illuminating their faces in the dark.

Fujin wondered if Seifer felt how bittersweet this was, too. Her mind was blocked up with thoughts of the sorceress, her parents, the mission, Rinoa—it seemed unfair that all those thoughts were tied up with him. Their first days together should have been epic and dedicated to just to the newness of them. But instead, everything was overshadowed.

"Hey ..." Seifer shifted behind her halfway through the film, untangling their limbs to sit beside her as he fished for the remote and muted the movie. "Where’d you go? I mean I know I’m no Zell Dincht but I like to think I’m pretty entertaining." Darn. He’d noticed.

"Sorry … it’s not you. I just can’t stop thinking about everything." She shrugged apologetically.

"Do you wanna talk about it? Because we can ... any of it." Seifer emphasized any of it so she knew it encompassed all pressing topics—especially Rinoa. She knew he wanted to talk about that. He ran his fingers along the back of her hand and tilted his face to kiss her palm. She shook her head as her stomach flipped.

"Okay, well … do you want to not talk about it, then?" A devious smile flashed on his lips, as his hand slid down her arm and found her waist. "I know something that could help take your mind off of things."

"You're insatiable, you know that?" She replied and swatted his hand, even though something in her chest fluttered and her cheeks felt hot.

"Well, yeah I am. This is about you, though." His lips found her earlobe as his hand trailed lower to tug at the drawstring on her cotton shorts. Fujin froze, grabbing his upper arm tightly—still so unsure of where to put her hands on him in general. She’d tried for so many years to make sure she didn’t put her hands in the wrong spots that putting them in those spots still felt wrong to her.

"Fuu, I’m not made of glass. You won’t break me." He whispered as his hand dove a little lower to run a finger along her waistband. She knew it was meant to be sensual, but on her usually untouched skin it just wound up feeling ticklish—she stifled a laugh and he pulled away from her, staring in disbelief.

"Are you laughing?" Her hand shot up to cover her mouth and she shook her head. "I gotta say I’ve never been laughed at in situations like this. Here I thought you were just nervous still."

"I'm not laughing at you, it just tickles." Seifer arched a determined eyebrow.

"Tickles, eh?" He leaned in again so that his lips hovered above her ear. He kissed her earlobe once before gently nibbling it, and then continued to sink his hand lower. He smirked against her when she gasped.

"I think I gave you the wrong impression last night—this isn't always going to be all ... tender and I
love you’s. I want more than that.” He whispered in her ear as his fingers moved slowly in that skilled, small circle of his and she couldn’t stifle a moan. He sucked in a low, ragged breath at the sound, and pressed into her more firmly. "Out there you might be my commander. But in here I'm yours. So …Don't. Laugh. Again.”

Seifer moved to place one deep kiss on her lips, before drawing away from her and pulling at her hips so that she slid down on her back in one swift and smooth motion. His aggressiveness shocked her … or rather, surprised her in that moment. She wasn’t actually shocked by what was happening right now. She'd been shocked last night when he wasn’t aggressive.

He leaned back on his knees to pull at her shorts, quickly snaking them off, and then returned to hover above her and kiss her cheek, her neck, her collarbone, before his lips began a journey farther southward. Fujin grabbed his shoulder.

"Seifer …"

"Didn't I say I was in charge?” He kissed her stomach, his hands roaming everywhere and pushing the fabric of her shirt up so his lips could touch the soft flesh that was heaving beneath. A jolt of nervousness ran through her, and her skin broke out in goose bumps as her lungs grew tight, unable to catch her breath. Seifer paused his journey to gaze up at her, the faint light from the television flashing in his green eyes.

"Relax babe," he whispered low and husky, still trying to convince her it was okay despite his speech about not being tender. "Let me lead.”

Those hands of his—large, strong, and warm—continued their movements, but his lips only resumed their mission when Fujin, overwhelmed by the sensation and finally curious about what would come next, let her grip slip away from him in silent permission. Her stomach burned as he smiled up at her before traveling downward, draping one of her legs over his shoulder so he could get close enough to kiss the space between her thighs. Her back arched in the shape of a crescent moon, her pale skin lowly lit by the blue light of the now ending movie. She screamed his name, and she could have sworn she heard him chuckle and whisper Not laughing now, are you? But she wasn't sure—her mind was full of static, blank desire for him. She'd been wrong the other night in the Dollet bar, when he'd sat across from her larger than life and she'd told herself he was too big for her mind to contain. Come to find out, her mind stretched infinitely and pushed everything else out to make space for him.

Seifer rose back up to kiss her cheek smugly afterward—quite pleased with himself, once again, for drawing out those loud and feverish sounds. And he was right to be smug, because that, Fujin thought, had been epic. She decided that Seifer was her general, her commander, her captain. She’d let him lead her anywhere.

His hand fished for the remote lost under his pillow and he shut off the television before sweeping her up, breathless and shaking, in his arms. "G'night Fuu … love you." He pulled the blankets up over them both.

"I thought you said it wasn't always about 'I love you's.'" Fujin's voice answered back to him, soft with approaching slumber.

"Well, I guess you caught me in a lie.” He ran his hand through her hair and yawned. "Now try to sleep … wake me up if you need more distracting."

Well, Seifer figured blurting it out over coffee at her kitchen table was just as good as any place to do
it. No eavesdropping ears or prying eyes to analyze them. No Raijin shoving his nose in where it didn't belong …

Plus, the feeling in the little den they'd created for themselves was still casual. He was even still in his underwear, for Hyne's sake. Sure, she'd somehow managed to have the wherewithal to get fully dressed and showered and had gone to get them said coffee, but still. How upset could she get with him, stripped down to just skin, in the early hours of the morning before either of them had a full cup of coffee? Especially after last night... he put that extra pep in her step today, after all.

Seifer was surprised she hadn't just cut to the chase yet, anyway. It was very unlike Fujin to dance around a conversation. She was usually very precise with her words and pointed with her plans. Maybe she was just worried about what his plans were … which is something that he just wished she wouldn't be. There was no reason for it.

To him it was obvious—he told her he loved her and he meant the words. And furthermore, he'd gone down on her last night, which wasn't something he even particularly enjoyed one way or another before this. He was a skilled lover, but not always a reciprocal one—and if he was being honest, he usually just looked out for himself. That all changed with Fujin, though—she came along and suddenly he found himself wanting to do it. And getting something out of it for himself hadn't even been a priority last night. Love seemed to be manifesting itself as a thing Seifer needed to express physically, and so he did what he did to show her.

The fact that she was still nervous about what his plans were for the Deling mission, so much so that she wouldn't even acknowledge it was happening, was maddening to him. Fuck, he didn't need to talk about why she volunteered him—trying to impress the new boss, and trying not to appear weak; he understood that part. What he didn't understand is why she wasn't assuming he had boundaries now. She should have known better … but, he supposed they weren't identically minded. His fervent physical demonstrations may not have been straightforward enough for his minimalist silver creature to process.

Seifer twisted his mug in a circle as she made small talk about how oddly busy the cafeteria was that morning, and how the wind hadn't acted up since that night on the boat; he only heard a smattering of what she said, before clearing his throat and cutting her off cold mid-sentence.

"I'm not going to sleep with her." Fujin stiffened in her chair and raised her eyebrows in surprise at the left-field assertion. "I'm not going to do anything resembling that."

She pressed her lips together in a thin pale line, and twisted her mug in her hands as he had just moments ago.

"I just wanted to clear that up … in case there was any doubt. I'll do everything I can to make this mission successful outside of that, but I'm friend-zoning it as soon as I can." Fujin sighed, and turned to look at the clock on the wall—he knew she was wondering why the fuck he chose this early hour to get into all this.

"Listen Seifer—that part of the mission is yours. I trust your judgement, obviously. Do what you need to do to."

"Fuck the mission—do you trust me?" Seifer pulled one of her fidgeting hands from her cup and gripped it tightly in his own.

"Implicitly." She gripped his hand in return, and he smiled.

"Okay, then consider that one less thing to worry about." Fujin nodded and gave his hand another
squeeze before hurriedly and intentionally busying herself with other matters. She stood up from the
table, stretching her back and walking to grab a pad of paper and a pen from the kitchenette counter.

"Well, do you want to take a shower and then help me go over some ideas for the mission before I
meet with Cid?"

"Sure, love to." He paused, twisting his coffee in his hands again before deciding whether he should
broach the next topic. In the spirit of trust and honesty, he figured now was also just as good a time
as any for this discussion too.

"Hey Fuu …" Seifer stood up to follow her to the counter and placed his hand on her back. "How
long have you known about Raijin?"
The three of them spent all of their time together—it wasn't that strange that two like-minded men, brothers of circumstance but not of blood, would fall for the same silver girl. He'd always suspected it. He definitely wasn't surprised. He was a little surprised by how salty he was feeling about it though.

A part of Seifer knew that opening a box that Fujin kept under her bed could lead to trouble, but his curiosity got the best of him, as it usually did. He peeled it open with hesitant fingers, fully understanding he was invading her privacy. But did they keep secrets from each other anyway? And didn't he already know everything about her? He never was one to wait for an invitation. Plus, he thought he'd seen a sliver of his own face inside that box through the spaces between the well-worn cardboard flaps she'd folded so intentionally—a memory of him in the box. He figured that it gave him a right to it, too.

The photo in question was one them after that SeeD ball together—one that he'd never seen before. Hell, he couldn't even remember someone taking pictures. She was framed front and center in the shot and Seifer was in the background, off-center and out of focus. Raijin was nowhere to be found … he must have been the photographer.

It turned out that most of the items in the box were Seifer-centric. He thought it was adorable that she'd held on to some weird little drawing he'd made on her homework once, along with that nonchalant thank you note he'd scrawled on her dinner napkin that one day they were both in detention. Fujin, relentlessly loyal, wouldn't rat him out for being the culprit of whatever it was they were in trouble for. They'd only been allowed out of the disciplinary room to sit and eat their food in silence in the cafeteria, with a Garden Master glaring over them. He'd passed the note to her then.

It was endearing to find that the weird stuffed animal he'd won her at the carnival had been important enough for her to keep—what had it been called again, a Mamba? He also found it kinda sexy that she'd been the one to steal his favorite t-shirt. So that's where that had gone, the stealthy little minx.

The discovery of the photo album was purely accidental. Seifer had been placing the things he'd removed back inside the box, when the cover the small album fell open to reveal an inscription written in a familiar and illegible handwriting, undated, unaddressed, and unsigned—as if written for fear of being found. If it had been picked up by anyone else, it would have been unrecognizable. But to Seifer it was obvious who it was intended for and who it was from.

I don't think this should be mine anymore, ya know? Even though I know it's never going to be me, I'll always think about you. I hope this reminds you how I always see you.

Seifer thumbed through the glossy pages slowly, confused at first, because every photo was just a different picture of Fujin. Intimate pictures taken of her in unexpected moments, like one of her studying in her dorm, one of her sleeping on a train—moments when she was herself and vulnerable; not Fujin the warrior, but Fujin the girl. These were photos of Fujin as he saw her through his own eyes, rough edges sanded away, eyepatch removed, fiercely graceful. Some of the pictures were from days that he remembered, and he could oftentimes find evidence of his presence in them. His coat,
his hand, his bedspread, Hyperion leaning against the wall. But he was never in them. The photographer's gaze was intent on Fujin as its subject. The images weren't a random collection taken accidentally over a period of time; she was the point of them altogether.

He came across a blank space in the album—the former home of the photo of the two of them together at the SeeD ball, which Fujin must have decided to remove and appreciate separately. Beneath that empty space was a photo of her and Raijin, on some sort of off-campus adventure together. The image showed Raijin wrapped around her and resting his chin on her head to hold the camera out at an uncomfortable distance to get a good shot. Fujin was covering her face, embarrassed, and Raijin was flashing his usual toothy grin. Seifer wondered if he'd been with them on that day.

They'd bought that camera as a birthday gift for Raijin a couple of years ago—Fujin's idea, of course. Over the years Seifer learned she was a nostalgic little thing, but she wasn't comfortable with people knowing about it. She knew that Raijin would be the only member of their trio to put seriousness aside and bother to commemorate the Posse's life together, so better to give the camera to him, who was always comfortable doing anything that Fujin asked him to. Raijin apparently took the opportunity to archive his thoughts on her, print it out, and then fucking show it to her without Seifer even knowing it had transpired. Raijin's little note was subversive too, seeming to intentionally hint at the core issue that had been between Seifer and Fujin all these years—the idea that Seifer didn't see her.

Well, wasn't that ballsy of him. This past week had just been full of revelations

Seifer scanned the rest of album quickly, not quite as surprised as he probably should've been. Raijin was always closer to Fujin than to him. He had been overly concerned with how Seifer had been treating her recently. He had been awfully mopey this morning alongside his supportive comments. The three of them spent all of their time together—it wasn't that strange that two like-minded men, brothers of circumstance but not of blood, would fall for the same silver girl. He'd always suspected it. He definitely wasn't surprised.

He was a little surprised by how salty he was feeling about it though. Just how many things did they keep secret from him? Just what was said between the two of them? And what had he done when he said it?

It was hard to say how long ago this tender little gesture had passed from Raijin's pea-sized brain to Fujin's hand, but he didn't have much time to try and figure it out then—Raijin's footsteps were returning, plodding and heavy, to move more of Fujin's things to her new room. Seifer placed the album back in the box and closed the cardboard flaps just before his friend popped his head in the room. He stood up painfully fast and awkward with the box in his hands, stuffing the small orange Mamba-thing and the photograph discreetly in the pocket of his coat when he realized he hadn't returned them to their rightful place.

Raijin babbled on to him about this being the last of it, moving a few more things, and then maybe getting something for dinner since it was so late. Seifer, distracted by the calm casualness of Raijin's face, agreed too quickly to whatever was being said. As Seifer was examining his friends countenance for any sign of impending betrayal, Raijin was taking the box out of his hands to continue the moving process, shoving money at Seifer to go pick up said dinner. He found himself walking toward the cafeteria, unable to speak, after Raijin sauntered off with the last pile of boxes … returning to Fujin without him. He wondered if that had been intentional. Raijin wasn't exactly an onion with a lot of layers though, so it was hard to believe he was angling for anything. Almost everything existed on the outmost shell of him. Except for this, of course …
Seifer made a brisk walk to the cafeteria, impatiently waiting in the always longer than necessary
line. He'd even been standing a couple of people behind the one and only Squall Leonhart, but didn't
have the focus to rib the guy. *Raijin actually had feelings for Fujin. But he said he didn't … right?
And she never told him that Raijin had breathed a word about it.* Seifer felt like he'd caught them
both in a lie.

When he finally made it to the counter, he ran his hand over his face in genuine confusion about
what to order—forgetting for a moment he'd been sent there for a pizza. It wasn't very often that
Seifer was so jarred he couldn't concentrate. A couple of students behind him groaned as his eyes
strained up at the menu, his hand over his mouth in quiet contemplation.

*Almsay, you gonna stare at the menu all night? I ain't getting any younger.* The words that came
from the woman working behind the counter snapped him out of the trance he was in.

*A large pepperoni pizza to go.* As he walked away to grab a few drinks from a nearby cooler and
snagged some paper plates, Seifer doubled back to amend his order. *And onions—chop some up and
put 'em right in the sauce.*

When he returned to Fujin's room found them sitting on her small couch together, after having just
moved it to a new spot. Both were glad to see him, but Fujin's eyes grew wider, brighter, and clearer
when he came through the door.

It *was* always him, wasn't it? Seifer supposed there was really nothing to worry about …

As they unpacked the remaining items around Fujin's room, Seifer noted she needed more creature
comforts to make it look like someone *actually* lived there. He told himself that was why he placed
the small stuffed animal and the photo of them together on her windowsill. It had nothing to do with
marking his territory, or wordlessly telling them both he knew something. *Nothing at all*…

The actual *need* for worry and agitation aside, Seifer couldn't hold back a smile when Raijin took a
bite of his pizza. On top of not being an onion with many layers, Raijin also didn't *like* onions in
general. Upon receiving Raijin's complaint Seifer only shrugged. *Oops, guess I forgot,* he said
between mouthfuls. Which was a thin excuse since they'd been ordering the same exact pizza for
years. Apparently Seifer was more than a *little* salty.

Raijin only continued to eat and talk about things he shouldn't be talking about, touching Fujin in
ways he shouldn't be touching her, and making her laugh when he just *shouldn't*—though Seifer felt
bad for thinking that, knowing the shit day she'd been having. He didn't feel so guilty about it when
Fujin's hand found Raijin's, though. Once Seifer saw that nonsense, he abruptly ended dinner by
packing up their food and clearing everyone's plates. Anything to get their bronze *friend* out of there
and get her to himself again.

It was hard for him to keep a lid on what'd he'd found in that little Pandora's Box as he and Raijin
walked back to their dorm together. The words were on the tip of his tongue as his friend unwittingly
volunteered to put himself in harms way in the training center tomorrow. *We need to get some
training in before Deling, ya know? I'm not nearly as on top of my game if I haven't been working
with you.* Seifer bit his tongue—he was unsure of where the conversation would go if he *did* say
something. Was he mad? Was he worried about Raijin still catching feelings? Was he
worried *about* Raijin? He wasn't even sure he wanted to know …

Seifer made quick work of getting out of there, only stopping for a long overdue shave and to collect
his toothbrush, his favorite movie, and a handful of other things—unable to focus as Raijin plopped
himself down on his bed and yelled out to ask what he was doing.
Going back to Fujin's ... I'm staying over. He walked over to Rajin's room, finding his friend lying flat on his back and staring up at the ceiling, silent. Rajin leaned up when he heard Seifer's coat rub against the doorframe, readjusting his pillow and folding his arms behind his head.

Alright man ... sounds good. I'll see you tomorrow. Seifer crossed his arms, his jaw stiffening.

Sounds good? Is that all you have to say to me? Rajin scratched his chin as his eyebrows drew together.

Uh, yeah man. Have fun, I guess? I dunno, what else do you ... want me to say? There was a perplexed, yet nervous edge to Rajin's voice. Seifer scoffed, shaking his head.

Okay, Rajin—fine. I'll see you tomorrow. He started out the door, but shouted over his shoulder. Do me a favor and at least try to keep your hands to yourself, eh?

What? Whaddy—a—

You heard me. Seifer hadn't waited for Rajin's response, fully knowing it was cruel and not caring in the slightest. What could Rajin honestly say right now that would change anything? Seifer was in no mood to hear it.

Of course, that wasn't going to stop him from attempting to have the conversation with Fujin this morning at her kitchen counter. If anyone owed him an answer it was her. She was his right-hand man in all aspects of life—this should have been on her shit to tell Seifer radar back when it happened. Her radar seemed to be a little faulty lately though ... she'd been keeping a lot from him.

"Hey Fuu ... how long have you known about Rajin?" He felt her tense at the question as he placed his hand on her back, just below her shoulders. Fujin stood up strait and swiveled around to look at him, abandoning the pen and paper she'd just picked up to start making notes for their mission.

"What?" She crossed her arms over her chest and leaned back against the counter. Her question was flat and void of dispute, but her wide eyes spoke volumes—he saw a flash of panic in them. It was the exact same look she'd had in her eyes when he'd cornered her about passing the SeeD exam earlier this week.

And that thought made him pause, because that hadn't exactly gone well. He'd been petty, childish, accusatory … and then the fight they had. It almost broke them.

Seifer supposed that whatever Rajin had meant by his gift—however long he'd felt it, whatever he'd said to her, and if he'd touched her when he said it (and Hyne that thought was awful)—it wasn't his to know until she was ready to tell it. Hell, it wasn't her fault if they both loved her at the same point, at different points … or even spread equally across the years they'd all known each other. Maybe it was his fault for never talking about it with Rajin—a conversation he planned on having later today in the training center.

"Rajin. That he's pretty good with a camera." Seifer wrapped his arms around her waist. "I found a picture he took of the two of us when we were moving your stuff. I put it in your bedroom." The awkward shift in tone wasn't lost on her, and he could feel her searching his eyes for the knowledge of something else as his hands slid to her hips.

"I saw that." Fujin tilted her head up at him, and he thought for a moment she was going to speak. He gave her a beat of silence—just a quick beat—opening the door for her thoughts to mosey on through. But reticent as ever, she didn't take the bait.

What could he do but shrug it off? He found that his thumb had started to graze her stomach as her
shirt rode up *just a little* under his grip. It was enough reason not to keep this up. Talking wouldn't allow him to touch more of her skin, and that's all he wanted. *He only wanted all of her.*

"Well, I think we should go in there and take a look at it." Seifer winked at her, and Fujin's suspicion fell away when she realized he was angling for something else.

"We have things to do." She leaned into his warmth and stood on the tips of her toes to kiss him quickly. "I still have to go see Cid, and Dr. Kadowaki again." He nodded heartily, but walked backward towards the bedroom all the same, guiding her along with him.

"I hear you, babe. And I agree—we definitely have things to do. But I have my own list for the day."

"I didn't know you had a 'to do' list going." She smiled at him, her voice playful and bold, which was rare for Fujin. Seifer was glad to see her bashfulness with him beginning to fall away a bit, but also a little sad to see it go. He loved being the one to watch her experience new things and get used to all of this … it was something he'd never have to share with anyone. Luckily, there were still plenty of new things left.

"Oh, well I do. You're actually *on* my list. I was thinking we could pick up where we left off last night." His hands moved to work on pulling her shirt over her head as they slowly made their way into the bedroom. "And then there's a whole separate list of things to do to you. It's getting pretty long, though … not sure we have enough time for everything this morning." *That* made her blush.

"You're a monster." She smiled and gasped lightly as he placed his hand on the nape of her neck and rested his other hand on her cheek, pulling her forward into a kiss.

"But I'm your monster."

"Wow, you're pretty loose today, ya know." Raijin doubled over, breathing heavily, as Seifer pulled his gunblade smoothly from the back of the T-Rexaur they'd just defeated. "How's that possible? My muscles are pretty tight—my calf is all bunched up. It was slowin' me down." His large bronze hand reached down to knead the muscle.

"Is that what it was?" Seifer arched an eyebrow at Raijin and ran his eyes over him dismissively. "Looked to me like you were distracted. Something on your mind Raij?"

"Nope." Raijin used his staff to push himself upright and walked closer to Seifer, still breathing heavily. "Something on yours?"

"Me? Nah, I'm feeling good. Been pretty loose for a few days now. Just got a little looser before I came here, actually." He grinned and stretched before sheathing Hyperion, definitely meaning to give Raijin the impression that it was Fujin who was loosening him up. Raijin's rolling eyes told him that he had, in fact, made an impression.

"Do you want to go through the loop again or are you done?" Raijin placed one hand on his hip and rested his weight against his staff. "Because honestly, I'm bushed. I think we've been in here for hours. Fuu's probably waiting by now, ya know?"

Seifer wiped sweat from his brow and flicked a piece of indistinguishable flesh from his coat. Grat, Fungar, T-Rexaur, Ochu—it could have been anything at this point. He was intentionally putting Raijin through his paces today, and not watching his back *just the right amount* to make the work difficult while still not letting anything *actually* happen to him. They had been in there for *four* hours to be exact, working non-stop, and he was also getting tired. Seifer wasn't going to be the one to tap out first though.
"Don't worry, it's not like she's going anywhere without us Raijin—don't have a heart attack." He walked forward a bit, away from the exit, as Raijin's voice called out behind him.

"I'm not worried … I thought you'd be a little more worried, though." Seifer snapped around to glare at him, surprising his friend. The implication he wasn't worried enough about Fujin in general almost earned Raijin a stiff punch to the face.

"I just … hey, what the hell is wrong with you?" Raijin's eyes narrowed as he pressed his staff into the ground. "Why have we been out here this long man? Hyne knows you don't need the practice, ya know."

"You said you wanted to train." Seifer turned away again and marched forward in search of their next victim. "So we're training."

"Yeah and when I said train I meant train, not level-up to 80 and get limit-breaks queued up." Raijin's voice grew distant as he yelled after Seifer, meaning he wasn't following. Seifer spun back around to face his friend, his long white coat dragging in the dry brush.

"I guess I'm having a hard time keeping track of what you actually mean when things come out of that loud mouth of yours." Seifer crossed his arms over his chest.

"What the hell, Seif!" Raijin threw his staff down on the ground and crossed his arms over his chest in kind. The two stared at each other, with Seifer biting his cheek and Raijin's features twisting in anger. "What's your problem?"

"Think hard Raijin. Not too hard though, I don't want you to have an aneurism."

"Hey man, fuck you. You've been on my case all day and don't think I didn't notice you hangin' me out to dry, ya know. I know you like the back of my hand, bro." Seifer scoffed and stalked forward to close the distance between them.

"Well, this shouldn't be too hard for you to figure out then." Seifer didn't deny making the day more difficult—he hadn't even been trying to hide that.

Raijin pressed his lips together, and finally looked away from Seifer. There. There was the realization he'd been waiting for.

"She told you?" Raijin arms tightened across his chest as he asked the question without meeting Seifer's gaze. There was a hint of hurt in his voice at the thought of being outed by Fujin, and even though Seifer knew it had been coming, hearing Raijin verbalize it still felt like a twisting knife—they were connected in pain in that moment.

"No … I found that little photo album you gave her and jumped to the not-so-far-fetched conclusion from there. I haven't talked to her yet."

"No shit, Raijin. Clearly." Seifer laughed incredulously.

"So that's what the comment last night was about. What today's about." Seifer balled his fists and took another step closer, while Raijin took a very small step back. "C'mon man. Don't. We have enough going on, ya know."

"Oh, I know we have a lot going on. But for some reason I've been out here all afternoon with you because I can't decide if I want to deck you or not." Raijin laid his hands out in
"Then do it and get it over with. Ya know I can't stop you. You've always been the better man—we know that for a fact now."

"When?" Seifer's jaw ached from how tightly it was clenched. The vaguely worded question was loaded with meaning, and Raijin didn't hesitate to answer.

"The same time as you, probably." He sighed, crossing his arms over his chest again. "Probably when we both made a point to not talk about it. Probably always."

_Probably always._ Now that hit hard. Even though he'd assumed that _always_ was when this started for both of them, it felt very different to know it was real. A fact, not a theory. _They were finding out so many thrilling facts about themselves lately._

"And when did you tell her …" Seifer found that he couldn't finish his sentence. He was torn between wanting to punch his friend and empathizing with his pain. He knew what it was like to want something for that long. He knew what it was like to want the _exact same thing._

"Before I knew about you … if it had been any later I know you'd be punching me right now."

"What did you say … how did it go?" Seifer's eyes narrowed as Raijin's eyes grew wide in surprise that he felt entitled to so many details.

"We were here, training. It was a normal day and I just told her. Couldn't wait anymore." Seifer ran his hand over his face, and shook his head—that's how he'd always pictured it happening for him too. _Something completely unromantic, but romantic in its simplicity._ How odd, for strangers to become brothers, and then want the same girl in the _exact same way._ Raijin had beaten him to the punch—somehow he always seemed to do that.

"But how did it go?" Seifer inquired again, unsatisfied and wishing he could be more eloquent, as Raijin held his hands up and shook his head when he realized just how much detail Seifer wanted.

"Nothing happened! I kissed her on the cheek, man—that was all. She turned me down … because of you." Seifer nodded, relieved, and glanced up at his friend to ask one final question.

"Do you still love her?" Their eyes locked, as Raijin seemed to weigh what the best answer was. He opted not to lie.

"Yeah man … I do. But _differently_, ya know? Ever since I figured out how you both felt about each other. I want her to be happy, I want _you_ to be happy. Hyne, I even gave you advice." Seifer ran his hand through his hair, looking away from his friend again. He was still pissed but he appreciated the honesty, and he was positive he wouldn't be as gracious if the situation was reversed.

"But ya know, I guess it's still a little fresh because hearing you say stuff about getting _loosened up_ doesn't feel very good." Raijin awkwardly scratched the back of his neck as Seifer tried to imagine himself on the other side of that coin—if Raijin had been the one telling him about being _loosened up_. He felt a brief wave of nausea as Raijin's voice broke through his thoughts. "And I'll try not to touch her so much … that's just how we've _always_ been, Seif. It's nothin' new, and doesn't mean anything."

"Is that why you've been out on so many dates this past year?" Seifer felt he'd been a little petty with that comment last night, so he ignored it and crossed his arms over his chest. He could tell Raijin was glad to see his hands out striking mode, and glad for the slight change in topic.
"Yeah, turns out there are tons of other girls out there, ya know. Just tons of 'em. I've been having a good time." Rajin flipped his hand out casually, and smiled. "And now that you're off the market there's even more." Seifer made an agreeable face for a moment, his features softening a bit.

"I don't really know what to do with any of this."

"I don't think you do anything with it. It is what it is, ya know? I'm working on it on my end." Seifer didn't reply, his leather gloves creaking as his fists clenched and unclenched a few more times. His hands were on the verge of going numb from the hours spent in the training center, and he was trying to work some life back into them.

"Seifer." Raijin's stern tone made his eyes dart upward, connecting with his friend's worried gaze. "It doesn't matter. It doesn't change anything."

"Yeah well, it can't change anything." The comment came out the wrong way, which was a problem Seifer seemed to be having with almost everyone lately.

"I know that ..." Raijin looked away and scuffed the ground with his boot.

"No, I mean it can't change anything. With all the shit we have going on right now, we don't have room for this. I'll be leaving her with you in Deling a lot, and it's not going to be fun for her, knowing what I'm up to. I need you to look after her. I don't want to be worried about whether or not you're gonna—" Raijin stepped closer, and in a bold move his hand shot out to grab Seifer's shoulder.

"You can trust me, ya know. I'd never betray you like that." Their eyes connected and a thick silence hung between them as Seifer let Raijin's words sink in. He searched his friend's face for signs of dishonesty, but his anger dissipated a bit when it occurred to him that throughout this entire conversation, Raijin hadn't even remotely tried to defend himself.

The silence was broken by a few junior students passing by, whispering under their breath as they gossiped about what might be going on between the already infamous Seifer Almasy and one of the other thirds of the Disciplinary Committee.

"If you idiots stare any longer, being eaten by a T-Rexaur is going to be the least of your problems." They scuttled away quickly at the sound of Seifer's voice, and Raijin chuckled as he released his friend's shoulder.

"We do look a little scary right now, I guess." He shrugged and leaned down to pick up his staff, chuckling. "Man for a minute there, I was pretty sure you were gonna throw down."

"Well, I'm still not in the mood to fucking joke." Seifer waited for his friend to collect himself before walking towards the exit. Raijin nodded and followed him.

"Okay … I just won't say anything then."

"Yeah, I think that's best." As the pair walked together down the corridor, that familiar guilty feeling began to fester deep in Seifer's gut at the defeated sound of his friend's voice. Raijin had just laid it all bare, easily and honestly. He stepped aside willingly, despite the pain it caused him. Seifer hated to admit it, but it was pretty damn honorable, considering the circumstances. And if anything, Seifer respected someone who could put the greater good ahead of their own self interest—he always strived to do that, but often found he was unable to get past his own pride. He stopped in his tracks, just before the exit, and turned to grip his perplexed friend's shoulder. Seifer couldn't tell if his hand opened slowly because of the hours of training, or if he still wasn't ready to touch Raijin. He knew
he wasn't ready to forgive him (if that was even something that was his right to do), but he also knew that he had to at some point—the three of them were bonded for life and breaking apart wasn't an option.

"Raijin—I'm the luckier man, maybe. I'm not sure I'm the better one." Raijin smiled and shook his head in disagreement, as Seifer continued to walk forward. He heard his friend jog to catch up to him with a devious chuckle escaping his lips.

"Man, thought you were gonna try to kiss me back there. I might be open to options Seif, but you ain't one of 'em."

"Didn't I tell you I wasn't in the mood for jokes?" Raijin chuckled again.

"Well, sometimes you don't know what's best for you. That's what you have us for."

Fujin didn't quite know what she was expecting when the folder was finally in her possession and safe within the walls of her own room. A part of her thought that maybe this sorceress—or mother—of hers would make a grand appearance again and put on a show of some sort. Maybe give her a sign? She didn't even believe in signs, but the past week hadn't exactly been steeped in logic. She supposed anything could be possible.

The plain manila folder, in all its beige thinness, didn't have much gravitas considering what was supposed to be inside. It was a little underwhelming, and the meeting with Cid had been less than fun to sit through, too. It wasn't exactly a banner afternoon.

At least she'd done something productive and had gone to see Dr. Kadowaki—she had a darkly bruised arm to prove it. Fujin swiped a finger over the implant under her skin, and grimaced a bit at its tenderness. At least it would be worth it in the long run ... at least she and Seifer wouldn't have anything to worry about in that department.

Fujin's eyes stayed focused on the folder as she vacillated between wanting to know if it was as underwhelming as it appeared, and wanting to burn the thing and never know one way or another. Sometimes not knowing was better. She'd spent her whole life not knowing, and what little information she had now hadn't exactly done her any favors.

She pulled out a chair and sat down, squaring the folder between her hands to line up the stray edges of paper that were poking out. No need to get a view of something she wasn't ready to see, just because Xu had decided to sloppily throw the thing together. Hyne, Seifer was right about her—Fujin also couldn't stand that woman.

Fujin had genuinely been glad to not see Xu in Cid's office today, taking it as proof that he really was circling the wagons around this one —she was glad mostly for her own benefit. Global sorceress threat be damned, Fujin just didn't want anyone knowing anything more about her. It seemed the more she revealed, the worse everything got.

Her meeting with Cid was only a brief 20-minute check-in to go over the mission details. He gave her a communications kit to stay in touch with him directly at Garden, a stipend for their two-month stay in Deling, and almost no direction at all other than to collect information on the sorceress' ties to Vinzer Deling and to stay close to Caraway. At least he'd admitted the whole mission was a shot in the dark.

*I'm not expecting you to come back with anything revelatory, Fujin. I'm just hoping you happen upon something that will help us gauge whether there appears to be movement towards this.*
Confused by his phrasing, Fujin asked for clarification.

*You seem sure that it's moving in a specific direction, Headmaster. Is there anything else I should know?* Cid laced his fingers together and leaned his forearms against the edge of his desk.

*No, there's nothing else pertinent to your mission.* Fujin had to fight to stop her skepticism from showing. Her quiet nature was a blessing when it came to reading people—she'd been watching them all her life. There was just something about his face … the look in his eyes. She was sure he wasn't being forthright.

*Though, now that we're on the topic of additional information, I do recommend you conduct some independent research about sorceresses and their powers. I honestly don't know if you'll experience them in any way, or if you'll eventually inherit them—I'm not sure how it works through a GF.*

*Of course. I'd thought about that myself.* Cid nodded proudly at her ability to take the initiative, wished her luck, and then dismissed her. Her first mission would be underway as of tomorrow morning. It was still hard to believe.

She pressed her palm against the folder, feeling a small lump inside—it was the only extraordinary thing about it. The raised spot had almost persuaded Fujin to take a peek, but the fear of knowing what else was in there and what it might do to her gave her pause. She didn't want to be emotionally compromised for this mission … any more than she was already going to be, considering how it had to play out. She needed to keep her focus.

"Fuu-sama, you in there?" Raijin's voice made her jump. His hand jiggled her door handle impatiently.

"Coming!" She took a deep breath and stood to open the door, revealing Raijin and Seifer on the other side. They looked a little worse for wear, and *smelled* that way too.

"Wow, you guys are pretty ripe." She waved her hand in front of her face to fan the smell away, but it didn't help much.

"This guy made me train hard today—felt good to move around though." Raijin walked past her and jerked his thumb at Seifer, who flash her a tired smile and kissed her forehead before walking in. Fujin supposed the smell wasn't so bad.

"Checked another thing off your to-do list, then?" She shot a sideways glance at Seifer as he slid past her, and he smirked and turned to walk backward a few paces to keep the conversation going.

"Yeah, almost done for the day. I may have added a few more things though." Fujin's stomach flipped at the low and raspy sound in his voice.

While they were busy exchanging innuendos, Raijin had made his way to stand at the small kitchen counter to busy himself with getting a glass of water from the sink. Seifer took a seat at the table, pulling off his coat and draping it over the back his chair.

"We'll get outta your hair in a minute and get cleaned up, but I—we wanted to see how things with Cid went today. Anything new?" Seifer leaned back in the chair, visibly tired even though he'd never admit it.

"Not much. He just gave me some of the mission essentials and reiterated what our goals are." Fujin pulled up a chair to join him, and placed her hands over the folder again. Seifer nodded, and glanced at Raijin who leaning against the counter now and looking equally as exhausted.
"Pretty much what I thought would happen." His eyes narrowed as he watched Raijin from afar, and then slowly stretched his leg out to push one of the chairs away from the table. "Raijin, sit down. You were just complaining about a bound-up calf muscle." The two exchanged a strange look, before Raijin walked forward and mumbled in thanks.

"So we're all set then. Any words of inspiration, commander?" Raijin grinned proudly at Seifer's new title for her, while Seifer smiled faintly at different memory altogether.

"No words of wisdom, let's just get this done and keep a low profile." They both nodded, her lack of receptiveness to Seifer's playful humor letting them know her nerves were shot.

"Hey, what's in the folder?" Raijin asked, taking a sip of his water.

"This … is apparently information about my mother." Seifer arched an eyebrow and removed his gloves, massaging one of his palms.

"What's it say?"

"I don't know. I haven't read it yet. I've decided I'm not going to until the mission is over. One of you might want to take a look though, just in case there's information in there that could be useful, somehow." A quick glance between her two friends was the only thing necessary to make the decision. Seifer's hand drifted outward and slid the folder out from under her grasp.

"I'll look at it." She offered him a wry smile in thanks.

"So … do you guys want to go get something to eat?" Seifer turned to slip the folder into a pocket on the inside of his coat. "I was thinking we should probably stop by the DC office and make sure there aren't any loose ends to tie up before we head out, too."

"Sounds good to me, ya know." Fujin detected a strange tone of surprise in Raijin's voice as the two of them exchanged words. Probably just because Seifer was willing to share their time with him—she was glad he was taking what she'd said to him yesterday to heart.

"Alright—let's go get cleaned up." Seifer and Raijin got to their feet slowly, both groaning a bit as they straightened out their legs and made their way toward the door. Fujin gently grabbed Seifer's wrist as he walked by.

"Call me when you're ready to go—I'll come to you." He smiled and leaned down to kiss her cheek, before they walked out the door. Her heart both lifted and sank at the simple, sweet gesture. She didn't know much about this mission, but the one thing she knew for sure was how much she was going to miss that when they were in Deling.
Tossed by the Waves

Chapter Summary

Seifer absentmindedly flipped the sliver band between his thumb and forefinger, stuck on the term 'sorceress lineage' and wondering what exactly that meant for Fujin. Was it in her blood to become one? From everything he'd read, that wasn't how the passing on of these powers worked … but maybe this was a special case. Everything else about it had been unprecedented so far. His clear feelings for her aside, Fujin had always seemed different to him. She was an old soul, uncannily perceptive, and at times almost prophetic. It made her an ideal partner in combat—her instincts and foresight had saved his ass more times than he'd like to admit.

Until now, Seifer hadn't ever realized just how itchy these SeeD couches were. He'd also never sat bare-assed on one before, so that could explain the surprise. Garden probably didn't take into consideration the comfort of textiles on exposed skin when they bought a million identical versions of this blue woolen couch for all the dorms. Though, maybe they should have—if they'd sprung for some more luxurious items, there might be a few more willing volunteers joining the force and not a finite number of orphans who were just looking for a home of any sort … it didn't even have to be a comfortable one.

He also wouldn't have known about the couch because he didn't typically make a habit of hanging out in people's living rooms naked. But Fujin was sleeping soundly in bed and he didn't want to wake her to scavenge for his clothes, especially since he'd already successfully untangled himself from her limbs and slipped off without causing too much of a racket. Why ruin that herculean effort with fishing for his boxers?

Normally he would have at least discarded all his clothing in one general spot—an old strategy of his for stealthy exits after casual hookups. But when they finally got back to her room from working late in the Disciplinary Committee office, he'd been in a hurry to get things rolling … and of course, an exit strategy was the farthest thing from his mind. One minute they were opening the door, and the next he was peeling away her clothing to expose as much pale skin as he could, and bending her over the bed in a frenzy. It was animalistic, wordless, and less gentle than all the other times had been; her prone to bruising pale skin would probably be sporting a fresh set of purple fingerprints on her hip in the morning. An apology worked its way out of his throat after he came, as he slumped against her back and pressed his lips to her shoulder blade between labored breaths. She shook her head in disapproval of him being sorry and kissed the back of his hand. Seifer hadn't realized that he'd laced their fingers together somewhere between the bending and the roughness.

When he couldn't fall asleep afterward—and had finally spent what felt like a sufficient amount of time watching her sleep—he made his way out into the living room and to find his trench coat, which he'd draped on the back of her dining room chair earlier this evening when they left to do work. That little gesture spoke volumes about how Seifer felt about her—he didn't leave his favorite possession (aside from Hyperion, which was more like an extension of his arm and less like an object) with just anyone. He sure as hell wouldn't leave it with Raijin … he apparently had to be careful about leaving anything with Raijin….

Sliding his hand inside the familiar large interior pocket, he snagged his coat from the chair and
clipped the folder she'd given him earlier between his fingers, pulling it out smoothly as he made his way to the couch. Seifer hadn't been able to fall asleep knowing that folder was just sitting there, unread, a mere few feet away from them. At least putting it in his possession allowed her to sleep though. He was glad she'd settled in quickly, curled up under soft blue blankets, and hadn't let thoughts of the past keep her awake.

And now he sat stretched out on her itchy blue couch under the glowing light of a nearby lamp, with his trench pulled over himself as a makeshift blanket and the folder resting on his lap. His hands—littered with tiny cuts and blisters from that tense training session with Raijin earlier in the day—moved to flip the cover open.

Before allowing his eyes to skim the documents, Seifer thought about how differently he and Fujin were processing this influx of information. Mostly about how it encapsulated the innate differences between them that surfaced this summer. Fujin was unwilling to look at these pages for fear of knowing everything all at once; she liked to compartmentalize things, breaking them down into smaller digestible bits to deal with individually. She'd actually said something along those lines to him in Dollet, and he was pretty sure he'd even detected a little bit of fear in her when he told her how he felt … as if getting everything she wanted all at once was almost too much.

Seifer, on the other hand, felt as if he needed to know everything all at once and it was largely intertwined with his tendency to see the duality in all things—Seifer gladly took the good with the bad and thought you couldn't have one without the other. His long-standing rivalry with Squall Leonhart drove them both to be better fighters … Seifer still being the better of the two, of course. And when he and Fujin both couldn't take the torment of seemingly unrequited love any longer and blew up at each other in Dollet … well, they sprang from that. Hell, even Raijin's longing for Fujin made him want what was best for her, and led him towards this robust dating life of his that he seemed to be enjoying …

As Seifer's eyes started to scan the first document, he hoped to Hyne that this news about Fujin had a silver lining … that some good would come of something bad.

**Name:** Anya Sanada

**Marital Status:** Widowed

**Maiden Name:** Elaria

**Born:** Esthar City, Centra Continent

**Father:** Unknown

**Mother:** Unknown; Sorceress lineage

**Location of Death:** Crystal Pillar extraction site/Lunatic Pandora, Centra Continent

**Cause of Death:** Inconclusive

**Children:** Daughter, Fujin Sanada—3 months

**Possessions:** 1x Potion, 1x silver ring, miscellaneous items of clothing worn at time of death. Domicile purged.

**Notes:**

Sanada was rightfully executed in retribution for espionage and high treason against the realm.
Witnesses describe Sanada's death to be consistent with other accounts of salvation at the hands of Sorceress Adel, the merciful protector of the realm of Esthar.

Autopsy deemed unworthy and unnecessary. Sanada's sorceress powers vanished from her body upon death, and officials are still trying to locate their transfer location. As is customary for sorceress dynasties, it is believed that Sanada may have passed her powers on to her daughter, who is currently being held under observation in the lab of Estharian para-magic scientist, Dr. Odine.

Salvation. Unworthy. Unnecessary. Rightfully executed. The cold words, clearly written by an Adel sympathizer deep within the sorceress' ranks at the time of the war, echoed in Seifer's head. He was thankful that Fujin had the self-control to hand that folder over to him when she did. So far this was all bad.

The scant, remaining documents in the slim folder of Fujin's past were a little more uplifting. They dryly recounted the tale of the brave Anya Sanada, who sacrificed herself to pass information about the design and movements of a structure called Lunatic Pandora to Galbadia and an Estharian resistance faction plotting to overthrow Adel.

Seifer, the Sorceress War history buff that he was, had heard of Lunatic Pandora before. Though he'd always thought it was an event that caused an increase in the monster population in Centra. Come to find out, it was a mobile structure of some sort that served as a conduit for the catalyst of that event—which the documents called a Lunar Cry. Apparently, they didn't print everything in the history books …

The only other thing he found that was truly of note was a tiny plastic bag stapled to one of the papers, holding a delicate silver ring—the only physical thing left of the woman that Fujin came from. Seifer's fingers worked to tear the bag carefully from the document, and he tapped the ring gently into his palm. It was etched with a pattern of waves, and embedded between each cresting cap was a small blue stone—sapphire, probably. He turned it over a few times to admire it, before the dim light of the lamp illuminated an inscription engraved on the inside of the band.

Fluctuat nec mergitur … he wished he knew what it meant. Maybe this ring was something she was given by her husband, before the war when times had been better …

Seifer absentmindedly flipped the sliver band between his thumb and forefinger, stuck on the term 'sorceress lineage' and wondering what exactly that meant for Fujin. Was it in her blood to become one? From everything he'd read, that wasn't how the passing on of these powers worked … but maybe this was a special case. Everything else about it had been unprecedented so far.

Seifer's clear feelings for her aside, Fujin had always seemed different to him. She was an old soul, uncannily perceptive, and at times almost prophetic. It made her an ideal partner in combat—her instincts and foresight had saved his ass more times than he'd like to admit.

Those rare qualities of hers that he highly admired never caused him to worry until now. What if they came at the cost of her being wrapped up in the bigger threat of all of this somehow? Those dreams of his could be a vision … her mother might be telling her to run. What if she was a sorceress already, and nobody knew?

Seifer shook his head at his own crazy thoughts, which were all too quickly trying to force fragments of facts into a whole truth. No, he certainly wasn't a prophet, and he would know if she were a sorceress—he knew her better than anyone.

The slow creaking of a door snapped him from his deep reverie, and his gaze darted upward to find Fujin peering at him as through the lamplight.
"There you are." Her pale fingers rose to rub away the blurriness of sleep from her eyes. "I thought maybe you'd left." Seifer closed the folder to cover up the documents, not wanting her to see anything just yet. Better to wait until after the mission was over and they were safe within the walls of Garden again.

"You're wearing my shirt. I wouldn't have gone far." He smirked at her, as she looked down in a haze to verify the statement.

"I didn't even notice this wasn't mine. I'm not exactly clear headed." Seifer laughed at her bewildered sleepy state, and slid the folder onto the nearby coffee table.

"Well, I do have that effect on women. C'mere—sit with me for a minute." Fujin rolled her eyes at the self-congratulatory comment, but complied and graced him a drowsy smile as she walked towards him. He reached for her hip and guided her down to sit between his legs, throwing his coat back over them once she was settled against his chest.

"Do you always walk around naked under this thing? I'm gonna start a rumor that you're a flasher." She yawned and rubbed her cheek against his collarbone.

"You wish." Seifer reveled in the feeling of her warm breath on his skin, and kissed the top of her head as he wrapped an arm around her. His other hand hung over the edge of the couch, still flipping that silver band between his fingers.

"So … did you find anything interesting?" Fujin wriggled closer as she hesitantly asked the question. "Anything that would be relevant to the mission?"

"Nah, nothing you need to worry about right now. It's basically exactly what Cid told us. A few new things … you and I can look through it together when we get back." He could tell that his phrasing of looking through it together made her nervous, because it meant he thought she'd need him there when she did look through it. Fujin sighed, and nodded against him in agreement and he cleared his throat to speak again.

"I did find something I think you should have, though." She pressed her hand against his chest and rose up to look at him skeptically as he held the ring out in front of them.

"This was attached to one of the pages. It was hers, apparently. … Her name was Anya." Fujin's eyes grew wide in surprise as Seifer waited for the unfamiliar name to sink in. In a perfect world, she would've heard it before—known the name all her life instead of it being something he needed to break to her gently. But their word wasn't perfect … at least not until the three of them—yes, even Raijin—met each other.

"There's no other information with it, but it looks … I dunno, it looks like something someone would have given her. Who knows, maybe her husband?" Pale, graceful fingers reached out to touch his own for a moment before removing the ring from his grasp.

"I know you don't wear a lot of jewelry, but it looks like something you'd like. I just thought you might want a piece of her to get used to." Fujin inspected the ring but didn't answer him, her eyes running over the etchings and trying to read the inscription on the inside. Seifer hoped that this at least helped bridge the gap between knowing too much and knowing just enough to get by.

"Oh, it says Fluctuat nec mergitur … I don't have a clue what it means." Strands of silver hair swept across her face as she tilted her head up at him, smiling.

"All the time we've spent by the ocean, and you don't know what this means? It's everywhere—
usually carved into figureheads on the prows of boats. 'Tossed by the waves but never sunk.' I've seen it a million times."

"Well, I guess I’ve never paid attention. I was probably busy watching you." He kissed her forehead, before taking the ring out of her palm to slide over her finger. "Clearly this is meant to be yours." Fujin's eyes stayed fixed on it, while Seifer couldn't stop thinking about how much he liked the feeling of sliding a ring onto that lithe, pale hand of hers.

"It looks nice on you." He said distantly, as he tried to push the pleasant thoughts of a certain future aside. Fujin laid back down on his chest, extending her arm to admire the ring as the blue stones glittered under the faint orange glow of the lamp.

"Thank you." Her warm voice reverberated against his skin. "Now … come back to bed—reading everything in that folder a thousand times over isn't going to change anything. We have a long day tomorrow …" She leaned up to look into his eyes again. "And … I'm going to miss this in Deling." Seifer nodded in agreement, and released her from his grip. Fujin shimmied away and extend a graceful hand to turn off the lamp. He knew he should probably savor this last night they had together, too. Hyne knows what they were walking into when they made it to Deling.

"I'm gonna miss it too." Seifer rose to his feet, dropping the coat on the couch and following close behind her. She turned around to grab his hand, and couldn't stop the blush from spreading to her cheeks at the sight of him.

"You have no shame." Seifer laughed, and threw his arm around her shoulder.

"I know you'd like me less if I did."

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**Deling was electric.** Not just in how brightly it's buildings lit the dark night sky, or with the glow of the vintage neon signs that were scattered on main street. The city itself was teeming with energy. The well-worn pavers blanketing the street, the people mulling under the city's famous archway … Fujin could almost feel it all bursting and breathing in unison around her. Every time she came to Deling, she swore it had a life of its own.

Of course, the wind in her head was acting up again, so that probably wasn't helping matters—everything felt breathy now. As if Deling breathing wasn't enough, the wind had been howling through her mind since this morning. She hadn't mentioned it to Seifer or Raijin yet, or even to Garden before they'd left. She'd been afraid of setting the mission back … though she supposed their mission was already hitting a roadblock, so a delay wouldn't have mattered much.

She'd been impressed by how well things seemed to be going initially. Typically, the train from Balamb to Deling was sold out and traveling by boat was usually the best bet, but Garden gave them access to a cushy SeeD cabin. With all the trains running on time they'd arrived in Deling in the late afternoon and were already checked into the Galbadia Hotel. Pretty straightforward, no problems—everything was just as it should be.

Things were going so well that Fujin even felt comfortable insisting that Seifer seek out Rinoa sooner than later, with hopes that he'd run into Caraway at the door of their home. That, just maybe, the general would have a clever plan of his own to stay in contact Cid and all of this was unnecessary. But if Fujin had learned anything in her life, it was that good fortune never lasted very long, and this mission was no exception.

Seifer returned to the hotel about an hour after landing on the steps of Caraway's mansion, with the dire news that the general was away on business and that Rinoa was in Timber—a tiny town under
Galbadian occupation—visiting friends. Apparently, their reconciliation in Dollet had been short-lived …

The security personnel at the general’s home was a little too enthusiastic to relinquish all the details. In just a casual conversation, Seifer merely hinted at meeting Rinoa over the summer, and the guard spilled the beans about where the whole household was and when they’d be back. No doubt Seifer was more skilled than most at getting information out of people, but it definitely shouldn't have been that easy. She made a note that they needed to tell Caraway he should increase his security if they were going to keep working with him.

The unexpected twist in plans made her feel off-balance. Fujin drummed her fingers on the mahogany ledge of their hotel room window overlooking Deling’s main square, in an attempt to channel her nerves into a comforting and steady rhythm. She hoped the beat might help her restore some sort of equilibrium—it was a trick she’d taught herself in training over the years. She’d drum her fingers against her weapon of choice—a Chakram—as a way to calm her nerves and focus her thoughts.

Seifer had actually been the one to suggest it to her, when they first started sparring in classes. She used to shake like a leaf before drills started for fear of getting hurt. When he’d made a comment that she didn't seem sure enough in her movements, Fujin confided in him that she was nervous and couldn't concentrate. You've gotta come up with a sound of some kind to play in your head and drown out everything else. Something that you always have with you, and that no one can take from you. That way you can't lose your focus … you control it. And if you can control that, you control the fight. You control everything. So, she’d come up with the drumming and the rhythm on the flat edge her Chakram, and from then on it sliced through the air from her hands fearlessly without a single shake—she wasn't sure if it was because it actually worked, or because Seifer told her it would.

Fujin had asked him once, after watching him beat an older and more experienced student, what device he used to focus. Smirking and wiping sweat from his brow, he'd said he couldn't tell her—that it was only for him to know. That would be the way it would go—he could know hers, but she couldn't know his. Fujin never felt the need to ask him again … he'd wanted to keep it to himself, and she understood that more than anyone.

"I couldn't even find Timber on a map if you asked me to—what would people even go there for, ya know?" Raijin's voice asked aloud and interrupted her thoughts. She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye as he continued to unpack his suitcase.

"It's under Galbadian occupation right now, and its only real claim to fame is the fact that the people there hate the Galbadian occupation." She heard Seifer lean back in his chair, his boot squeaking against one of the wooden rungs. "Caraway mentioned that the issues between them were political at our dinner… maybe she's sympathizing with the resistance?"

"Hmm," Fujin ceased her drumming and turned towards them, pressing her back against the window casing and crossing her arms. "That's an extreme way to work out a family dispute—getting politically involved in a tiny town on the opposite coast of the continent. A little impractical."

"Well, she didn't exactly exude practicality and strategic thought." Fujin glanced sideways at him, irritated with the idea of Seifer thinking about the girl exuding anything at all. "Plus, what better way to get back at daddy Caraway than embarrassing him by upending President Deling’s little pet project?"

"If that's why she's there, she'll probably be interested in SeeD's help." She turned back around to look out the window, her eyes fixing on Deling’s grand archway lit up in the distance.
"She was pretty interested in my SeeD affiliation that night I met her. It wouldn't surprise me if that's why." Fujin closed her eyes tightly for a moment and groaned inwardly at hearing that. Both at the idea of the girl showing extreme interest in something about Seifer, and at the fact that her interest in SeeD would add an additional, unfortunate layer to their mission. Seifer also seemed to remember an awful lot about Rinoa, despite the fact he'd been so drunk he couldn't tell right from wrong that night ... 

"We'll have to tread lightly then. The last thing we need to do is inadvertently encourage her support of the Timber resistance and cause bad blood between us and the General. Let's hope it's simpler than that." Fujin exhaled and rubbed her left temple. "How are you planning on getting her back here?"

"Don't worry about that ... I'll figure something out." His hesitant answer made her chest ache. She nodded and clasped her hands behind her back, unwilling to turn around and look him in the eye. How else would he get her back here? Of all the ridiculous questions ... 

"So if Seifer is leaving for Timber in the morning, what's the plan for us while he's gone?" Raijin awkwardly glanced at the two of them as he asked his question, trying to stay engaged in the conversation about the mission while also trying to not engage in the subtext. She took a deep breath before answering this question, knowing that no matter how she said it he was still going to be angry. 

"I'm staying here to start gathering intel. You're both going to Timber." Fujin spoke with authority, and heard Seifer scramble to his feet quickly and step towards her in response. 

"That's your plan?" Seifer scoffed, and she didn't bother turning around to answer him. His irritation was predictable—he didn't like to sit on the sidelines while someone else called the shots. "I'm not leaving you here alone. Not when you have all this stuff going on with you. One of us should be here." She saw Raijin nodding in agreement from the corner of her eye. 

"Seifer ..." His well-meaning but ill-timed concern was forcing her to walk the precarious line between lover and leader—Fujin wished he'd waited until they were alone to disagree. "Please don't make it harder than it needs to be. Deling is a safe city, I have Cid on speed dial, and I haven't had any symptoms since the night on the boat."

"Which was docked in Deling." He snapped at her, though it was a gentle snap—as gently as Seifer knew how. She turned around to look at him then, not angry so much as exhausted from the stress of best laid plans going awry. 

"Listen, you're both going to Timber and that's an order. It's safer for travel, and it's also safer to have two of you there given the tensions between the soldiers and the civilians." She couldn't fight Seifer and the wind, but at least within the context of this mission she could control one of them. 

"Fujin I—" Seifer stopped himself when it became clear that Raijin was awkwardly trying to stay out of the discussion, moving around the room to adjust things that didn't need adjusting—a bedspread tightened, the complimentary hotel notepad and pen lined up on the nightstand. As Seifer's green eyes watched their friend, she saw something in him shift. His chest heaved with a single deep breath. 

"Okay ... you're the boss." The words fell from his lips with difficulty—the feeling of letting her lead him was still so foreign to them. "Raijin and I will go to Timber."

"Yes, you will." Fujin stated to him plainly, making it very clear that it wasn't up to him anyway and that she didn't need him to agree with her. Her fingers began to drum against her thigh again.
"Alright, I'll go get train tickets then." Seifer snagged his coat off the back of his chair, his voice tinged with annoyance and defiance.

"No, not the train—you can rent a car in the morning. That way we know you can get back whenever you want … just in case the trains are sold out."

"Trains from Timber sold out? There's a better chance of a Grat flyin', ya know?" Raijin chimed in from across the room.

"All the same …" Raijin was right, but Fujin didn't want to run the risk of them being stuck there for too long. Of him being stuck there with her for too long.

"Okay … a rental car then." Irritation still edged Seifer's voice as he slid his coat over his shoulders and marched towards the door. "I'm gonna go see if they have one available for tomorrow. I need some air." He paused when his boots reached the threshold, leaving the three of them standing silent in the shape of a perfect triangle.

"Well?" Exasperated, he held his palm out at her. "Are you coming, or are we just gonna stand here and stare at each other?"

"That depends—do you want me to come so we can talk about this more? Because it's not a debate." Seifer bit his cheek and wiggled the door handle as his words failed him. Fujin raised a pale eyebrow and crossed her arms over her chest. Raijin, standing quietly in his own corner, nervously looked around the room and pretended he wasn't witnessing a fight.

"Fine, never mind. You two stay here—enjoy yourselves." The comment was heavy with sarcasm. "I'll be back later."

"I'll come with ya man." Raijin stepped forward, shoving his hands in his pockets awkwardly. "I … could use some air, too."

"No thanks." Seifer scoffed, opening the door and walking out. "No point in that. You'd rather be here, and I'd definitely rather be alone. Thanks for the backup, by the way." He slammed the door behind him. Raijin's shoulders slumped and he sulked as he finished unpacking his bag.

"What the hell was that about? I know why he's mad at me, but he doesn't need to take it out on you." Raijin mumbled something she couldn't make out under his breath and shrugged.

"He's wrong. I'm not rewarding that by running after him him." Fujin wasn't going to let herself feel guilty about not chasing after him, and if Raijin had anything else to say, she didn't want to hear it. She snatched a few things from her bag and made her way to the bathroom to take a shower and get ready for bed.

"This was all Seifer's fault. He was the one who stormed off and who wouldn't respect the fact that she was leading them on this mission. If he hadn't run into Caraway in the first place, and struck up that deal to leave Dollet for the summer without consulting her, they wouldn't even be here right now. He was the one who brought Rinoa into their world and put himself in this position. He also seemed to uncannily remember so much more information about that night even though he was
'drunk' and it 'didn't mean anything.'

Apparently Fujin was the one who wasn't quite over that yet. Talk about not being honest …

She vacillated between wondering whether she was right to stand her ground, or wrong let him leave, as she dried off and stretched a stolen black t-shirt of his over her head to sleep in. She wished she'd taken one that he'd worn already—it at least would have smelled like him, and maybe that would've eased her anxiety a bit.

What was she anxious about though? Clearly, he was in the wrong here …

Though she supposed part of the problem was the difficulty she had interpreting Seifer's worry as something separate from his perception of her abilities as a fighter. His concern came across as not believing in her, even though she knew it was likely also deeply embedded in something else entirely.

Oh well, she couldn't go back in time and make a different choice. Fujin was here, Seifer was out there, and they were both too stubborn to change decided to just go to bed.

The mild fight kept Seifer away unnecessarily late into the evening—he returned just as Fujin was contemplating conceding and going out to find him. She was glad when she heard Seifer stumble over Raijin's boots and curse under his breath quietly as he slipped into the room. She'd seen those boots there earlier—in the exact wrong spot—when she finished up her shower. Spitefully, she chose not to move them, knowing full well there was a high probability that Seifer's feet would find them in the dark.

As she watched his silhouette lower down into a chair across the room to remove his shoes, she stayed motionless and stared up at the ceiling, dreaming up the worst-case scenarios. In his anger, he'd probably gone to the bar to grab a few shots of whiskey. Some woman there had probably hit on him, because who wouldn't try if they could? And maybe under the always perfect bar lighting and through the filter of booze, those undeniably gorgeous green eyes of his saw something he liked … something that was the opposite of her. Maybe that's where he'd been …

When Fujin felt the weight of him settle onto the bed next to her, she braced herself for the thick scent of alcohol, cigarettes, and the flowery perfume of someone else. But to her surprise, Seifer smelled like himself—a mix of warmth, leather, and whatever soap he used all these years that still made her giddy when he was close enough for her to smell it. He snuggled up to her, placed his hand on her stomach, and pressed his lips to her ear.

"Truce? Or … I'm sorry, I guess." It was a good thing he was willing to broker peace with her, even if it was half-hearted. Fujin could have gone days without saying a thing to him. Or … at least, she'd like to think she could. She turned on her side to face him, and placed her hand on his cheek.

"I'm sorry, too. Where were you?"

"Reserving a car, and then just walking." Seifer's large hand covered her own and gripped it lightly. "Waiting for you to come find me, I think. Little did I know, you were sound asleep."

"Not asleep … I was waiting for you to come home. I was worried." His face twisted into something resembling apologetic in the dark.

"I figured. I didn't mean for that to happen … I don't want you to worry."

"I'm not trying to make you worry, either." Her thumb rubbed his cheek. "You understand why I want you to both go to Timber, right?"
"I do … but can't we just wait a couple more days though? I wanted to make sure there aren't any threats here before we leave." Fujin sighed and ran her hand through his hair.

"We can't—you know that." He groaned, but quickly followed it with a smirk.

"*Fine*, I'll drop it. But *I was* hoping to get some time alone with you tonight. If you would've come with me earlier, we could have found a nice quiet place to go …" His hand slid down her arm to the small of her back. "But hey, I think Raijin's knocked out … wanna fool around?" The hallway light coming in under the door illuminated his face just enough for her to make out a wink. Fujin rolled her eyes at him, which elicited a chuckle from his soft lips.

"Wow, today is *not* my day. Can't blame a guy for trying, I guess. Something to look forward to when I get back, then …" His voice trailed off, and he leaned in close to press his forehead to hers.

"Seriously though, I'll try not to do that again—not let *us* get in the way of what's best for the mission. I know you can handle Deling. And the wind's been gone for a couple of days now, so it's fine, right?" Fujin nodded, hating that she had to lie to him but knowing she didn't have a choice—Garden was depending on them and so was *Seifer's future in SeeD*. He wouldn't go if he knew.

"*Fine*? Are you kidding? I'm gonna have a *great time* without you guys. Go find some of these Deling card sharks that Raijin has been raving about and practice up so I can beat the two of you."

"*Yeah*, do me a favor and stay away from card sharks while I'm gone. And stay out of seedy places while you're hunting down sorceress leads too. Now … I'm going to go sleep in the other bed—this is too tiny for the both of us." Seifer leaned in to kiss her, his tongue parting her lips and sliding against hers for a few moments. When he pulled away and made that gratified, deep humming sound of his that made her stomach flip. "I'll see you in the morning, Fuu."

She watched him slip away, and wondered exactly how much trouble she'd be in if something *did* go wrong while they were in Timber. He didn't like it when she hid things from him … but she was doing it for *his own good*. Hopefully he'd understand … and hey, if luck was on her side she wouldn't need to worry about it at all.

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Leaving her alone went against *every* instinct Seifer had. But … it was hard to know if those instincts were even something he could trust now—if they were the instincts of a warrior sensing danger or the hesitation of a man in love.

Raijin coming to Timber with him was sort'vve a double-edged sword, too. On the one hand, those base feelings of jealousy he'd been having were now alleviated since the two of them wouldn't be cooped up together in that tiny hotel room, without Seifer around. That wasn't much of a win though, because despite still being incredibly pissed at Raijin, he did *truly* trust them both—Raijin coming with him to Timber and leaving Fujin alone outweighed any brief relief he'd felt.

Seifer supposed it didn't really matter what he felt about it at all though. Fujin was their leader for this operation, and for Fujin—and only Fujin—he'd blindly follow rank as best he could … even though *that* was against his nature, too.

In all the years they'd spent together, he couldn't remember a single time they'd left the more fragile member of their Posse to fend for herself. *Hyne, she'd kill him if she ever heard him call her fragile* …

But *fuck* was it hard to listen to her this morning when she'd knelt beside his bed and nudged him awake with tender pale fingers. As Seifer's blurred vision adjusted to the light of day, he found Fujin
staring down at him surrounded by an ethereal glow—her shining silver hair haloed by the sun filtering in through the windows. For just a moment he forgot where they were, and in a hazy wakefulness he collected her in his arms and began to groggily divulge the details of a dirty dream he’d had about her last night.

The bliss was short-lived when Fujin cleared her throat and her eyes darted to her left to indicate there was someone else close by. The hotel room came into view behind her, and he groaned as he remembered they weren’t at Garden in her dorm, and that he needed to censor himself for Raijin’s sake. Begrudgingly, Seifer let her slip from his grasp to start the day.

As if nothing had changed between them all, the trio’s morning ritual played out as it usually did when they travelled together. Fujin, a creature of habit who was always the first to wake up, left to grab them all coffee and breakfast. Seifer and Raijin stayed behind in bed, no words passing between them, as the haze of sleep faded away with the rising of the sun.

The new romance with Fujin did add some welcome variation to their morning routine, though. When she returned with coffee and brought it to Seifer in bed, he now found it totally acceptable to pull her down for a deep morning kiss as a sign of his gratitude, leaving her breathless and smiling—censorship be damned.

And Raijin leaving them alone at the breakfast table to go and take a shower had a whole new meaning to it, too. It offered Seifer the perfect opportunity to gently pry Fujin's coffee from her hands and pull her onto his lap so that he could sneak another kiss. His rapidly drumming heart felt like it was going to expand and burst in his chest as she accepted his invitation eagerly, placing her hands on his cheeks with fierce gentleness to deepen their kiss—the ring he’d given her the other night warm and hard against his skin. Seifer wrapped his arms around her and pulled her forward to press against him gratifyingly, and heard a quiet murmur of approval as her lips curved into a smile against his mouth. That shining silver halo she’d had disappeared as their bodies bent just out of reach of the sun.

And what could he do then but press against her again and hold her tightly there? He desperately wanted to be with her—to show her again what it was like for him to love someone; for Seifer Almasy, the untamable playboy of Garden, to actually want to be tamed. It was all-consuming, and he ached at the thought of not being next to her tonight, and the prospect of not being able to touch her for days… even in just a simple, stolen moment like this. Was this that fleeting thing people always talked about with new relationships, when you just couldn't keep your hands off each other? No, this was definitely something more than that. If they could just get a minute alone …

But apparently they didn't even have enough time to wrap up whatever it was they were currently doing. Raijin emerged from the bathroom sooner than expected in a fog of shower steam, and squeaked in shock at the sight of Fujin straddling Seifer before they realized that he'd come through the door.

_Hyne … do ya want me to stay in there?_ Raijin had laughed nervously and shielded his eyes at the sight of them. Seifer was sure he'd detected a hint of annoyance too.

_Sorry Raijin_, Fujin said awkwardly, her cheeks reddening as she scrambled off Seifer's lap and their friend walked over to join them at the table. Seifer didn't bother apologizing—he wasn't even the slightest bit sorry. He kept his eyes fixed on her, already missing the feeling of her skin against his as he rested his elbows on the table and sighed.

_It's fine, ya know_. Raijin reached out to grab his coffee to keep himself occupied, and quickly changed the subject. _When are we leaving?_
As soon as Seifer's ready, ideally. Fujin, visibly embarrassed at being caught and visibly shaken by Seifer (which, of course, made him pretty happy), took a sip of her coffee as she motioned towards him.

Alright, alright. I'll go get cleaned up and then we'll finish breakfast and hit the road. Seifer rose to his feet and leaned over to whisper in her ear before leaving the table. You can come too if you want.

He hadn't whispered it very lowly, so there was a good chance Raijin heard it. But what was he supposed to do, walk on egg-shells forever? Fujin's cheeks reddened then, too flustered to even give Seifer a stern look before he walked away … smirking all the while. She didn't move to join him, and he hadn't actually expected her to—he just loved to watch her squirm a little in that cute, shaky way that she did … irritating Raijin was an added bonus.

The morning went by too fast, like all mornings with her seemed to be doing lately. One minute he was watching her longingly as she outlined directions to Timber on a map, and now they were presently they were making their way out of the hotel to the streets of Deling. Fujin walked with downcast eyes and stuffed her hands in her pockets, and Raijin followed close behind, whistling as he watched the denizens flooding into the streets to begin a new day. Seifer was only watching her, and clumsily bumping into people as a result. Was this really how he had to say goodbye to her—in crowded streets with Raijin standing between them? He would do this all so differently … he found himself thinking that a lot lately.

The attendant at the pick-up desk handed Seifer the keys to their rental car and apologized for being short staffed today—he'd have to go out back and grab the car himself instead of an attendant pulling it up front. Seifer nodded in thanks as Fujin shelled out the necessary cash for the trip ... he could have sworn he saw her hand shaking as she placed the money on the counter. But what for? This was what she wanted … she was making him do this.

"I'll pull up out front." Seifer shook the keys in his hand as he walked backwards a few paces and his eyes locked with hers.

"Okay, we'll wait outside." He sensed disappointment in her voice at the beginnings of their very unsatisfying goodbye. Not much could be done about it now though—they were already more than halfway through it. And no matter how they said goodbye, the fact that they had to do it at all was deeply unsatisfying on its own. There wasn't much chance of salvaging that.

Seifer made his way to the garage and found the car somehow, despite the fact that his mind couldn't fully focus on the task at hand. He slipped inside and tossed Hyperion in the back seat, before starting engine. Letting out a long exasperated sigh, he leaned back against the headrest and closed his eyes. He'd planned on leaving Fujin a little better than this. There'd been plans to give her reassurance that he'd be loyal. He'd wanted to tell her to call him home if the wind acted up. He still needed to warn her about being wary of the city at night despite how well-trained she was— their instructors at Garden always said that you were in the most danger when you were comfortable. Seifer wanted to tell her the things a boyfriend would tell her, which didn't really line up with things her subordinate would say in front of a fellow operative … especially the bit where was going to miss her hands, her lips, her eyes …

He laughed out loud and shook his head, running his hand over his face and blinking hard as he marveled at how utterly undone he was by all of this. No one had done this to him before. The untamable Seifer—the knight questing after a grand dream—tamed and bent at the knee for the silver siren of Balamb. It made sense … it would be her.

The passenger side door clicked open, jarring him from his thoughts. He jumped upright as his hand instinctively darted to the back seat to grab Hyperion. Fujin, knowing his movements almost better
than he did, grabbed his arm before he could reach it.

"It's only me."

"Holy shit, you sure know how to sneak up on a guy." Seifer placed a hand against his chest and laughed from the shock. "What are you doing? I thought you said that you'd wait—"

"I know what I said. Raijin's waiting out front. I just … wanted a minute …" He smiled as her voice trailed off.

"Did you miss me already?" Seifer chuckled as his hand reached out to gently pinch her side. "I'm glad you followed me. I actually wanted to tell you—"

"I already know." Fujin cut him off, drawing closer to him and touching his cheek as her eyes stayed fixed on his. "I'll be careful. I'll call you at the hotel if anything goes wrong."

"And don't get too comfortable here." He whispered, his brow furrowing. If she already knew what he was thinking, then what had she come after him for?

"And I won't get too comfortable." Fujin echoed, as her hand slid down his neck to his chest. "But I'm not here for that." Her hand didn't stop—it sank downward still until it found a resting place in his lap. And when it landed there, her fingers searched in the poor lighting of the concrete garage to unzip his pants.

"Hey, uh … what …are you doing?" Seifer laughed breathlessly between the words, as his eyes quickly scanned the garage for anyone lurking nearby who might see.

"I wanted to, before you left." With the zipper unzipped, and his belt now unbuckled by her deft fingers, her hand continued it's roaming and his breath caught in his throat.

"Shit … uh … Fuu, we don't need to do this here." He laughed again in shock at her boldness, as she maneuvered all scraps of fabric obstructing the feeling of skin-on-skin out of her way—a low groan escaped his lips when her hand found him.

"You don't want to? Because it doesn't really seem that way …" She arched an eyebrow and let her eyes dart downward for a moment before she leaned in to kiss him quickly, her voice playful in that way he got a glimpse of the other day in her room. He decided, in that moment, that he liked it as much as he liked that nervous newness of hers.

"Well, I didn't say that …" She smiled and kissed his cheek, his chin, his collarbone. His lungs grew tight when her body unexpectedly readjusted so that her head could sink to his lap.

"I don't know how to do this, really … I'll probably be terrible at it." She paused to look up at him, her mouth hovering just a few precarious inches away from doing something that had been in that dream of his last night. Seifer couldn't stop himself from running his fingers loving through her hair. Maybe that halo of hers was still there after all.

"Well, great time to learn …" She laughed at his ridiculous response—her breath against him caused him to shiver as her eyes, one crimson and one blue, gazed upward at him. He swallowed audibly as he waited for her to move. What a strange feeling, to be completely at the mercy of someone else and not wanting to turn the tables. They'd been trained all their lives to get the upper hand … in battle, in espionage, in everything. It had never been about that with Fujin though—Seifer had shown her that soft underbelly of his thousands of times over the years, and would gladly be at her mercy on any given day … especially right now. Especially when her soft lips sank lower and the warmth of
her mouth surrounded him, and when her tongue began to draw patterns that made his mind melt … *Hyne, have mercy.*

Raijin was tapping his foot impatiently when the car wheeled out of the garage, a scowl flashing on his face as he saw them approaching. Seifer rolled down the window as he came to a halt in front of their bronze friend.

"What's your problem?" He asked, with a grin stretched across his face and his hand gripping Fujin's thigh.

"I've been waiting for like 20 minutes." Raijin crossed his arms over his chest and glared into the car at Fujin. "*That's* my problem, ya know."

"*Raijin.* The weather is great; the sun is shining—you couldn't ask for a better day to be left outdoors." Seifer felt Fujin's hand grip his own before she opened the door and slid out of the car. "Now hop in—let's get this show on the road." He watched Fujin say sorry to their friend as she scuttled past him, telling him to be safe in Timber as she made her way to Seifer's window.

"Alright." Fujin grabbed the lapel of his coat as she leaned in to kiss him quickly. "Call me when you get a chance. Hopefully sometime over these next couple of days." She took a few steps away from the car.

"I'll call *tonight.* You be safe, ok?" She nodded and offered him a weak smile.

"You too, Seif." He smiled back and ran his eyes over her one more time, before putting his foot on the gas and driving away. He watched through the rear-view mirror, as she turned her back to them and walked towards the heart of the city. Seifer wished he could've come up with something more profound to say to her—he still couldn't think straight after what she'd just done, completely out of the blue. *Speaking of which …*

"Sorry we made you wait Raijin. I mean it. We had some things to wrap up …" Seifer turned to look at Raijin and caught him rolling his eyes.

"Ya, I'm sure you did. Listen, it's fine man—we don't have to keep coming back to this. I'm fine. You're fine. *She's fine …*" His voice trailed off, as he rolled down his own window and let the warm summer breeze blow in. "Let's just have a nice trip. Forget about all this stuff and just … have fun, like we used to." Seifer nodded in agreement, as Fujin and Deling fell out of view.

"Alright man, that sounds good. And hey, if you see anything good to stop and fight along the way just shout—but don't tell Fujin about it, eh?" Raijin nodded and smirked at that.

"Secret's safe with me, bro."
Wrecked, solitary, here

Besides, her mind needed to be sharp—she needed to beat back that gnawing feeling of weakness. She had a day of reconnaissance work planned, not to mention some intensive research to conduct, and distractions wouldn't help. She decided not to let herself worry about the trouble they could get into on the drive there (what if they got a flat tire in an Ochu infested grove?), not to hyperfocus on potentially missing a call from Seifer if she was out doing work (what if he gave up on calling and she couldn't talk to him for days?), and to definitely not think about Rinoa (what if she was more beautiful that Seifer remembered?).

It was already going so well.

Hyne, what was she doing?

She wouldn't necessarily say that she regretted what just happened in the parking garage … but she never really thought the phrase 'regretted what just happened in the parking garage' would be in her vocabulary. Then again, she also never thought 'I love you Seifer' would be in her vocabulary either … at least not said out loud.

Fujin stuffed her hands in her pockets and marched back down the street towards the hotel and the center of town, refusing to watch Seifer and Raijin drive away to Timber. She wasn't going to be that girl … the one that stayed behind dutifully with welled up eyes and her hand longingly clutched to her chest from heartache, as the men rode off towards adventure. She was already feeling stereotypical enough this morning as it was, what with her creeping jealousy manifesting itself into incredibly out of character liaisons—no need to give into it entirely.

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Fujin sighed and drummed her fingers against her thigh as she tried to quiet her mind. The wind was back again this morning, breezing through her ears, and to her surprise she was glad to hear it—it gave her something else to focus on. She was finding that if she talked to it—or rather, to her—it would respond sometimes, by blustering louder or wafting more quietly. Right now, Pandemona was blowing soothingly, smoothly. Fujin could've sworn the guardian was trying to comfort her.

She'd been trying not to think about that in general, too. She'd had Seifer as a distraction since their pivotal meeting with Cid Kramer, where she learned her mother and the sorceress attached to Pandemona were one in the same. And did Seifer ever provide the best distraction—that smile of his, those green eyes... Her all-consuming love for him had been the dam holding her feelings on
everything else at bay, but now that he was gone … she was petrified that those feelings would crash over her in a rush … catastrophic, tidal.

So she tried not to think about it. She tried to compartmentalize things and treat each bit of information as it's own separate issue, and not as if it were all as intricately interwoven as it all seemed to be. Better to keep the work separate from the personal, better to look at the knowledge objectively. Better … it was going to be better this way.

She made a pit stop at a busy little café next to the hotel to grab a cup of coffee before heading to the library for the day. Normally she would've been fine with the mediocre hotel coffee, but even this small detail was part of her work—it was the perfect place to listen.

A handful of patrons ahead of her were grumbling lowly about the long line, while others sitting at the small indoor tables were busy catching on the local happenings, emboldened to talk loudly over the hum of conversation and city noise. Did you hear who's going to be performing at the Galbadia Hotel? … The city has almost finished fixing the clock tower … I don't know if they ever found the student who went missing at that old crypt on the outskirts of the city, the poor dear.

"Next? Miss?" The man at the counter interrupted her low-grade espionage. "What can I get for you?"

"A black coffee." She fished for a few gil in her pocket, and frowned at her own request. Why not pick something that would take a few more minutes? "Actually, I've changed my mind—can I have that?" She pointed to a very elaborate looking image drawn in chalk on the specials board.

"Wow, that's an upgrade from black coffee! Livin' on the edge." The clerk, a handsome young man around her age, with curly, chestnut colored hair pulled back in a bun, grinned at her.

"Yeah, sure." She replied sarcastically, looking over her shoulder to scan for anyone who might be interesting to sit next to for a moment. "It's a wild morning."

"Ha! I guess so. That'll be 30 gil, please." Fujin distractedly placed the money in the man's outstretched hand. "Say, you have really pretty eyes—real unique."

"Oh … th-thank you." Out of reflex, she shook her head at the compliment and moved to stand on the other side of the counter to wait for her coffee.

"Aw, c'mon. It's a compliment—an elaborate cup of coffee, a compliment. What a great way to bookend your wild morning." She awkwardly ignored the flirtation and he grinned wider.

"Hey buddy, I'm not against you getting a date and all, but can ya help me?" A man waiting at the counter asked gruffly, exasperated.

"We'll have that ready for you in a few minutes," he smiled at her again, and turned to wait on his customer. "Sorry sir, what can I get you?" She rolled her eyes and took the opportunity to listen to the crowd again, zeroing in on the conversation of a pair of men in their late 30 sitting at a small booth off to her right who had the clean-cut look of Galbadian soldiers.

"I'm so tired of these drills we've been doing—why are we practicing these things so much lately?"

"I don't know," the man's companion yawned mid-sentence. "But I have to think it's got something to do with President Deling's new … friend. Everything's been different since she started showing up."

Their voices dropped lower. Fujin took a small step backwards in their direction, distancing herself
from the distracting chatter at the counter so she might be able to hear them better.

"Well, I don't like the look of where it's going," one of the men said between sips of coffee. "You know what I heard? A rumor that the President was going to give her a cabinet appointment of some kind."

"Really? 'Cuz I heard there was talk of her being named an ambassador. A couple of guys under Caraway's command said something about it the other day."

"How would that work? And for what? It's not like she has diplomatic power over anything … yet."

"Who knows, man? For all we know he could just be sleeping with her. There might not be anything behind it."

"Ya think? I heard she was married to one of the higher ups at—"

"Miss, your coffee's ready." The barista who took her order earlier plunked her coffee down on the counter. Fujin grimaced at his poor timing, and marched forward to grab it. She murmured a disingenuous thank you and ignored his attempt at continuing the conversation, as she slipped away to try and find a seat near the two Galbadian soldiers. But alas, it was too late. In the few seconds it took her to grab her coffee and turn around the two men were standing from the table and walking out of the café.

Just when it was starting to get interesting…

She contemplated following them for a moment, but thought better of it when she realized that tailing Galbadian soldiers without backup anywhere nearby was a terrible idea. It was incredibly easy to forget she was by herself since the Posse worked in tandem so often. Seifer's advice about not getting too comfortable had been sound—she'd need to keep her confidence in check until they returned.

Instead of following the soldiers, Fujin wandered over to the cork bulletin board near the exit of the café to scan the well-worn fliers and pamphlets tacked there to gain some knowledge of the local happenings. She had to flip a few out of the way here or there to get a good look—many of them were plastered on top of each other, vying for space in the busy world of concert promotions, apartment listings, lost pets, and soup kitchens. As her fingers flicked a couple of identical fliers out of the way, she realized there were tons of pamphlets from stores in the shopping district promoting touristy sorceress and para-magic related merchandize. Hats, pins, umbrellas, and books with titles like 'It's All Elemental: How to Improve Your Magic Stats' and 'How to Bring Out Your Inner Sorceress.' It was clear that the sorceress craze, along with all things spellbinding, had taken hold of the city.

She stumbled on another notice about a Triple Triad tournament at a local pub scheduled for later in the week, just a few doors down from the Galbadia Hotel. Judging from the flier's advertisement of trendy craft beers, it looked like a pub where a younger crowd would gather—possibly young Galbadian infantrymen with loose lips. She pinched the paper between her pale fingers and plucked it from the board, folding it up and stuffing it in her pocket. She paid little mind to a handful of grumbling onlookers who deemed the action unsavory, and exited the shop to continue her mission.

As Fujin made her way to the public library, she wondered how long this entrenchment in the occult had been going on here in Deling. The news hadn't seemed to spread anywhere else, but given the state of communication systems in the world today it wasn't uncommon for news to travel slowly. The Posse hadn't even heard a whisper about it during the time they spent seaside in Dollet, which was surprising since the Dollet-Deling route was frequently traveled. The news must be fresh.
Fujin's mind wandered to another thing that was bothering her a bit: how odd it was that Cid Kramer, all the way on Balamb Continent, would have heard anything about the sorceress before they relayed the message from Caraway. She supposed it could have been discussed at a joint Balamb-Galbadia-Trabia Garden meeting … but the end of the term would have been busy for Cid, and she couldn’t recall him being gone recently. Odd indeed… she'd have to run that by Seifer, at some point.

En route to Deling's library, Fujin passed by Caraway's mansion. A guard, who was supposed to be standing watch outside, was sleeping on duty. The grand arched windows on the top floors of the building were dark, while the bottom windows where security and service staff likely worked, were brightly lit. At one point, she heard raucous laughter and music coming from one of the windows left ajar. Caraway was, apparently, still not at home. The carelessness of his security continued to make her uneasy about working with him, but that wasn't a task she could deal with today, or maybe ever. Better to keep moving, one foot in front of the other, and tackle the things that could be accomplished.

Once she reached the library, Fujin planted herself at a table in the back with a notepad and some scraps of paper. She started with something less intimidating than the sorceress problem, and began to read up on the short history of Guardian Forces to see if there was any record of a sorceress joining with a GF before. Since they were discovered only shortly before the Sorceress War with Adel, not much information about them was available. She found two dusty books and a handful of research papers which mostly focused on the alleged memory loss that occurred from junctioning. It read almost exactly like the stuffy training manuals at Balamb Garden.

"A Guardian Force is an independent energy force. By combining it with para-magic, it is possible to control tremendous energy. Memory loss is a possible side effect, but this has not been proven as of yet."

Balamb Garden was the only SeeD institution to support the use of GFs, though she was never sure why. Personally, Fujin couldn't say whether they caused memory loss one way or another. She, Seifer and Raijin weren't heavy users of GFs and usually preferred to hone their natural abilities, unless they were on a mission that required it—this recent issue with Pandemona was the longest she'd ever had a GF junctioned. None of them ever described experiencing memory loss per say … although, they all couldn't remember the first eight or so years of their childhood. But she chalked that up to trauma from being orphaned.

The research on GFs was interesting though … one study even hinted that the more affinity you had for one GF, the faster your memories were erased. Fujin wondered if the extra boost of power in battle was really worth the cost, as she shuddered at the thought of Pandemona wiping her memory clean of her days with Seifer and Raijin.

She licked her thumb and flipped through the pages of one of the books speedily to find a section on GF origins, and her eyes grew wide when they fell upon a memorable name buried among the text.

"Guardian Forces were discovered by renowned scientist Dr. Odine of Esthar, and the junctioning system was subsequently designed by him to connect the consciousness of humans with the GFs, with the goal of replicating the powers of sorcery through para-magic."

Dr. Odine of Esthar—the same scientist Cid mentioned in his office a few short days ago. The same man who held an infant Fujin in an Estharian laboratory for observation after Adel murdered her mother.

How strange that Cid hadn't mentioned that. At some point after Adel had been defeated, Cid must have met with Odine to discuss integrating GFs and the junction system at Balamb—he must have known the scientist personally in some way. Maybe through the notorious orphanage that Seifer and
Fujin both apparently came from? She vaguely remembered him hinting at the fact that he'd seen Seifer and Fujin at the orphanage together …

Fujin set the books on GFs aside, and with renewed interest began a deep search for information on Dr. Odine, the famous scientist who seemed to have a hand in everything impacting her right now.

The information on Odine's early years was virtually nonexistent. His discovery of GFs put him on the map in both the scientific and occult communities as a sorcery researcher, and after that he was incredibly active in his field. Under Adel's reign, he conducted special studies on consciousness and junctioning (the details of which were vague), and aided with the design of a hybrid research facility/weapon called Lunatic Pandora. Fujin thought the facility sounded vaguely familiar … something Seifer had maybe mentioned to her when regaling her with long and boring stories about the war? She was suddenly regretting not paying more attention…

Most recently, Dr. Odine had been lauded for designing and producing items that suppressed sorceress powers. He'd created them behind Adel's back, as fears of her tyranny heightened in Esthar during the war. Fujin examined a sketch of one of the items in the book—a delicate silver necklace with a large, sapphire pendant—and felt a little relieved at the fact that Odine had shown some sort of hesitation about Adel's powers while he was under her command. At least the man who raised her in his lab for five years wasn't a blind supporter of her mother's murderer. It was sad that was the only comfort she had to rely on—a shred of goodness in her quasi-captor's heart, which came far too late.

The tightness of unprocessed grief spread from her chest to her throat at the thought of her mother, and the idea that no one had protected her … that they may have pointedly chosen not to. It was sad to imagine her that way, without loyal friends like Seifer and Raijin on her side to stand up for her, regardless of the dangers. Fujin was dreading sitting down with Seifer when they returned to Balamb to go through her mother's dossier … but then again, she'd have Seifer with her—he was her rock, her anchor, her safe harbor. With him at her side, she could get through anything.

As Fujin flipped through the pages, she was hoping to find data on what Odine might be working on currently, but the trail went cold following his research on suppression of powers. Since his continued studies on consciousness following GF junctioning hadn't been fully published yet, it made sense that might be where his interests were currently … but what would the purpose be if it were? There didn't seem to be any need for development beyond the junction systems …

With little information available on Odine, and with the day fading fast, Fujin returned the volumes to their shelves and moved on to the topic of sorceresses. As she wandered through rows of lore, she found the section on sorcery and para-magic was picked clean. Begrudgingly, she dragged herself to the reference desk to ask for help from a polite, elderly librarian.

"Well my dear, I'm afraid most of our books on that topic are checked out right now. They've been very popular, what with the new guest that's been frequenting the city." The woman continued to search through the library's catalog for anything that might be helpful. Fujin wouldn't usually tolerate being called my dear by anyone, but the woman had kind eyes and a warm smile.

"Well, thank you for checking. I suppose I'm a little late to the game. How long has the sorceress been visiting town for, now?"

"Ah, I knew you weren't from around here." The librarian smiled again and removed her glasses, letting them hang around her neck by the chain attached to them. "The town's been a-buzz for about a month or so now—she took Deling by storm. No one's actually talked to her or seen her do much in public, besides enter the presidential residence. But my, she's awfully beautiful. Ah-ha!" The librarian reached for a scrap of paper on her desk, her eyes darting back and forth from the paper to
"I think I have something you might like to see, since you're interested in the history of sorceresses. It's a part of our rare books and special collections holdings, so I'm afraid you can't take it out of the room, but there's a big and comfortable desk to use, and you can photograph the book or make copies if you'd like."

"Great, thanks for your help—I appreciate it." Fujin followed the woman to the elevator, the usual excruciating prospect of small talk in an enclosed space alleviated by the woman's gentle nature.

"So, what brings you to town?" The librarian asked, as they entered the elevator and she pressed a button for the basement.

"Oh, I'm a cadet at Balamb Garden. I'm on a summer vacation with my friends." She forgot that she was a SeeD now, but no matter … it was probably best to not mention it.

"Well, you should be out enjoying it then!" She laughed and wiped her glasses on her blouse. "You Garden kids are so serious … though I suppose you have to be. And I also suppose I shouldn't call you kids. You have more responsibilities on your shoulders than this old lady has had in her entire life."

"I don't know about that." Fujin chuckled, and crossed her arms over her chest as she leaned on the cool wall of the elevator. "You're a gatekeeper of knowledge—that's a pretty big responsibility."

"Oh my!" The woman let out a hearty laugh, her rose colored cheeks turning a deeper shade of pink as she tucked a few strands of gray hair behind her ears. "You might be romanticizing it a bit." The elevator came to a stop, and the doors chimed open to allow them access to the special collections room.

"Now," she moved to a cabinet on the far wall and unlocked a pair of glass doors. She slid her fingers gingerly over the spines of leather-bound antiquities, searching for the call number. Once found, her weathered hands pulled the large book effortlessly from the shelf and gathered in her arms. "Here we are. I'll set it on the table—it's very old so be as gentle with it as you can."

"Should I wear gloves or—"

"Oh nonsense!" The woman smiled at Fujin again and placed the book on the table. "Books are meant to be touched, read, and enjoyed. We just ask that you be careful, and come let us know when you're finished—we'll put it back for you."

"Great, thank you."

"You're welcome dear. Enjoy your reading."

The woman returned to the elevator, and soon Fujin was left alone with a tome of sorceress history at her fingertips. She flipped the cover open and ran her hand over the first page, unsure of where to begin—she didn't exactly know what she was looking for ...

A detailed genealogy of Hyne and his descendants took up the first 50 or so pages of the book, which wasn't very fascinating or very relevant to Fujin's research. As she skimmed the pages, she was beginning to lose hope that any of this would help. But, once she waded through the pages of family trees belonging to sorceresses long gone, she came across a section of the book detailing the various powers that the decedents of Hyne possessed over the years, which were different among each lineage—everything ranging from elemental properties to mind control. The introduction to the section caught Fujin's eye—it pointed out that a common trait among all sorceresses seemed to be
their uncanny ability to enchant and manipulate.

"Many sorceresses have a unique command over human emotion—their powers make them enigmatic. Those who are most susceptible to their charms can be consumed by admiration, and often demonstrate unyielding loyalty that causes the formation of a lasting bond. Since the affection is typically prevalent among males, many sorceresses form relationships (tending to be of a maternal or romantic nature) with the loyal protector—a role which has become commonly known as the sorceresses' knight."

Well, that explained Deling City's enthusiasm a little. She re-read the passage a few times, with an irrational panic creeping into her chest as she superimposed the information on her own life. What if Seifer was only beguiled by the powers residing inside of her right now? That couldn't be true though. He said he'd been in love with her for years, and Pandemona had only been with her a few short months—the timing didn't add up. But still … everything between them came to a peak shortly after Pandemona's arrival. Maybe it sped things along?

As Fujin read through the different powers of each Hyne dynasty, she stumbled on the family name Elaria. She ran her finger over the name, her brow furrowing at the palimpsest of a memory, as the corner of the page fluttered in the breeze …

Fujin realized all too late what a breeze in the basement of a library meant. Before she had a chance to process the thought, a white wind encircled her—the same white wind that had surrounded her and Seifer on the boat. She stared in awe as it began to spin in a fast, feverish tornado. The pages of the book splayed in front of her turned over, shifting direction as the currents changed. She slammed the cover shut and pressed arms against it to keep it closed, as the white light from the wind grew brighter and blinded her eyes.

"It's you … she heard a soft, clear voice echoing in the vacuum around her. It's us. Fujin tried to speak, but the force of the gale choked her and filled her lungs.

Hush now, my Fujin. I wish I could protect you … but …. perhaps it will all be worth it. You'll find such unbearable sorrow down this path, and even I can't predict what comes after the storm. My daughter … my darling girl. I'll stay with you until he comes for me, and then you'll need to choose. For he will come … and you … you'll have to save him. Fate is a wicked thing.

"Who will come? Who will I have to save?" Fujin tried to scream, but she felt too weak, and the words weren't strong enough to carry. The wind filled her chest, forcing them back down her throat and left her stinging in pain—she felt like she was drowning.

Hush, my dear. The moon will come. The sun will set. And between this world and another, you'll find him standing among the stars.

All these riddles, Fujin thought to herself as her eyes grew tired and her limbs became heavy. I don't know what you mean.

You won't know until it happens to you. This is the plight, and the beauty, of life. Cherish it—every minute. Now … breath, and sleep, my child. I've kept you far too long.

Fujin couldn't keep her eyes open any longer, and soon everything faded to black.

"Good heavens child, are you alright?" A firm grip on Fujin's shoulder and a gentle voice woke her from a deep slumber. As her bleary eyes brought the world into focus, the concerned face of the librarian who'd helped her earlier in the day appeared before her.
"Oh … yes, I must've fallen asleep for a minute." Fujin scrambled upright, her eyes darting to the book quickly, hoping it hadn't been damaged by the wind. Of all the things to be worried about. She was relieved to find that everything looked relatively normal, save for her notepaper being strewn on the floor at her feet. She leaned down to grab the scraps, as the woman picked the book up to put it back on the shelf.

"Well, I'm not surprised. We're about to close—you've been down here all day. I noticed you left a couple of books out on your table upstairs, and I brought them to the reference desk in case you wanted to check them out."

"All day?" Fujin sorted the papers into an even stack in front of her and rose to her feet. "What time is it?"

"A few minutes shy of nine o'clock. Well, probably nine on the nose by now."

"Oh," Fujin's eyes grew wide in shock at how much energy this recent event had knocked out of her, and worry that Seifer might be wondering where she was. She backpedaled when the librarian looked at her curiously. "I … didn't realize that it was getting so late. I'm sorry to keep you after-hours."

"Oh nonsense—I love it here. Though, I do think you should be doing less work on your summer vacation, and enjoying more of your free time. Clearly you need a rest." She touched Fujin's arm and led her to the elevator. "You're only young once my dear … and time has a funny way of sneaking up on you. Believe me, I know."

"Alright, I'll take your word for it." Fujin attempted a smile, but felt groggy, hazy and off-balance still. The woman chuckled, and pressed the button for the main floor.

"You're apparently not caught up on your sleep yet. Let's get your books, get you checked out and get you headed home."

"Sounds good …" Fujin allowed the librarian to lead her out of the building, and she quickened her pace as soon as her feet hit the pavers of Deling's still busy streets, hoping Seifer wasn't worrying about her or worse, hadn't stopped calling entirely.

The phone was ringing the moment Fujin opened the hotel room door, and she darted towards it to snap the handset up off its receiver.

"Seifer?" She asked, breathless from both rushing home and from not having any time to process what had just happened to her.

"Hyne, I'm glad you picked up ... Where've you been? I've been calling you. I left a message with the front desk, too." The receiver touched the corner of her bottom lip as she smiled at his concern.

"I know, they handed it to me when I walked in." Fujin lied, for no reason in particular, as she sat down on the bed and tried to mask her labored breathing.

"Well your hotel is fancier than mine, then. There's hardly any service here. Let's never go on a vacation together to Timber, by the way. The place is dead … I'm pretty sure I ran into Hyne himself earlier today." He chuckled at his own joke, his voice crackling with static from the bad connection through the Timber Hotel's old telephone. "Next time let's pick a time to talk. I was … worried."

"I was fine. I was just out into the city doing some general scouting and researching—I lost track of time."
"Well, I guess so—it's almost 9:30. Did you run home? You sound outta breath." The man didn't miss a beat.

"Only up the stairs. I didn't want to miss your call again."

"Aw, do you miss me already?" Seifer's voice shifted to a softer, sweeter tone, that Fujin had never heard through the filter of phone lines before—it gave her goosebumps.

"I'm pretty sure you called me."

"Hmmm … well you got me there, I guess." He chuckled at her response. "Well, what'd you find out in all of your researching?"

"I mostly read up on GFs and old sorceress lore. There's apparently a real revival of interest on the topic. Which says a lot all on its own …" She heard him murmur in agreement as she flipped one of the books she'd checked out over with her free hand. "I looked into Dr. Odine a bit too. Did you know that he discovered GFs, and created the junctioning system?"

"No clue. I hadn't heard of him until Cid mentioned his name."

"Me either. It's a little weird, isn't it? We're the only Garden that uses GFs … and Cid obviously knew him somehow … you'd think we would have at least heard of him. Oh, Odine designed something else called Lunatic Pandora, too. Have you heard of it before?"

"Uh …" Seifer paused for a moment, and then cleared his throat. "Yeah … I've heard of it. Why, what'd you find out?" She sensed a nervousness in his tone.

"That it was some sort've research facility. Why, do you know something else about it?"

"So Odine designed it? That's a weird coincidence." He pretended not to hear her and glazed over her question quickly—a classic sign that Seifer was hiding something. But Fujin decided not to press him … whatever it was, he didn't want to talk about it, and all she wanted right now was to hear his voice.

"Yeah … but you know, this is all pretty boring stuff to talk about over the phone. Why don't I just tell you more about it when you get back?"

"Sure. That sounds good." She heard the nervousness leave his voice. "Hey, how's the wind?"

"Same—all quiet, on all fronts." Fujin bit her bottom lip as she heard him exhale in relief. She felt guilty lying to him, but she knew the truth wouldn't help right now. He'd want to come back to Deling and it would put the mission at stake. Neither one of them needed that.

"Man, am I glad to hear that. I really wanted to wait a day or so to leave …" His voice trailed off.

"I know. You know that's not how this works, though. We don't get time to get acclimated." The crackling became louder, sounding as if he'd brushed the phone against the collar of his jacket as he moved to a more comfortable position.

"Well, why don't I tell you about my end of things so we can get it over with? Then we can talk about better stuff."

"Sure—hey, where's Raijin?" Fujin realized that she hadn't heard him scuttling in the background.

"He's asleep in the room, and I'm sitting out in the hallway. Don't worry, it's secure—there's no one
"Okay, go ahead—what's the status?"

"Well, we made contact with Rinoa earlier this afternoon." His voice shifted to a hushed tone, and Fujin wasn't sure if it was because he was trying not to be heard or trying to soften the blow. "It wasn't too hard to find her, considering there's hardly any life in this town."

"Good." And it was good, though she still hated that she had to say it. "And how does it seem—can we use her?" Part of her hoped he'd say no … Fujin wasn't sure she'd even care if he was lying about it.

"Yeah, we'll be able to use her—she's pretty pliable. A little flattery and a mention that I might be interested in transferring to Galbadia Garden, and she was already throwing Caraway's name around to impress. She's conveniently selective with when she wants to own him, though. She even goes by a different last name—Heartilly. I'm being careful not to seem too eager to get the introduction." Fujin nodded, and then realized he wasn't there to see her doing it.

"Good." She said again, too quickly, her voice sounding an awkward octave higher.

"Also, just throwing this out there—nothing happened today, Fuu. It was surprisingly friendly. She's not nearly as bold without alcohol." The sensitive tone in his voice made her chest ache, and she sighed.

"You don't have to tell me."

"I do though." He exhaled lowly, sending a shot of soft crackling static to her ear along with it, and continued with his report.

"I told her we're headed to Deling the day after tomorrow to meet you, and that we're hanging out in the city for the rest of the summer. She said she's planning on returning too and mentioned riding back with us."

"Great—if we can get her back here we won't blow through our stipend so quickly." And Fujin could at least see him.

"Agreed … plus, I don't like not seeing you." Their mirrored thoughts made her smile. "Anyway, that's all I have." The phone grew a little cracklier and she heard him mumble an obscenity at it. "Damn phone. I'd try to get them to fix it but something tells me it's the system itself." He sighed, and she heard a muffled sliding, scraping sound. She pictured him sitting on the floor, his legs apart and one arm resting on his knee, leaning his head back against the door as the tension from their conversation left him.

"So, Seif—what else is on your mind? What else happened today?" Fujin asked, a little awkwardly. She'd only just realize that they'd never talked on the phone before. Sure, they'd had a few curt conversations to make plans or locate Raijin, but other than that they'd never had a conversation from a distance.

"Well, some crazy girl with silver hair jumped me in my rental car this morning." His grin was almost audible. "Which—by the way—was pretty unexpected and …uh…awesome."

"Was it? I wasn't sure you liked it." He laughed softly at that.

"Now I know that's not true … you're really good at that, by the way. I'm talking nothing to compare
it to good." She felt her cheeks burning, even though no one was there to see her blush. "I wish we'd had a minute to talk after so I could tell you that."

"Yeah, sorry about making us rush. Raijin was waiting … I didn't want him to get curious and come looking for us."

"Yeah, and seeing us … with you like that … ha, man, that would have given him a heart-attack, probably." He paused for a moment, clearing his throat again before continuing. "You didn't do that because you were worried about what I'd do here if you didn't, did you?"

"No. Not really … I don't know." Her hand fiddled with a loose thread on the bedspread, trying to find the words. "I think I just wanted to make sure you knew I could match your … voracity … before you were gone for who knows how long." She instantly felt silly for saying it.

"Babe, if that were true we'd never get anything done." Seifer spoke through a warm laughter edged with a low rasp, probably at the prospect of never getting anything else done. "Just be … you. It that just so happens to be the kinda girl who busts into my car and does that then I'm not gonna complain. I just don't want you to do certain things because you think I … expect them. I don't."

"I know you don't. I just wanted to make sure you were thinking about me before you left. It's petty, I know." Fujin didn't need to say all the words for him to understand.

"I'm pretty sure the attendant saw us." He said with a smile in his voice, changing the topic again. "He didn't, did he?" Her hand shot up to cover her mouth, and Seifer made a clicking sound with his tongue.

"Well, he walked into the garage, looked through the window, and then walked directly out. So yeah … don't be surprised if he looks at you funny the next time you're there."

"Great," she groaned and flopped back on the bed. "The first days of our covert mission and I'm already getting noticed. We can't let stuff like that happen when you get back here with her …" Her voice drifted off, bothered by the thought of having to keep her distance from him, and he murmured in agreement.

"We'll just have to be careful then. You can't ask me to stay away from you. I won't do it. This is hard, being this far away from you right now." The cord of the phone squeaked as she twisted it in her fingers, as she thought about her research from earlier in the day—about sorceresses' powers and the leverage they had over human emotion. She hoped to Hyne that wasn't why he missed her. "Plus, Raijin and I were talking about it earlier—I don't think the three of us have ever been apart for more than a single night since we all met. How funny is that?"

"Wow, I think you're right. I was gone overnight on a training mission in Centra once … but other than that … huh, isn't that strange." He laughed at the mention of her Centra mission.

"I think Centra is why Xu hates me so much—I kept harassing her for status updates on it. I even stole her headset and wound up in detention all day. All because I had to know where you were. The things I've done for you, Sanada." His laughter tapered off, and he sighed. "And Hyne, the things I'd do for you now. I think I would've burned Deling City to the ground if anything happened to you there tonight." He wasn't joking, and that made her even more worried.

"Please, don't ever raze a city for me." Fujin said earnestly, and Seifer chuckled before letting out a long yawn.
"You're tried Seif. We should probably get some sleep." Fujin was actually exhausted from the wind herself—she'd only just realized that she had a throbbing headache, and that her muscles felt sore from the stress of tensing in the tornado.

"I know, but I don't want to stop talking. I miss you."

"I don't want to stop talking, either." A pleasant and knowing quiet overcame them for a moment, their breath echoing through the phone lines into each other's ears. "But, I should probably get some sleep too..."

"Okay … I'll let you go. But hey?"

"Yeah?"

"I want you to stop worrying. Don't ever think that some other girl could persuade me, and don't … do stuff because you think other people would do it for me. You've got my head so turned around … I can't see anyone but you." His sincerity made her ache for him to be close—she wished things like distance and time weren't real.

"Okay, I'll stop overanalyzing things so much, I guess … maybe we'll talk tomorrow?"

"We'll talk tomorrow. Call if you can't sleep or if anything happens with the wind, okay?" He sighed, hesitating to end the call and sounding a bit disappointed by her tepid response. Fujin had been so distracted by what had happened in the library, that throughout their conversation she'd barely said anything in response to Seifer's many overtures of devotion. Sometimes she needed to remind herself that they were two different creatures, with two different sets of needs … though they oftentimes felt like a single entity.

"Wait." She let her body sink into the mattress, and she pulled the blankets over herself as she let her guard down and spoke to him softly. "Let's talk a little longer, actually. I miss you, too … pretty terribly."

"Of course." Seifer replied, and Fujin could hear the smile in his voice, content with the idea of being needed by her. "I'm all yours for as long as you want. I'm sorry we're missing each other tonight."

"Me too," Fujin sighed, and closed her eyes. "I never thought I'd be the kind of person who had trouble sleeping without someone next to me. But … I've gotten awfully used to you being in my bed."

"Well, I like being in your bed." He spoke huskily again, the phone lines crackling in her ear. "I can't think about any of that right now though. Not when we can't do anything about it."

"New topic then." She smiled, and rolled onto her side. "Tell me about the drive to Timber. Tell me anything about your day. I might fall asleep, but I just want to hear your voice." Seifer paused, and the sound of his body adjusting reverberated through the phone lines.

"Fuu … are you sure you're okay?" He asked tentatively, and her sore muscles tightened at the question.

"Absolutely," she nodded, hoping throwing physicality into the lie would help it sound more convincing. "I've just been reading all day and I'm in my own head. Now stop asking me questions—tell me about the trip."

"Alright …" Seifer didn't seem to fully believe her, but must have opted not to press her. Instead, she
heard him settling into his spot in the hallway, preparing to regale her with tales of their adventure to Timber. "Well, let's start with how Raijin wanted to stop and fight every, single, thing we saw along the way there. I told him that you'd be mad but he just wouldn't listen."
Chapter Summary

Going back to Caraway Mansion with Rinoa might move things along faster on the espionage front, but Seifer had a very much wanted destiny to go see about. He was certain that alone time with the Duchess wasn't going to get him there.

Three days.

Three days of this girl—this child—prattling on about the most mundane shit. Listening to her incessant whining about her hard life growing up within the gold-lined walls of Caraway Mansion, under the oppressive weight of her daddy's clout in Galbadia. Her father barely knew her, she carped. His rules were too strict—she couldn't even go out at night. His influence too far reaching—she couldn't outrun him. Everywhere she went, she was Caraway's daughter.

Rinoa Heartilly, Caraway's Princess, said these things to Seifer without the slightest consideration that he didn't even have a parent, let alone an overbearing one. Worst of all, she said it all while nestled up close to him, under the weight of his arm or near the crook of his neck, so he could feel her stifling warmth and moaning breath with each syllable she uttered. How people could sit so close to someone and say things like that, knowing so little about the person they were using as a sounding board, baffled him.

But Rinoa wasn't the only girl he'd known who'd been so obtuse. She was just the only one he'd spent three consecutive days with, and Hyne was he ready to get away from her for even just a minute. Let's fucking hope that Caraway still didn't let her out at night …

Seifer couldn't place all the blame on her for being so annoying, though. Rinoa was probably just a normal girl, with normal girl problems. A bad hair day with her raven locks every now and then, a pimple on her peachy skin every month or so. It wasn't her fault that Seifer—an orphaned mercenary-in-training facing a future rife with life-or-death situations—found Rinoa's particular types of problems to be insignificant. Neither one of them had chosen their lives, he supposed. And hell, she'd apparently lost her mother in a car crash when she was just a little girl, so he should probably lend some sympathy to her gripes …

He found it difficult to feel sympathy for her, though, when she talked of wanting to help Timber's resistance movement and at the same time refused to see through her own bullshit. Daddy Caraway's clear support of the Galbadian Occupation had apparently been so much of a sore spot between the pair that Rinoa had been visiting Timber for months, joining up with two knuckleheads named Zone and Watts to bolster sentiment for the resistance. She couldn't explain why she supported the movement in any sensible way, and clearly wasn't quite ready to admit that her daddy issues were the catalyst for her activism. Now that, Seifer found to be incredibly immature.

But man, she was a coy little thing who knew what her assets were and knew how to use them. Her crisp clear skin with its fresh, fleshy pink undertone—as if she'd just walked indoors from a cold winter day in Trabia—gave her an innate look of feminine delicacy. And when she flirtatiously flipped her hair, Seifer observed that it had a silky luster to it that he wasn't sure he'd ever seen before. Had he not been so turned off by her personality and her clear mental inferiority, her perfect smile and her thick lashes batting coquettishly over her deep brown eyes might have convinced him
that her childhood was terrible. That her father hadn't really ever loved her, and all men were just
distant disappointments until he came along. These were, of course, all things she'd boldly laid bare
in the three-day timespan they'd known each other. She was far too trusting.

Hell, her beauty even made Raijin blush the few times she'd touched his arm. And if Seifer were a
single man when this mission started, he'd probably ignored his deep dislike for her and would've at
least gotten a taste of the willing Duchess of Deling—she'd definitely be game for it. But, while
Raijin blushed at the gentle touch of her rosy fingertips, Seifer cringed inwardly when she snuggled
up close to him … and thought only of Fujin.

Rinoa's overenthusiastic and bubbly reaction to "stumbling" on each other in Timber only made
Seifer think of how he and Fujin could just glance at each other to convey excitement. He didn't
need a garrulous greeting or a body-smothering embrace—full of too much intentionally placed thigh
and breast to be considered friendly—to know that Fujin was glad to see him. He just knew.

The premature and bountiful affection that Rinoa showered him with only served as a reminder of
how a reserved, timid touch from Fujin made his entire body burn. Her nervous pale fingers had only
touched him—had only ever wanted to touch him. Her milky white cheeks only flushed a rosy pink
shade for him when he kissed her, when he held her, when they slept together. Fujin didn't look that
delicate for just anyone—it had to be earned.

And when they sat together on a bench under Timber's night sky, and Rinoa kissed the nape of his
neck after laying her shallow complaints on him, she left a cold wetness there that gave him a
chill. But Fujin … her lips on his neck left him warm and wanting—he wouldn't have let her pull
away long enough to go cold…

So, while Rinoa might be able to make Raijin blush, Seifer was largely unaffected—he knew what it
was like to be with his own personal goddess. He smiled, knowing in that moment that he must love
their silver friend more than Raijin ever had. If he truly loved her, no mere mortal woman would
compare … not even the Galbadian Infanta.

"What are you smiling about?" Rinoa leaned forward from the backseat of the car and grabbed his
shoulder playfully. "Thinking of a funny joke?"

He was surprised she'd noticed, since she'd been filling the silence all morning with stories about
herself. Seifer thought up a lie quickly. After all, he couldn't say he'd been thinking about reuniting
with his girlfriend—though it seemed incredibly lacking to call Fujin just his girlfriend.

"Uh—no. Well, not really." Seifer shook his head, and glanced at her from the corner of his eye
momentarily before turning his focus back to the road. "Just thinking of something funny that Raijin
told me the other day."

"Something funny that I told you?" From the corner of his eye, Seifer saw Raijin turn to look at him
quizzically, and he had to stop himself from rolling his eyes. He wished, just sometimes, that Raijin
were smart enough to roll with it and not make things more complicated.

"Yeah … I was thinking of some of the benefits of transferring to Galbadia Garden, like not seeing
Zell Dincht anymore. It made me think of that story you told me the other day. Zell's another cadet in
our class, Rinoa. A real pain in the ass." He flashed a glance at Raijin to play along, and saw his
friend chuckle at the mention of Zell's name.

"Oh right, about his 'date' with Fujin." Raijin laughed genuinely from the passenger seat. "Man, that
was intense to watch."
"Actually, no. I meant the training center thing—"

"Wait, Fujin—on a date?" Rinoa chimed in from the backseat. "Wow, she doesn't seem like the dating type. She's so serious. So, is this guy her boyfriend?" Seifer momentarily arched a disapproving eyebrow at Rinoa's inaccurate assessment. Raijin laughed nervously and tried to clarify.

"Um … no. Fujin's not dating … uh …" Raijin awkwardly shifted in his seat, and glanced at Seifer for guidance, who only tilted his head a little to crack his neck in annoyance at Raijin's carelessness. Why had he drawn attention to something they didn't want to highlight? Why couldn't he have just told the Ochu in the training center story? Of course, maybe Seifer shouldn't have been thinking about Fujin in the first place …

"Well, this Zell guy tried to go on a date with her," Raijin decided to continue with the story and bypass Rinoa's remarks about the existence of a boyfriend. "And when he got a little handsy she laid him out flat. Which is good, because if she hadn't done it I would have. He was outta line." Raijin turned to look at Rinoa, and made a punching gesture with his hand.

"Wow, I think I like her a little more now." Rinoa chuckled and leaned back against her seat. She glanced up and caught Seifer's eye in the rearview mirror as she playfully pushed on Raijin's shoulder. "And it kinda sounds like Rajin here is a little overprotective of Fujin. What's the deal, are you two a thing?"

"No." Seifer snapped, a little too quickly. "They're not a thing, we're just all really close. Overprotective doesn't really exist in our world—we're really good friends, the three of us. We look out for each other because we're all we have." Seifer turned to look at Raijin, who was staring straight ahead and overzealously nodding.

"Suuuure." Rinoa chuckled, and gripped Raijin's shoulder again. "And Raijin's just blushing because it's hot out. I was trying to figure out what the deal was with the three of you. Honestly, you boys never like to say how you're really feeling. Except you, Seifer." She craned forward to kiss his cheek.

The Duchess was right about Seifer … at least, about the version of Seifer that she knew. Since part of this whole plan was to engender a bond that would put him in Caraway's proximity, he'd been laying it on fairly thick since they met up with Rinoa in Timber. You're such a cool girl, with all your ideals and activism, I'm misunderstood too, and you're the only person who's ever gotten me. You're so brilliant and beautiful, how could someone not love you? All the things she'd wished she'd heard from her stoic father, Seifer said to her under the guise of a besotted lover—he mirrored her interests, and exploited her insecurities. It was a simple tactic for a naive, young girl who was very clearly seeking a male figure to fill a gaping void in her sense of self.

"Well, I'm one of a kind, I guess." Seifer gave her a half-hearted smile. Even though he didn't care for her as a person, on deeper and more humane level he still felt slightly guilty about eventually crushing some of that wide-eyed, innocent idealism of hers when he inevitably broke this thing off. The cadets at Garden never had the luxury of being wide-eyed innocents, but he imagined a pure view of the world would be a terrible thing to lose.

"So Raijin. You want me to help set the two of you up? I'm really good at that sort've thing. I mean, Fujin isn't a normal girl so it might be hard. But …"

"What do you mean by that?" Seifer glanced at Rinoa in the rearview mirror with squinted eyes.

"Well, just that she's a little hard around the edges, you know?" Rinoa reached into an overnight bag she'd brought with her on the trip to Timber for a compact, and began to inspect her lipstick in the
small mirror. "I'm sure a lot of girls in SeeD are like that."

"No, Fuu's not really like any other girl in SeeD. And … she just takes a long time to get to know. She's not hard, ya know." Raijin made a disapproving face.

"So … she's unlike any other girl huh Raijin?" She batted at the bronze man's shoulder again. "Oh, you're so in love. I'm going to make this my summer project."

"Do us all a favor, Rinoa, and stay out of her social life. She likes not having one." Seifer chimed in, and gave Raijin another sideways glance. He wasn't thrilled with the direction this conversation was going.

"Yeah, please don't. It's not true, ya know." Raijin held his hands up defensively, and shook his head too enthusiastically.

"But wouldn't it be fun? The four of us out on double-dates, doing couple-y things?" Rinoa pulled her legs up onto the back seat and stretched out across it, as she gazed dreamily out the window. "Plus, I think the friendship the three of you have is just wonderful, and I really want to be a part of it if I'm going to be around. Something tells me Fujin's going to be a hard nut to crack, though. Maybe if I do something nice for her …" Her voice trailed off as she stared out the window at the scenery flying swiftly by.

"Ah, Rinoa." Seifer chuckled a little at how everything Rinoa just said would make Fujin physically ill if she'd been there to hear it. "Trust me, a double-date would be Fujin's worst nightmare. She's not that kinda girl and she wouldn't see it as nice—she'd think it was invasive. And besides, she and Raijin aren't into each other."

"No, we're not." Raijin turned to look at Rinoa, hoping that direct eye-contact would convince her. She only smirked, leaned forwarded, and loudly whispered in Raijin's ear.

"Seifer's just being overprotective of you two—we'll talk about this later." She reached over to muss Seifer's hair, and then fell back to her seat again as she continued to inspect her lipstick.

"Say, why don't you all come over to my place—well, Caraway's place, for dinner tonight? You must be sick of all this hotel food. Plus, it'll be nice to hang out with all of you." Rinoa clipped the compact shut and clutched it in her palm as she hopefully gazed at Seifer, unsure of whether he'd accept the invitation. Her confidence was probably faltering because Seifer was specifically avoiding using any terminology to define what was happening here. That was part of his plan too. Not part of the mission, but his own personal plan for self-preservation.

"I mean, you don't have to … and I'm not sure if Caraway is back from his business trip or not. But if he is, you could talk with him about Galbadia Garden a bit—see if it's the right fit for you."

"Sure, I guess a home-cooked meal sounds nice." Seifer waited a minute to accept the invitation, and was sure to add a little hesitation to his tone. He didn't want to sound too eager, and he wanted to leave her questioning and feeling a bit unstable.

"Well, a professional chef-cooked meal. Caraway and I never learned how fend for ourselves in the kitchen." Rinoa corrected him, beaming. "And it'll be all three of you? You'll bring Fujin too?"

"Sure, unless she already has plans." Seifer wanted to be sure to leave Fujin a way to opt out, in case she didn't want to be subjected to Rinoa hanging all over him at a dinner party scenario that would, let's face it, be her worst nightmare.

"Great, we'll plan on all three of you then!" Rinoa made a joyous, squeaking sound. "I'm so
—you can meet my dog, Angelo. Hyne, it's been forever since I've had people over. Most people don't want to come because of stuffy old Caraway. It's hard to make friends when your father is so … intimidating."

"Here we go again, Seifer groaned inwardly, as Rinoa experienced another moment of self-pity in the backseat. It wasn't that it was unjustified … Seifer just had a hard time caring about anyone outside of the Posse's little circle ... especially if they were only meant to be temporary fixtures in his life.

"Well, no worries Duchess." He looked up at the rearview mirror again to connect his eyes with hers. "We're mercenaries. We're not easily intimidated."

"Duchess?" Rinoa asked, confused by the pet name.

"Yeah, Rinoa Heartilly—the Duchess of Deling." If he was going to be able to get through this, he was going to at least have a little fun at her expense, and of all the things he'd mockingly called her in his head, that one had the best ring to it. "You know, because your dad commands the city. He's not the ruler—that's Vinzer Deling—so you can't be Princess. Plus, Zone and Watts call you Princess … which is a little creepy, by the way."

"Oh stop, it's not creepy. That's just my code name for our group." Rinoa pulled her knees up to her chest, not thinking about the dirty footprints she was leaving on the seat of their rental car. "Duchess. I guess that has a nice ring to it. It's kinda old-fashioned."

Seifer smirked at her approval of the mocking, and fitting, nickname as the skyline of Deling came into view in the distance. It was still far away, but the flat terrain at least allowed them a glimpse of their destination. His foot instinctively put a little more pressure on the gas pedal, as he thought of Fujin waiting for him.

"Say, speaking of Vinzer Deling, does the President come around Caraway mansion a lot? I bet with your support of Timber, that's pretty hard to sit through, ya know." Seifer was surprised by Raijin's ability to frame the question in the context of how Deling's presence at Caraway Mansion impacted Rinoa, so it wouldn't be as obvious that he was fishing for information. Hell, he was surprised Raijin had thought to ask about the President at all … Seifer certainly hadn't. This was a prime example of why the Posse was a Posse—their individual weaknesses were bolstered by each other's strengths.

"Well, Caraway mostly goes to the Presidential Residence for meetings. But when we host parties and stuff Deling usually comes. I try to stay away from him ... we're usually seated at opposite ends of the dinner table." Rinoa held her hands out to illustrate the distance. "Anyway, let's talk about something else—I'm way too fired up from my last meeting with the Forest Owls to think about President Deling right now."

"Oh yeah, why's that?" Seifer wasn't even sure what this Forest Owls group was about yet—he knew that she'd talked about it that first night he found her in Timber, but he'd honestly zoned out and spent most of the time wondering what Fujin was up to on the other side of the continent. And this poor girl didn't have a clue.

"You know, the thing I told you the other day … about how he's increasing the number of soldiers in town. And they've had some engineers there, which is really weird. Anyway, I swear my father has something to do with it. Maybe he knows about my resistance group and has been reporting back to Deling about it. My own father turning me in … can you imagine?"

Seifer pictured Rinoa and her two lackeys Zone and Watts bumbling around Timber, committing a variety of capers as "activists" that only caused a nuisance and didn't have any lasting impact. He could also picture the Galbadian soldiers groaning every time she rolled into town on the train,
feeling righteous and indignant about things she didn't fully understand, knowing they'd need to handle Caraway's daughter with kid gloves if she did anything that required reprimanding. No, the Galbadian forces definitely weren't threatened by the Forest Owls, and Caraway wasn't the kind of man who'd want soldiers to deal with his precious Rinoa any way but gently. Which made an increase of boots on the ground a little more intriguing … but, what was happening in Timber was only tangentially connected to their mission. No need to go digging around unless it became necessary.

"You never know." Seifer shrugged, not being able to find it in himself to even falsely approve of her silliness. He kept his eyes fixed on Deling City in the distance, which grew larger with each passing minute under the blazing late afternoon sun. "You can't really trust anyone these days."

There. In his own roundabout way he'd warned her, and that sliver of a guilty conscious he'd been grappling with was officially gone. Hell, it wasn't his fault that Balamb needed to use Rinoa as a mark to gain intelligence footholds in Galbadia, but then again … it also wasn't Rinoa's fault she'd been born to a General. Furthermore, Raijin and Seifer hadn't even chosen to participate in this mission—they'd been ordered to. And the things that were happening to Fujin that got them all involved in this to begin with weren't her fault either. None of them chose this. Choice often couldn't be reconciled with destiny—the latter was meant to be fixed, and the former gave you the illusion that it wasn't.

Though one could argue that the choices of his forbearers had scripted his destiny—all of their destinies. Inhabitants of the past—their parents who fought in the war, and the sorceresses stretching all the way back to Hyne himself—set the cogs in motion. Seifer and his friends were merely living with the consequences. Just as, he supposed, his own choices would set the cogs in motion for future generations. But was any of it really a choice, then?

It was a paradox he thought of often, especially now that those nightmares of his had become more frequent. Would the choices he made lead him directly to that dismal nightmare, no matter what? Maybe his course was already charted, or maybe it really was all just a dream … hard to tell, honestly.

"So, Seifer. What are your plans when we get back?" Rinoa's voice made him jolt as it chimed from the backseat and interrupted his thoughts. "Do you want to swing by my house with me and wait for Fujin and Raijin to come over later?" He raised his eyebrows at Rinoa's invitation, reading between the lines as her questioning, anticipating, eyes once again connected with his in the rearview mirror.

The mission be damned. If his future was set in stone, it was inconceivable that it didn't include Fujin. Why not make all the right choices, then? The ones that seemed they could only lead to her in the end. Going back to Caraway Mansion with Rinoa might move things along faster on the espionage front, but Seifer had a very much wanted destiny to go see about. He was certain that alone time with the Duchess wasn't going to get him there.

"Nah, I really need to get back. Gotta return the car and do a bunch of stuff for tonight," he spoke as he broke his gaze away from her, oddly struggling with the fib. "But hey, we'll all come over at 7 o'clock, if that works for you?"

Rinoa looked disappointed but agreed and smiled, and forgot about it the next minute when Raijin asked her about the dinner menu. Seifer was relieved that he didn't have to explain himself to her. He was usually a cool liar, but the closer they got to Deling, the less level-headed he felt—it was hard to keep the charade up when his heart was somewhere else.
Cradle

If the pain had lasted for one more minute, Fujin was sure she would have needed to rush to the hospital. She'd spent the entire day after the incident in the library locked up in her dark hotel room, writhing, feverish, and restless—tossing and turning in and out of a nightmare-ridden sleep; plagued by intense muscle spasms that wouldn't allow her to rest for more than an hour at a time. Not a single muscle spasm in a single limb, but several throughout her body, simultaneously—her calves, her abdomen, her back; places on her that she never even knew cold seize up.

There were moments where she contemplated making a sweaty-palmed phone call to Cid for help, or at least to Dr. Kadowaki for advice, just to let someone know she felt like she was on the brink of something catastrophic. She also didn't really want to run the risk of Seifer and Raijin coming home from Timber and finding her buried under the soft blankets, lifeless and stiff—they'd never recover from that.

But knowing that the mission was at stake and loathing the idea of being perceived as weak by the higher ups at Balamb, she made the bold decision that she was going to be fine—as if deciding it made it so. With no plans to call for help or schlep herself to an emergency room, Fujin simply stayed in bed and waited the pain out—that SeeD training for withstanding capture and torture coming in incredibly handy. She reached that blessed point her instructors always told her about, when her energy was too depleted and her mind too numb to register that she was still in pain. Her body gave way to the agony, and she fell into a deep slumber.

She must've managed to net at least five hours of solid sleep, and thankfully, miraculously, found relief on the other side of it. The sound of Deling's morning traffic roused her, and she rubbed her eyes in astonishment that she was still breathing.

Fujin swung her legs over the side of the bed and stood slowly, desperate to support the weight of her own body and know that her muscles hadn't turned to mush. Her limbs still throbbed tenderly as the fibers of her muscles stretched and guided her upright—even the feel of the blankets pulling against her skin ached. But with the constant pain of spasms long gone and only the sting of pain far-removed left behind, it was the first clear-minded moment she'd had to think about what the fuck had just happened to her, and why this recent incident manifested this way for her—agony coupled with debilitating exhaustion.

Even though she was a seasoned warrior who'd had her cage rattled by some pretty powerful spells, this was the worst she'd ever felt. It even paled in comparison to what she'd gone through last year, when Raijin serendipitously discovered that the Disciplinary Committee badges were keyed incorrectly and allowed to access to a sub-floor of Balamb Garden. Raijin couldn't hold back his excitement to explore, and with Seifer nowhere to be found he dragged a reluctant Fujin along with him to show off his discovery. They ran into an advanced monster called a Tri-Face five minutes into the adventure, and she fell victim to a flare spell that knocked her out cold. Had Raijin not been well stocked with Phoenix Downs and ready with few cure spells at his fingertips, she'd probably be dead right now.

Fujin spent a week in the infirmary recovering. Hyne had Seifer been pissed at them … but, he got over it quickly when he saw how small and fragile she looked in a hospital gown, bandaged up and buried under blankets. He ditched classes to stay by her bedside while she recovered, telling her Kadowaki promised the burns wouldn't scar and teaching her about elemental magic junctioning so she'd be better prepared next time. Imagine how angry he'd be with her now for lying, if he'd seen her this way …
But even the pain of *that*—of delicate singed skin pressing against Raijin's arms as he scooped her up and bolted to the infirmary—felt *nothing* like this. And at least she'd passed out soon after that happened, and hadn't had to lie awake in pain waiting for relief to come. She also hadn't had a single dream, at least nothing memorable. *Not like this time at all* …

Fujin pushed the thoughts of her nightmare aside and groaned as she attempted to raise her arms above her head to stretch her back. She winced when she realized that level of mobility hurt too much, and begrudgingly let her limbs go limp at her sides again.

Her eyelids felt heavy again and seemed to be intent on staying closed, but she refused to lie down and sleep more. She painstakingly propelled her body towards a cushioned chair by the window overlooking the city, and lowered herself down with a groan. *She'd take a rouge flare spell over this again any day—at least it was obvious where the pain came from and at least Kadowaki had drugs to treat it. Good drugs. She'd tried an Elixir and it hadn't even touched this.*

Fujin wondered what had been so *different* this time. After all, the recent visit from the wind hadn't lasted longer than one that Seifer had witnessed on the boat. But, the voice she heard was clearer and stronger, and she could speak with it using only her mind … *Maybe the strength of the connection was what depleted her energy so much?*

It made sense that if there *was* a connection between GFs and memory loss, it was possible that summoning them burned up essential minerals for brain function dealing with learning retention and memory—sodium, *potassium*. And *who knows* how quickly they'd burn up if they were being summoned by something else living inside her that *also* used up those same things. *Low potassium levels could explain the muscle cramps…*

She didn't have the energy to dissect it now—she was already exhausted again from the bed-to-chair odyssey. Fujin leaned on the mahogany windowsill with her elbow, propping her chin on her hand and peering through the hotel room curtains at the morning sun—*it was daylight again … had she really been sleeping for that long?* Hard to believe that the library incident had happened two nights ago and she was *still recovering from it. Hard to believe Seifer hadn't caught on, too.*

Fujin had thrown all the energy she could muster into pulling the wool over his eyes, which was a feat all on its own because he'd called her *three times* yesterday: once in the morning just to say hello—which in retrospect was painfully sweet, considering she'd never heard him make a morning phone call to *anyone else* before—and once at night to report on the day and check-up on her. *Check-up* being the key phrase, as her groggy and almost incoherent state on their morning call aroused some suspicion.

And so it was that *other call* that she kept replaying in her head—the extra one he'd placed immediately following their morning chat, where he very pointedly asked her if something was wrong. The anxiety and frustration in his voice had been palpable.

*Fuu, sorry for calling back … I just … something didn't sound right. Are you okay?*

*Yeah, I'm fine.* Fujin made her best attempt to sound breezy, finding it was a much easier thing to accomplish when she had a little tequila in her, and when here muscles didn't feel like they were dissolving. *I just haven't had any coffee yet.*

*Fujin.* Seifer groaned as he spoke her name. She visualized him pressing his fingers to his forehead in frustration. *Come on—you sound awful. What's going on?*

*Nothing—I mean, I guess I didn't sleep well. Maybe that's it.* He didn't respond at first, taking a moment to analyzed her imprecise words and the slight waver to her voice. She could hear Raijin
whispering something to him in the background, followed by Seifer's hand muffling the mouthpiece as he told their friend to "butt out."

Okay, what's up Fuu? I know something's wrong, so you may as well just spit it out. Is it the wind again?

Without realizing he was doing it, Seifer was once again putting her in the difficult position of choosing them or the mission, and at the most inconvenient time, too. But even through her exhaustion, she could tell the worry in his voice outweighed any anger he was feeling at her feeble attempt to keep a secret from him—he wasn't doing it intentionally.

You're right, I'm not feeling good today, she'd told him, only willing to tell him a half-truth and hoping it would wrap things up quickly and neatly. I went to one of the local pubs last night, just before we talked, to see if I could get more of a read of the local sentiment about the sorceress. I had a drink while I was out—I was trying to blend in. I hadn't eaten much, and I got a little sick this morning and I still feel terrible. I'm sorry, I don't know why I didn't just say that.

Hyne Fujin, did we not just have a conversation about you being careful? His voice was followed by some faint scuffling sounds and the click of a closing door—he'd stretched the phone line to sequester himself in the hallway for privacy from Raijin. I wouldn't really call drinking by yourself being careful. It's one thing if we're in Balamb, or we're all visiting somewhere together, but someone could've … Seifer thought twice about finishing the sentence, not wanting to imagine the scenario.

We're in the middle of a job, and someone could be tailing you. You never know. He tried to frame his concern in an official SeeD capacity. Normally she would have scoffed at his controlling tone, but she was trying to keep her secret and fighting over an imaginary problem seemed excessively pointless.

It was only one drink, Seif—it just made my stomach queasy. But you're right anyway—it's dangerous to be inhibited in any way on a mission, especially without you guys here. I'll be more careful next time. Maybe she'd given in too quickly. Maybe she should have protested. Would he catch on?

Good, that's all I'm asking. And hey, why not just tell me the truth?

Do you think you have a monopoly on worry? She had to clench her teeth to stop herself from crying out in pain as her muscles burned from a slight movement she made on the bed. And like you haven't kept some of this Rinoa stuff from me? I don't want you to worry … you don't want me to worry. We're probably just making it worse by trying to protect each other … Seifer sighed again, taking her lie and her reasons for it at face value at the mention of Rinoa.

You're probably right. Hyne … I don't think I've ever told you not to drink before. Sorry, probably a little outta line, right? Fuck. She heard him scratching at the beginnings of an unshaven beard. I guess this is going to take some time to get used to. We'll get better at it, though.

Sufficiently comforted by hearing that Fujin was okay, and satisfied at uncovering the deception he thought she'd been trying to sneak past him, Seifer was content to end the conversation. He whispered a few tender words to her, things he was only comfortable saying from the seclusion of the hallway without their bronze friend around, and let the call end with the promise of talking to her later—the lie had been successful.

The only problem now was that he was on his way back to her, and she was still legitimately not feeling her best and she looked it. Her skin was ashy and chalk white, and her bloodshot eyes had
stark dark circles under them. Her nerves felt raw. She was anxious, tired, had a light headache, and all her muscles carried a tender ache. So yes, the lie had been successful … but there was no way he’d believe it when he saw her.

Thus the task of figuring out what to do for the day became a new problem hitched to the previous one—a chain of dilemmas. Staying at the hotel would only mean more bad dreams and locked up muscles, which desperately needed to be stretched. Plus, if she didn’t move around and get the feeling of life back into her, there was no way she could pull off looking remotely normal by the time he got back. But it sounded both daunting and nauseating to head back into Deling to mine for mission-related data, and hunkering down under florescent lights in the dark library and risking another incident was also a terrible idea. Both of those ideas were off the table.

She could go for a drive, she supposed … but then she’d be by herself, which was risky given what just happened to her. Besides, she didn’t have her own car and the last thing she wanted to do was face the guy at the rental place who’d apparently caught her and Seifer in a compromising position. Fujin was marooned by bad options and her own over-analytical mind.

She gazed out the window, her eyes catching on a trail of sparsely clothed people milling in the street below, waiting to board one of Deling’s blue buses. Many of them had their arms piled high with towels, while others were stuffing a cargo area under the bus with a variety of colorful plastic buckets, coolers, and folding beach chairs. A mother was ushering a rowdy group of children through the accordion doors as she frantically tried to apply sunscreen to two slippery boys, one blond and one brunette, who evaded her grasp—they reminded her of Raijin and Seifer.

The beach. Of course. It could’ve been a sign from Hyne himself.

Nothing gave her more comfort than the sound of the water, and she was desperately seeking peace of mind to steel her nerves. Ever since she was a child, the gentle lull of the tide soothed her. Oftentimes during the languid summer days spent fishing with Seifer and Raijin, she’d stay late at the Balamb docks long after her friends had grown tired of waiting for the fish to bite. As she lamented how Seifer was everywhere around her yet still hopelessly out of reach, Fujin always found unmatched solace sitting on the weather-beaten boards and listening to the waves crash under the evening sunset. The sound transported her to a place of thought beyond thought, time beyond time—where a day of not having what she wanted didn’t matter, because infinity stretched before her like the endless sea. The thought loomed so large in her mind that she could almost smell the fresh ocean air now …

A short trip to Galbadia’s beach, Fujin had decided, was a perfect solution to today’s problem. She could find an anonymous patch of sand to claim as her own, and swim in the cresting waves; the weightlessness they offered her would give her aching limbs the good but gentle stretch they needed. The bright sun and salty water would provide a valid explanation for her dry, bloodshot eyes. Her skin might even turn pink from a light burn, to at least give her the slightest shade of something living. Plus, she wouldn’t have to rent a car—she could hop right on the bus. Most importantly, she wouldn’t be lying in the dark hotel while her mind created unfathomable, dark things when she closed her eyes.

Fujin packed up a few provisions in a small bag—water and sunscreen from the front desk charged to their room, a hotel towel, shorts and a tank in place of a swimsuit—and caught the next bus to the beach. The trip was uneventful, save for the constant chatter of other beach-goers exacerbating her headache. As luck would have it, she found a stylish pair of abandoned sunglasses wedged between the seats she’d selected, and stuffed them into her bag. Not one to normally nick things from other people, she didn’t see any harm in scooping up something that had technically already been lost.
She’d never been to Galbadia Beach before—had never even heard of it—but she soon discovered that it wasn’t very large. It was a small stretch of sand that would have been pretty hadn’t it been enclosed by a tall fence edged with barbed wire. Standing at the entrance checkpoints were armed by Galbadian soldiers, who must have been stationed there to keep beasts at bay. She’d wondered how an area like the Galbadian Plains, with such a high monster population, managed to provide public swimming … it certainly gave a beach day a very different feeling than lazy days in Balamb—a much more occupied feeling.

When she approached a checkpoint to gain entry, one of the guards eyed her suspiciously and pulled her from the line of people waiting to pay for entrance.

"What's your business at Galbadia Beach, miss?" Huh, peculiar … a little intense to interrogate someone for a day of swimming. His voice sounded familiar, but the helmet he was wearing obscured his face from view—only his eyes were showing. Wasn't he hot in that thing? What could she do but roll with it—she didn't want to cause any trouble.

"Just here to get a tan." She smiled, and he glared at her pale skin and rolled his eyes.

"You're not here for a tan. You're here to find something, or maybe to choose. I'd prefer you not lie about it miss." Thoroughly confused, Fujin shrugged and stared back at him, her brow furrowing.

"I'm … not sure what you mean by any of that. I'm not here to find anything—I have everything I need." She hesitantly opened her bag to show him it's contents. It looked fuller than she remembered—like she'd stuffed an entire world in there before she got on the bus. How was she ever going to find anything in this? She muttered the thought angrily in her head, as the guard reached out to close her bag without looking inside.

"That's what they all say, lady. But sooner or later they all realize they're here for one reason: the wind or the salt."

What the fuck does that mean?

"Really, I'm not looking for trouble. I'm just here to swim." She held her hands up in front of her, the heavy bag pulling at her shoulder. The guard rolled his eyes again, and ushered her back in line.

"Sure, miss. You just keep telling yourself that. Have fun, ya know." Mystified, Fujin looked over her shoulder as the line marched forward and the guard sauntered away. He looked back at her, laughing at their conversation when he joined up with the other soldiers on watch. How rude, she thought, as she made her way through the checkpoint.

The quarantined area was incredibly crowded, but a distant sandbar surfaced by the low-tide caught her eye and offered her sanctuary. Fujin waded in the thigh-deep water to it speedily, her body aching with exhaustion when she finally reached the fresh, damp sand. She unfurled her towel with help of the gentle breeze, and wearily sank down to lie flat on the cotton bed as she tried to catch her breath after the arduous journey. She’d never felt this gutted after a simple walk on the beach before. Fujin closed her eyes and swallowed hard, as the sand shifted to the shape of her body and formed a cradle of earth—she wasn’t used to feeling so helpless.

She’d been displaying plenty of helplessness and weakness lately, though. Hyne, it was embarrassing to think of how many times she’d cried in front of Seifer … she’d unleashed more tears these past couple of weeks than she had in her entire life. It was a clear sign that this issue with her junctioning was having an impact on how she was processing things; this new element to her relationship with Seifer, the confirmed death of her mother and these baffling interactions with her and Pandemona … everything. The effects of this recent incident with the wind had even scared her, and fear wasn’t a
feeling she experienced often.

What was it that they'd whispered to her? It's you ... it's us. She'd need to choose. And then came a vision of him telling her it was over and pushing her down, and another of him storming towards her, full of fury, and grabbing her throat.

Fujin shot upright with a gasp, the white towel balled in her fists; she must have dozed off. The sun had moved higher in the sky and her skin was warm to the touch—she was definitely going to be burnt.

Desperate to cool off, she wobbled to her feet. She fought the pain and the urge to lie back down and close her eyes, and marched towards the water without thinking; not stopping until she was submerged to her chest. Maybe the the pattern of undulating of the waves would beat out a rhythm on entire body, like when she drummed her fingers on her thigh in battle, but amplified—maybe it would help her focus beyond the pain and fear.

Fujin let herself go, allowing her body to float with the rise and fall of the waves; her back turned to the expanse of the ocean as she gazed at the shoreline. Closing her eyes and tilting her face to the sky, she breathed deeply as the water broke against her neck and enveloped her in a white salt spray. She wiped her face and opened her eyes again, blinking as another wave bared down on her and obscured her vision with a curtain of silver hair. She dunked underwater quickly and ran her hands over face to push the silky strands caught in her lashes aside, and held her breath to sink low under the ocean’s cool skin. There, that was the answer. That's where comfort waited for her.

If a home was a physical place where a person felt most secure—where they could plant their feet, rest their weary bones, and wait life out until the end of days—then the vast, volatile sea was hers. At least, it was the answer she'd supply people with when asked where she pictured herself living later in life after SeeD ... as if any of them planned on a future. Near the ocean, on the coast, somewhere that rocky bluffs meet the salt, she'd always say. It was mostly true—those briny depths were her kindred spirit.

A physical home wasn't a concept that the Posse had a full grasp of, though as children they always imagined it would make them feel more complete if they did—they even created imaginary origin stories for themselves as placeholders until they discovered their real ones. Raijin always said that he came from the lazy town of Fisherman’s Horizon, born to a sailor who'd volunteered to fight for Galbadia in the war, and who'd gallantly been lost at sea. Seifer, on the other hand, claimed he'd probably been born on the Island Closest to Hell, despite the fact that no one could survive there —how else could he have grown up to be so strong? Fujin would agree with him, unwavering in her support, but in her own mind always thought he missed the best part of the story—that he must have been the son of Odin, or one of the great mythical warrior relics of the past. How else could he be so strong?

Seifer always said that Fujin hailed from Trabia, deeming her snow white skin a sign that she sprang from the desolate Northern tundra. People who lived in the subzero temperatures were hard, tough, and had a greatness about them, he'd surmised, and she had it in her to be that way too. It thrilled her back then to think of how Seifer Almasy, the storied son of Odin who was born on the Island Closest to Hell and lived to tell the tale, thought that she had greatness in her.

Regardless of his confidence, Fujin never believed him. She wasn't convinced that a home was a physical place, anyway. She could visit all snowy peaks in the North, all the oceans around the world, and feel only a fraction of the calm and belonging that she knew was possible now. She found those feelings, unmatched, in one place only … wherever Seifer was.

Of course, they grew out of their mythology and now knew that the Trabia story was complete
fiction—just part of Seifer's plan to make her less insecure and convince her she had a greatness in 
her waiting to be unleashed. They knew for certain now that Fujin was an orphaned child from 
Centra. She was the product of a soldier and a sorceress … the spirit of which was living in her brain 
and ravaging her body as it tried to get out. She preferred Seifer's myth of how she contained an 
untapped greatness; this version of her story gave her the feeling that death was waiting for her. 
Apparently the symbolism wasn't enough, and her brain decided it need to go one step farther and 
conjure a vision …

Fuck. Even a trip to the ocean couldn't give her mind a moments rest from what was happening to 
her. The horrific nightmare was ever present and the thoughts of death pervasive, no matter how 
much she tried to ignore it—the constant whirring wind of Pandemona reminded her of it every 
second. The things she'd experienced yesterday hadn't helped—her body felt like it was rebelling and 
rejecting her spirit …. like it was trying to push her out.

As she bobbed beneath the water, a haunting vision from her dreams flashed in her mind and made 
her queasy—his strong hands gripping her neck; his distant green eyes rimmed with a golden glow; 
the skin of his wrists piling up in layers under her fingernails as she clawed at him, scratching and 
sputtering desperately. But he didn't stop squeezing the life from her as he looked through her 
… beyond her.

It was vivid and tactile—she could feel his warmth, his breath, and the energy of his fury burning 
into her. It was so real that even now Fujin felt her lungs aching for air. She shot back to the surface 
gasping, but before she could catch her breath and force the nightmare from her head, another wave 
bore down on her and pulled her under again.

You've betrayed me, Fujin. She heard the words he'd whispered to her while she slept, even through 
the wind and water; he glowered at her ferociously, red-faced, as hot tears streaked down her cheeks 
and she struggled to cling to life. You've betrayed me.

Fujin blinked, and with the salt stinging her eyes she kicked her tired legs to propel herself towards 
shallower depths—beyond the reach of the oppressive high waves. She choked when she surfaced, 
her chest heaving as she winced at the false memory of phantom hands around her throat.

She knew he could be dangerous and unpredictable—volatile as the sea—but Fujin still couldn't 
imagine a scenario where Seifer would ever hurt her, let alone try to kill her. Why would her mind 
play such a cruel trick? She could never tell him … he'd be crushed that her subconscious could 
even conceive of it.

"Hey lady, are ya alright?" Fujin sucked in a deep breath, her eyes searching the shore to find a 
young brunette boy waving at her animatedly, with another blonde child rushing to his side, his eyes 
narrowing as they were hit by the sun—they were the same two boys she'd spotted from her hotel 
room window earlier in the day. What were the odds …

"Fine, thanks." She waved back at him, her heaving chest aching at she continued trudging forward 
in the thick sand, her wet clothes adding to the burden.

"Ya sure? Looked like you were drowning. We thought we were going to have to save ya."

"Nope, just swimming." Had she been drowning? Her lungs sure felt like it …

"Hey, this ring yours?" The blond boy held his hand up in the air, displaying a shining object 
glittering in the sun. "I found it on the sand here."

Fujin looked down at her naked hand, noting that her ring was, in fact, gone. But it had fit so snugly
Her hands must have shrunk in the cool breeze … just enough for the silver circle to fall off.

"Thanks, I think it is." Fujin called out and tried to pick up her pace, but her legs ached too much from the combined pull of the sand and the push of the water. She stepped slowly and awkwardly high above the waves—her calves burned.

"It's got blue stones all over it." The blond boy observed, turning it over in his fingers. "It looks expensive. Are these sapphires?"

"You know, they might be." Fujin flashed a weak smile at the child as she approached him, her hand outstretched. "I don't really know for sure. It was my mother's ring." The words fell off her tongue awkwardly—she'd never said the word mother to anyone outside the walls of Garden. The boy smiled at that, and looked up at her with green eyes as he held the ring out and dropped it onto her palm.

"You should wear it then—she probably meant for you to have it." His phrasing was odd … familiar … but Fujin didn't think much of it. She was just relieved to have the ring back—funny how could she be so relieved about getting it back when she never even realized she'd lost it.

"Yes … she probably did." She slid the ring onto her finger, with her eyes transfixed by how snugly it fit back into place. How had it fallen off?

"Thanks for returning it to me. I'd give you a reward if I had any money." She looked around the sandbar, spotting the bag she'd brought with her to the beach in the distance. "Oh, but … I did bring the whole world with me today, for some reason. It's yours if you want it." The blond boy considered the offer, smirking as his lips began to part with an answer just a second too late—his brunette friend cut him off.

"No thanks, we're just glad you're here to get it back to … we were sure you were drowning, ya know?" The brunette insisted again as she twisted the ring in a circle on her finger.

"Nah, not Fujin." Did she tell them her name? Awestruck, Fujin lifted her gaze to meet the eyes of the blond boy in front of her, and was greeted by the green eyes of a man instead—Seifer. "Tossed by the waves but never sunk, eh Fuu?"

The tone in his voice was off—he sounded menacing. Before she could respond, the blue sky above them shifted to a haunting backlit gray, and Seifer's face hardened. She took a step backwards in shock, almost falling into the water before he lunged toward her and caught her throat in his hands.

"You've betrayed me." He whispered calmly as she gasped for air through guttural pleas, the water rushing around her. "Fujin …"

"Fujin," his voice repeated again, as she felt another hand gripping her shoulder and shaking her. "Fuu …"

Fujin woke up with a start, her head jolting a few inches away from its cradle in the crook of her elbow. Her cheek ached from being pressed to something hard—wood, the smell of mahogany—and hand on her shoulders was kneading the muscles there with tender fingertips. When her eyes began to focus, they were drawn to the large window in front of her, revealing a view of Deling's skyline sparkling in the late afternoon sun.

She'd never even left the room. She must've fallen asleep again this morning while staring out the window … the whole thing had been a fucking fever dream.

"Babe?" She crooked her head to the left to find Seifer crouched down, his massive hand stretched
across her shoulder blades, his gentle green eyes gazing at her with a touch of concern—he must've been the one to shake her awake from that nightmare, and she loved him so much in that moment she thought she'd burst.

"Hyne, you're a sight for sore eyes. Even though you seem to have no fucking clue who I am." He chuckled as his golden fingers moved to brush the hair from her eyes. "That's some deep sleep you were having."

"I guess it was … I just had the weirdest dream." Fujin managed to speak through her confusion, though her dry mouth fumbled the words. She made up for it by reaching her hand out weakly to tug on the collar of his coat. "Welcome back. I'm really happy to see you."

"Me too … well, happy to see you, that is." He smiled, and readjusted to sit on his knees so he could lean in to press his lips to hers before wrapping his arm around her. Fujin gratefully sank into his warmth.

"Fuck, I've missed you. I even left Raijin behind to wrap up paperwork with the car so I could have you to myself for a minute—he'll probably wind up renting another car instead of returning that one, but what's life without a little risk?" Seifer chuckled, twisting his fingers in her hair as she nuzzled his neck. "Man, what have you done to me, Sanada? I'm a ruined man."

"Same … utterly ruined," she replied and weakly wrapped her arms around him in return—her exhaustion paired with his light touch and tender words had her on the verge of tears. That monster in the nightmare of hers could never be the man kneeling in front of her now. "I'm so happy to see you, Seifer."

"You said that already …" He pulled away from her to look into her eyes, and stroked cheek with his thumb. "Now, what's going on? Why the hell are you passed out on the windowsill in a puddle of your own drool? You fall asleep watching for our car or something? I'm flattered." She blushed, and rushed to wipe both her cheek and the signs of dampness from where her mouth had been pressed to the wood.

"No, I've just been tired all day. I thought it was the drink yesterday but … I think maybe I'm getting sick, picked up the flu or something."

"A flu, huh?" Seifer's arched an eyebrow and pressed his hand to her forehead, and then pressed his lips there too as if they were another instrument to gauge temperature. "You don't feel warm."

"Well, I definitely don't feel good … but, I guess I feel a little better now that you're back." Fujin buried her face against his collarbone again; she felt him smile against her ear—he seemed to like it when she sought him out for comfort or initiated the touch, and today she reveled in the comfort he gave her. Unmatched solace.

"Well, unfortunately our alone time might be a little short-lived. We've been invited to dinner later tonight. Seifer's hand found hers and he looped their fingers together. "To … Caraway Mansion. Rinoa was pretty set on all of us going, and the general might be back … I don't think you're up to it though. Should I cancel? We could lay low here instead."

"No, don't. It's a good opportunity," She shook her head and pulled away from him. "I'll come too … I need to see Caraway again, if he's home. Maybe I can get him alone to talk."

"Okay, but …" He inspected her face now, touching his fingertips to the dark circles under her eyes. "You sure about that? You look really tired."
"That's just a nice way to say I look like shit."

"Never. Not possible." He smirked, and gently slid his hand to the back of her neck, pulling her in for a deep kiss. How could she even imagine that those hands of his would ever hurt her? Fujin sank down against him again afterward, sighing as she pressed her palm to his chest.

"Well, if I'm sick you're definitely going to get it now." She yawned, desperately trying to force her eyes to stay open.

"Worth it," he murmured, as he ran his hand through her hair. "Something's definitely not right with you, though. We have a few hours to kill—you wanna sleep more? You know, on a real bed. I'll stay with you." As quickly as she nodded against his neck in approval, he was slipping an arm under her legs and lifting her effortlessly—cradling her against his chest.

"Hyne, you feel lighter today." Seifer observed as he placed her gently on the closest twin bed, his voice riddled with questions that he didn't dare ask her yet. She knew he could tell that this definitely wasn't the flu. But for whatever reason—pity, fear of knowing, or fear of making her angry, Hyne knows why—instead of asking the questions that were on the tip of his tongue, he busied himself with pushing the middle twin bed up against hers to create one large king.

"What about Raijin?" She asked as she rolled onto her side, a groan escaping her throat before she remembered to mask it. At least she couldn't see his face; if she couldn't see the questions, she could pretend they weren't there.

"What about him? I know his feelings are hurt, but we can't be expected to shelter him from this forever—he'll deal with it."

"I … didn't realize you knew." She whispered groggily, unable to give the revelation the full attention it deserved.

"Don't worry about it, Fuu. We can talk about that some other time." She heard Seifer's coat falling to the floor, and it was soon followed by the weight of his body settling next to her on the bed. He scooted towards her and pulled her close—their bodies fitting together in a perfect shape, like two broken pieces that were always meant to be a whole. "Let's just rest—I'm tired too. Missing you wore me out."

No, it was ludicrous—inconceivable. Seifer could never hurt her. Nightmares weren't premonitions. She pressed herself into him and began to drift off to sleep again. They were a reflection of your base thoughts though—what did it mean, that she offered him the world with no question, and that he'd tried to kill her with his own hands in the waves? No, Seifer could never hurt her. The words echoed in her head as she drifted off to sleep.
What was he supposed to do? Call her out right then and there, with her slumped over like a rag doll on the window ledge? Accuse her of being a liar all over again? About SeeD, about the incredibly personal reasons she accepted this mission to begin with, and about what the fuck had been happening to her while he'd been gone? Tell her how furious it made him to know in his gut that she was hiding something from him again—and pointedly chose to lie about it?

No, he couldn't bring himself to do that now.

Seifer knew something was off with her, but on the phone she'd been so deliberate in her deception he'd had no choice but to begrudgingly believe her. It was just a drink, she'd said. It only made my stomach queasy. I'll be more careful next time.

After their call, as the day dragged on, Seifer thought about the number of times they'd all gone out together, and the number of times she'd had just one drink and been fine. He also thought about how he'd gotten a little controlling for a minute and told her not to drink by herself, and how she didn't even say a word about it. That was very un-Fujin-like … to accept crap from anyone, even Seifer, about her ability to self-regulate. Normally, no one had a better grip on themselves than Fujin, and it was impossible to find anyone more composed … up until recently, anyway.

Admittedly, she'd been a bit of a mess as of late, and he supposed he should probably cut her some slack. But that curiosity of his and his inability to let things lie—that need to just keep pushing buttons until his opponent caved and he won—would not let up. He was intent on getting to the bottom of it, and hashing it out in person and not through some damned staticky Timber phone lines. So, when Seifer finally made it back to Deling and cracked open the door to their hotel room, he naturally took in the scene before him with the mixed emotions of anger at being lied to, and worry at finding the room dank and virtually unlived in … like nothing in there had moved since he and Raijin left.

He finally spotted her motionless in a seat at the window, with her face pressed into the crook of her arm like she'd fallen asleep while steadfastly waiting for a long-lost love to return from a trip to sea. The shades were pulled high on the windows and the sun was pouring down on her—that silver halo he'd left her with back atop the crown of her head. When he called out her name and she didn't move an inch, all those things he'd been thinking disappeared … the only thing he'd felt was fear.

It looked like a scene from the holy scriptures, with the dust-flecked light of the sun creating a direct portal to the heavens and lifting her soul up. Time stopped; his stomached lurched; his head rushed with a surge of panic that pounded in his ears. He was on the verge of yelling. For a moment—just for a split second—he'd thought she might be dead.

But somehow through the rush of adrenaline he saw the slope of her shoulders rising and falling. Breathing. She was breathing and she was alive. A hand gloved in black leather flew to his mouth to stifle the guttural sound forming in his throat, as he let out a massive sigh of relief. Fucking hell.

He wasn't sure he was a believer, but in the far corner of his mind Seifer thanked Hyne and any gods—all the gods there ever were and all the ones to come—that he was just being a basket case. His whole world had just collapsed in on itself and then expanded again within seconds. Fucking hell—he really thought she was dead for a minute there.

He went to her with a quickened pace and knelt to get a good look at her face, removing his gloves
so he could hold his palm near her mouth. Only after he was certain he'd felt her warm breath on his hand did he scan the room for signs of trouble—any clues she might be hurt beyond what was externally visible. But there was no blood, no overturned tables, no evidence of a struggle. Taking a second to regain his composure so he wouldn't scare her, he shook her gently with a firm grip, resisting the urge to aggressively rattle her awake.

Fujin's eyes cracked open lazily to lock with his and the only thing he could feel was relief. Her fingers reached out to touch the collar of his coat and tug him closer, and all he could register was how thankful he was that those hands were still warm. She still smelled like her; her lips still tasted like her; her skin was still soft and responsive to his touch—she was still very much alive.

A fever, Fujin claimed. Call it whatever you want, Seifer thought to himself as he pressed his lips to her forehead. I don't need to win.

His anger long forgotten, Seifer lifted her featherweight body with eager arms from her perch at the window and moved her to the hotel's small twin bed for more sleep. His body worked independent from his mind as he slid one of the other beds up against hers to lay by her side. He awkwardly stretched himself out across both mattresses, sinking a bit into the crack between them. Discomfort didn't matter as long as he was feeling those deep breaths she was taking against his chest. He didn't even bother trying to scramble to a more socially acceptable position when Raijin burst into the room, finally finished with returning the rental car.

There was a long line. Raijin said distantly as he closed the door with a quiet touch. Seifer couldn't see his face but he could picture it—bewildered, disappointed, glad for them; all of that wrapped in one … whatever that looked like on a man like Rajin. What the heck's going on with her?

Seifer propped himself up on his elbow slowly, pulling back from a slumbering Fujin just enough so he could turn to see a sliver of Raijin's face and whisper over his shoulder.

I don't know, man. I walked in and found her all groggy like this. Something's not right. She said she thinks she has a fever … but I had this feeling yesterday. Seifer shook his head and looked back down at her. I had this feeling something was wrong and I should've followed my gut. We shouldn't have left her here.

We had'ta go. This is a mission, and it was an order. Nothin' we could do about it, ya know. Raijin sighed and placed his things down on the bed. Like what you've done with the room. Really … opens it up.

Yeah, I told her I would stay with her. But these fucking beds are too small … and for a little thing she manages to take up as much real estate as she can. Seifer was trying to make a joke, but it still felt like an awkward subject for two friends with fresh realizations of once shared feelings.

Yeah, she does. Raijin chuckled, and slowly lowered himself down on his own bed, trying not to stare at them too much, and just look directly at Seifer. So, does she actually have a fever?

Not that I can tell. Seifer whispered, as he turned to look back at Fujin to be sure their quiet chatter wasn't waking her up. I think it's the wind again. And for some reason she wants to come with us tonight. I dunno, I think it's a bad idea. You wanna see if we can convince her not to?

Seif, I'm not tryin' to undermine her, ya know? Raijin kicked off his shoes and fell back onto his mattress, folding his arms behind his head. She can handle herself.

Undermine her? Raijin she's not in any shape to go anywhere—look at her. Seifer continued to gaze down at her, even though he'd wanted to shoot a glare at Raijin for implying he didn't understand the
That's your problem, man. Raijin chuckled quietly again in genuine amusement with the scene in front of him, the awkwardness dissolving. You can't stop looking at her that way. That way you just did—she'd eat you alive if she saw that, ya know?

Shut up. Seifer's cheeks grow hot, mostly because he knew it was true and he knew how ridiculous it must look to see him snuggled up to Fujin like she was some helpless damsel—she would eat him alive if she knew he was doing that in front of anyone, even Raijin. Seifer heard his friend chuckle lowly again, along with the squeaking of mattress springs as his large frame settled into the bed.

Listen—she wouldn't come tonight if she didn't think she should. And I'm going where she tells me to go, when she tells me to go. It's all about getting into SeeD without the red tape, ya know?

Nice, Raijin. Seifer scoffed, and tried to turn a little more to glare at his friend. She's clearly a fucking mess, and you're thinking about getting into SeeD?

Uh, yeah man. Raijin's face twisted in confusion at Seifer's complete lack of awareness—a rare reversal of their usual roles. You should be too. One of the reasons she took this mission was for us. Didn't you hear her ask Cid about it? She's going through all this so we can join her in the field. I woulda said no if she'd asked, but she didn't and now we don't have a choice …

With everything that was going on, that conversation about a direct pathway to SeeD hadn't actually crossed Seifer's mind since it came up in the Headmaster's office. The offer had been far too enticing for Fujin to turn down, and Cid would've known that. It was a good play on old Kramer's part to get them all to Deling and near Caraway, though Seifer still wasn't exactly sure why it had to be them. Cid's justification was pretty thin; he could've sent any of his already well-trusted SeeDs on this mission, and it didn't really make sense that he wasn't sending Xu—his closest Garden confidant, who would probably throw herself in front of a moving train if it meant saving the old man's life. She'd never betray his trust by spreading news that the sorceress was working with President Deling. It didn't add up.

Whatever the intention behind Cid's offer was, Fujin took the bait—even though in all likelihood she also sensed that it wasn't just completing a mission for an even exchange of getting her friends instated in SeeD. But knowing Fujin as well as he did, he imagined her prioritizing the impacts and outcomes of the mission in her mind: there was no question as to what would have been sifted to the top, above all else—the Posse, and keeping the three of them together … especially after that fit he'd thrown in Dollet.

I'd almost forgotten about that. Seifer laid back down next to her, his back turned to Raijin. Go figure—I've been trying to pass for two years now and it slipped my mind. Seems like just yesterday my only goal in life was to get in before any other gunblade specialist could get through.

Ha, it basically was just yesterday. Hey, did Leonhart take the exam this year?

I don't even know. Seifer shrugged absentmindedly, his eyes fixed on the side of Fujin's face as the corner of her mouth twitched in her deep sleep. We ran into him at Garden, and I didn't ask. Didn't even think to check anywhere else …

It's funny how fast things change, ya know? Seifer could hear the smile in Raijin's voice.

Yeah … funny, I guess.

"Hey, are you guys ready?"
Seifer's head jerked towards the voice that rang out behind him. He'd been pouring over some of the notes on Odine and GFs that Fujin pulled together at a small table with Raijin, and lost his train of thought as he replayed the afternoon in his head.

Fujin emerged from the bathroom, looking a little more rested but still sounding tired. She was dressed in her usual uniform—blue coat, blue pants, eye-patch. Seifer thought briefly that he should probably refer to it as a costume, since the Fujin he knew was completely different behind that mask she wore.

"Yeah, we're good to move out." Seifer stood up from the small table reluctantly, reaching over to shut off the small lamp that had been illuminating his work. Raijin flipped through a couple of pages of Fujin's notes, ignoring their conversation as he studied her handwriting.

"Hey Fuu," Seifer walked up to her, smiling softly as his hand moved to her face to peel off her eye patch. "You uh … might want to leave this at home. They've both seen you without it … no need to confuse people."

"Right, I forgot about that." She shook her head as she watched him place the small piece of dark fabric on the table. "I swear I feel better, but my head still feels a little foggy."

Yeah, that's probably because Pandemona, the sorceress-GF, did a number on you. Seifer thought as he threw his arm around her shoulders.

"It's alright, it's not like it's a high stakes dinner—this is just setting up the connection, letting Caraway know Cid sent us." While Raijin was occupied, Seifer leaned in to kiss her temple. "Easy stuff. I'll probably wind up doing all the talking."

"Right, easy." Fujin mimicked as she stuffed her hands in her pockets. "Well, Raijin. Let's get a move on."

"Yeah, sure. Right behind you." Their friend placed the papers down on the table, scratching his head as he finished a few sentences. Seifer noted that this might be the first time they'd had to pull Raijin away from his reading.

"Man, ya know … this stuff with Odine is really crazy." Raijin stood and joined them near the door, as he stared off into the distance. "Why haven't we heard of this guy? He seems like a pretty big deal."

"I wondered the same thing." Fujin's voice was hushed as she opened the door and led them all into the hallway. "Seems strange that he never came up, in all the years we've been at Garden."

"Yeah, I mean … especially since Cid knew he raised you for a few years. Ya'd think at least you would've heard about him."

"I doubt Odine had much to do with it." Fujin pressed the button for the elevator, slipping out from under Seifer's arm and leaning against the wall. "I was probably taken care of by lab staffers. Like any other experiment."

"Strange he didn't say anything all these years though." Seifer leaned against the wall next to her as he spoke, resisting the urge to wrap her under his arm again. "I wonder if Garden has a secret file on all of us. You know, one that answers all of our questions, reveals our identity … just the things we've been looking for all of our lives." Fujin smiled at his sarcastic tone as the elevator arrived, and Raijin stepped in first, shaking his head.

"Wow, I hope not. I don't want to know now." Fujin nodded in agreement as she and Seifer
followed him.

"Wise choice." She impatiently pressed the button for the lobby, trying to get the doors to close faster so no one else could join them. "Enough about all of that though. Let's go over a few things for tonight so we're all on the same page." She moved in front of them and crossed her arms over her chest, trying to muster enough energy to convey the fortitude of a leader.

"We're on vacation from Garden for the summer. Seifer's thinking of transferring to Galbadia Garden so that he's the only leading gunblade specialist, with hopes of becoming the first gunblade instructor in the Garden system." Seifer scoffed and threw his hand out flipantly.

"For the record, I hate that part of the narrative. I'm already the leading gunblade specialist at Balamb." Fujin rolled her eyes at his comment and continued.

"If Caraway's there, then our goal for the night is to discreetly communicate to him that Cid has sent us as a conduit for intel. We should also probably try to establish a drop location somewhere in the city for exchange of emergency messages from him. But not knowing Deling very well, we'll probably have to try and get him alone and pick his brain for that." Seifer nodded in agreement, impressed by her ability to push through whatever physical pain and exhaustion she was experiencing to act so fucking professional. He wasn't sure he'd be able to do the same in her shoes.

"I'll probably be able to ask if I can speak with him alone to hash out transfer details." The elevator stopped on the second floor, but Seifer pressed a button to close the doors immediately. They heard the person on the other side yell an expletive, but Seifer paid no mind and continued talking. "I can ask about a drop location."

"Yes, that's what I was thinking. And if Caraway's not there … if it's just us and Rinoa …" Fujin paused, and leaned against the elevator wall. "Then Seifer needs to keep her interest, get invited back to Caraway mansion, and we'll try this all over again."

"This sound boring either way, ya know?" Raijin sighed, running his hand down his face. "There's nothing for me to do."

"Not true. You'll either be entertaining Rinoa while Seifer and Caraway talk, or you and I will be wandering around the mansion, conducting a little research of our own." Fujin smiled at Raijin as the elevator came to a halt on the ground floor. "Plus, the food should be good."

"Ya know, it should be," Raijin's mind wandered off as he dreamed of culinary rapture. "They have a professional chef."

"Of course they do." Fujin groaned. "These spoiled, upper class—"

They were met with a wall of sound when the elevator doors opened wide—the loud rumbling of voices accompanied by flashes of light. The trio stared out into the lobby, stunned, as they waded into a crowd of photographers and journalists, all pushing closer to the exit as they focused their attention on something standing just as the glass doors. Seifer, towering over most of them, caught a glimpse of a presidential motorcade outside.

"Hyne, what's going on? Is President Deling here?" He craned his neck as the three of them nudged into the fray, his eyes searching the chaos for anyone who might look like a political. "There are a bunch of those fancy armored cars out front."

"Nah, it's not Deling." Raijin raised his arm to point just to the left of the exit. "Look right over there, getting into the car right now—it's the sorceress. She must not've left town yet."
There were moments in Seifer's life that he knew he'd always remember; a realization that came not after-the-fact, but as the moments were happening. It was a feeling he'd get in his gut—something gnawing at him telling him that it was important … to pay attention. He'd tried to explain it to Fujin once or twice, but never seemed to find the right words—he just had a strange knack for realizing the innate truth of a moment as it occurred … almost as if he'd died and was looking back at that fragment of time with unparalleled clarity.

He'd felt it when he held Fujin, that first time they were together on the boat home from Dollet. It was like they'd been together a thousand times before, or were at least always destined to be. It's why he confessed that he loved her so quickly, and why he'd already been having crazy thoughts of settling down and family. Fujin already felt familiar—she felt like home.

Seifer had a similar feeling when SeeD finally allowed him to choose the weapon he'd spend his life training with. He could still smell the heat of the foundry at the blacksmith's shop, and hear the chilling metallic sound of hammers meeting metal as he walked by the stock models for sale and deemed them all unfit for war. His feet kept carrying him towards the back of the room, towards the sound and the smell calling out to him. That's when he saw Hyperion's all too familiar blade—still being worked on the anvil, red-hot from the belly of a fire. That's the one—he'd decisively told the Garden instructor who'd been tasked with bringing him there. That's my weapon. The instructor scoffed and insisted he choose one of the available models—it was astronomically priced, and it was not even being close to finished. But Seifer refused to take anything else, and refused to leave without it. It was his, and he just knew it … he always had.

And seeing the sorceress from a distance now as her small dark form made its way into the car, Seifer felt a shiver run down his spine. Running into her had been a complete coincidence, and he hadn't seen her face—had barely caught a glimpse of her—and yet somehow … somehow … he knew this chance glimpse meant something. What, he couldn't be sure …

"Yo Seif, did you see her?" Raijin asked as he took a step forward. "Real pretty, right?"

"Have we seen her before?" Seifer ignored Raijin's question and futilely tried to get a glimpse of her face through the car's tinted windows. He kept his eyes locked on the sorceress until the door of the car was closed and the motorcade began driving away. Fujin didn't hear his question over the roaring crowd as they scrambled through the door and filtered onto the street.

"Hyne, probably a bunch of reporters from Occult Fan. Let's get going." Fujin and Raijin marched ahead, Seifer's hesitation going unnoticed at first. When Fujin realized that he wasn't following she spun around locked her eyes with his as she took a step backward.

"What's the matter? If you don't move we're going to be late."

"Nothing … I just …" Seifer's gaze followed the last car in the motorcade as it drove down main street toward the presidential residence. "I just feel like I've seen her before."

"Well, maybe you have. In the newspapers here or something. Now come here—walk with me for a-ways." Fujin held out her hand—a rare gesture on her part—as an incentive for him to move. "We can be together for a minute, at least." She was interpreting his alarm at the sorceress as hesitation to go and see Rinoa with her in tow. He pushed aside the gut feeling, and grabbed her hand gladly.

"Sure thing, commander."
Alright folks, updates are coming more slowly now. I’ve been pretty bogged down with actual work projects so my writing time has been decreased a bit, and I have some big plans coming up that could delay upcoming chapters. I'm going to keep writing, I just won't be churning them out fast. As for this chapter, I'm 99.9% sure I'm going to be editing it. I like the overall storyline, I just need to add more details, I think. Anyway, feel free to read and review. I'll let you know when/if I make changes.

Fujin was disappointed that the spirit living inside her wasn't recognized by the sorceress. It was one thing to feel in her heart that it was real, but it was an entirely different thing for the two entities to converge and verify they were of the same ilk. Her stomach dropped in anticipation as she waited for the woman to reel around and scan the crowd, searching for the source of the feeling that someone like her, something like her, was standing among the common folk watching. Fujin felt hollow when the recognition didn't come—an odd feeling considering being identified by a potential sorceress threat wasn't an ideal scenario.

She'd heard Raijin mumble something vague and Seifer quietly respond, but she couldn't make their words out—the flashing lights of cameras were too distracting, and she was still having a hard time focusing after what she'd been through.

*Hyne, probably a bunch of reporters from Occult Fan. Let's keep going,* she'd said aloud to them both, trying to force her voice confidently above the sound of the crowd. But as Raijin walked in front of her, and they edged closer to the street where the motorcade still waited, a strange feeling swept over her and rendered her still.

…*Was it possible to feel darkness?* Because Fujin *swore she felt it* the moment she stepped closer to the sorceress.

It wasn't the usual definition of darkness that she understood through the senses of sight and touch—like when groping the walls of a room void of light to find her way out—but a genuine *feeling*. It wasn't a concept she could extract herself from by switching on a lamp, but a *tangible thing*. It was vast and shallow all at once; happening in that moment but also rooted in eternity. Sprawling without direction but with clear intention—*an end*; either by slowly spilling out to find the edge of the universe or by *creating one of its own*.

*Maybe it was a darkness more like death*—akin to being in a casket, buried with the lid-locked and her eyes closed forever … but still *being there*, inside, her heart not beating but her mind free to roam. Nothing but the darkness, the once-removed memory of the smell of dirt, and the vibration of mourners traversing somewhere beyond. There was nothing to light the way out … because there was no light anymore.

Fujin lost her footing for a moment, and blinked a few times as she pulled herself away from the sensation—*how was it possible that they were all standing there still, when what she'd experience felt infinite?* She spun around and found Seifer standing still as a stone, his face hard and his brow furrowed, peering through the lobby windows at the sorceress in the street. His bright green eyes were reflecting flashes of gold as the photographers around them continued to vie for a last shot the
city's grand guest driving away—the resemblance they bared to that nightmare of hers was haunting.

What's the matter? She'd asked with intentional casualness so her uneasiness would go undetected.

Nothing … I just … I feel like I've seen her before. His eyes kept tracking the woman, remembering something distant.

Well, maybe you have … Fujin brushed his statement aside, not wanting to lend merit to anything related to that moment for fear that something about it could be true. ...In the newspapers here or something. Now come here—walk with me.

Sure thing, commander. Seifer smiled and stretched out his golden hand to meet her own, happy to leave the thought behind, and happy she seemed to need him. Fujin was just relieved that he didn't seem to experience the same thing … if they'd both felt it, then it had to be real and not something her mind was creating on its own.

Though as the trio weaved through webs of buses and people to make their way through Deling's streets, Fujin threw a sideways glance at Seifer every few minutes, deeming him uncharacteristically quiet—normally he'd be nervous-rambling the whole walk there, trying to keep her spirits up as they marched towards an evening that her worst enemy might not even be able to conjure up as torture. Raijin walked a few steps ahead of them, marveling at the architecture. Seifer would only mumble a few words, feigning interest, as he held her hand in a sweaty vice-like grip. Fujin only squeezed back, her fingers feeling cold despite his warmth. She'd have to ask him later, after this terrible night was over, what exactly it was that he'd felt in that moment.

Rounding the final street corner to Caraway's, Fujin reluctantly let her grip loosen in Seifer's hand, signaling that it was probably time they separate. It didn't register for him at first—his green eyes fixed straight ahead and far away, in a deep state of contemplation.

Seifer. Fujin nudged him with her elbow, and he startled. She took the opportunity to pull her hand from his.

Sorry, I wasn't paying attention. He shook his head, and stuffed his hands in his pockets as they climbed the short hill to Caraway's place.

Anything you want to talk about? Fujin stopped in her tracks and he stopped alongside her, fixing his eyes on the ground. Raijin continued marching ahead toward the grandeur of the mansion in the distance.

Yeah, but … not right now. Seifer looked up at her in a sharp motion, biting his cheek as he studied her face. How 'bout you? You ready for this?

Yeah, I'm ready. She mimicked his whisper, and he nodded.

If you're planning on coming back tonight, can we split off and talk for a bit?

Don't say stuff like that. I'm coming back every night. Seifer placed a hand on the back of her neck and pulled her in for a kiss before nudging her forward. The nightmare she'd had of him strangling her flashed in her mind, and she shivered. We'll talk later. Seifer gave her side a final squeeze as he ushered her forward toward Raijin, who was waiting at the top of the hill impatiently for the two of them with his arms crossed over his chest.

Fujin was finding it difficult to transition from that dark feeling to the present, as they sat together in the formal dining room of General Caraway and Rinoa Heartilly's home. She pushed her food around with her fork to give the appearance that she was eating as Rinoa's giggles chimed from the
other side of the table in response to a witty joke of Seifer's that Fujin had missed.

"I still can't believe how amazing it was that Seifer and I ran into each other." Fujin prodded her potatoes, uninterested in hearing Rinoa gush about the odds again. "To think, of all the times for you to get curious about Timber."

"Yeah, well never thought I'd see you there. Raijin and I had never been before, so we just thought we'd take a trip." Fujin lifted her gaze to catch Seifer glancing in Rinoa's direction as he took a sip of his water. "We wanted to see what Galbadia was up to there—if transferring is something I wind up doing, I wanna know what's going on locally. We don't have uprisings like that in Balamb."

"Well, I think it was fate." Rinoa reached over to tap Seifer's forearm. "What are the chances?" There it was again. Fujin had to make a conscious effort not to roll her eyes.

"Well, the chances are pretty good since you're in Timber all the time." General Caraway spoke up from the head of the table, just before taking the last bite of his steak. "Fate has better things to do."

Fujin was glad that General Caraway had made it back for this dinner of theirs, but the irritation in his voice signaled that he wasn't as pleased. When the three of them sauntered into the mansion's foyer, Caraway's jaw was tensed with anger—he was less than thrilled to greet them, and he'd been much more standoffish compared to their meeting in Dollet. If someone asked Fujin to place a bet on as to why, she'd probably put her money on the fact that Cid Kramer, a long-time acquaintance of the General's, had included Rinoa in this mess. Caraway seemed to be having enough trouble with his daughter as it was—getting her unwittingly involved in SeeD operations was probably not something a parent appreciated. None of them—including Cid—had a grasp on what that must feel like.

"That's an exaggeration." Rinoa rolled her eyes. "Believe me, I'd like to be there more."

"Let's not get into that right now." Caraway snagged his glass of wine off the table, which he was refilling plentifully tonight, and held out his other hand to silence her. "Not in front of our guests. I don't want to discuss politics and make a bad first impression." The General's gaze rested heavily on Seifer, who awkwardly reached for his water again and took a swig. Rinoa made an effort to fill the silence that followed.

"Right … well," Rinoa, in a confused mix of anger at being belittled and crestfallen at being scolded, changed the subject. "Anyway, like Seifer just said—he's interested in transferring to Galbadia Garden. I thought that maybe … maybe you could talk to him about it, since you know the headmaster?"

Fujin leaned back in her chair, observing Rinoa as she waited with baited breath for a response from Caraway, her eyes nervously darting from her plate to her father's face as she waited for him to put an end to the awkward silence. Through the filter of Seifer and Raijin's description, Fujin imagined Rinoa would've been tougher than she appeared now. It was strange for a girl, described to be hell-bent on ruffling Caraway's feathers, to steer the conversation away from Timber so willingly. Come to think of it, the fact that she brought home anyone from the Garden system and not a tattooed, vegetarian, pacifist spoke volumes. That anti-establishment veneer Rinoa put on with Seifer was just a façade—was this all about impressing her father? Even this dinner, devised as a way to parade a military boy around and beg for approval in place of affection? Fujin couldn't stop her mind from trying to find a motive … it helper her not think about how Rinoa's left hand had disappeared under the table, probably resting on Seifer's knee.

"Some other time, Rinoa. I just got back from a work trip, and I'd rather not talk about Galbadia or Gardens for another second." Caraway responded flatly, unhurriedly taking another sip of wine. He pivoted in his seat to turn his attention to Fujin and Raijin's side of the table.
"So, Fujin … it sounds like you chose not to visit Timber. A wise choice, I have to say—it's very
dangerous right now." He glanced sideways at Rinoa, who was busy flashing Seifer an apologetic
look before grabbing her own glass of wine and taking a few gulps. "Have you been here in Deling
by yourself?"

"Yes sir, General Caraway. I hadn't been to Deling in a while, and I wanted to take in the sights. So
I've been spending the past few days—" Caraway smiled, cutting her off as he grabbed the wine
bottle from the table, and leaned towards her to refill her glass.

"Now, now. Just because my daughter refuses to address me informally in my own home doesn't
mean that you should. My name is Fury, but most people call me Caraway. A pretty girl your age
calling me 'General' and 'Sir' makes me feel like an old man."

"Okay … sure thing." Fujin felt her face turning a shade of pink as her eyes darted to Seifer, who
was visibly displeased at Caraway's level of comfort with her.

"You sure you don't want any wine, Seifer? It's a good year." Caraway wiggled the bottle in the air,
leaving his eyes fixed on Fujin.

"No, sir. I'm trying to cut back—I find it gets in the way of training. Water suits me just fine."

"Hoping that putting the right fuel into the machine will keep you sharp and help you pass exams?"
Caraway grinned deviously as he placed the bottle down on the table and finally turned to look at
Seifer. "Probably not a bad strategy."

"Seifer's actually already in SeeD, General." Rinoa piped up proudly, tucking her hair behind her ear
turning to beam at Seifer.

"Uh … actually no, I'm not," he corrected, chuckling awkwardly as he avoided Rinoa's confused
stare. "Sorry, I probably wasn't clear enough—I'm in training still at Balamb Garden. I need to work
on being more careful with my descriptions of Garden hierarchy around civilians, I guess." After
years of studying Seifer's face, Fujin could tell this particular admission was painful for him—he
hated all forms of self-deprecation. She felt a sting of jealousy at the fact that he was flustered by
being embarrassed in front of Rinoa, though. She'd been trying not to let that happen tonight, but it
manifested without her permission as an aching burn in the core of her stomach.

"We all talk about it like we're in it already, ya know?" Raijin piped up from the other side of the
table as he chomped on the extra steak he'd asked for. "You're in the day you start training. It's just
part of the culture, at least at Balamb it is—it builds this feeling of family, sort've. It's easy to confuse
people." His massive bronze arm extended across Fujin's plate to grab the bottle of wine Caraway
had just placed back on the table, and she couldn't help but smirk—Raijin was always Raijin, no
matter where they brought him.

"Sorry, I didn't realize …" Rinoa voice trailed off as the prospect of a boyfriend in SeeD dissolved—
her plans of either carrying out wacky schemes in Timber or finding some common ground with her
father thwarted. "So none of you are in SeeD, officially?"

"Fujin is," Raijin pointed his fork at her, after having just scraped a piece of meat from it with his
teeth. "She just passed the exam." Rinoa's brown eyes lit up at that and she looked at Fujin with
renewed interest, as if she were seeing her for the first time.

"Really? But you're so young. Are they going to send you on missions?"

"Age had nothing to do with it. We fight when we're ready to fight." Fujin hadn't realized that there
was an edge to her voice until Rinoa's face was overcome by a look of panic.

"Oh, no—sorry. I mean, of course you're capable. I just meant … I just meant that I've never met a female SeeD as young as you. It's impressive." Rinoa smiled warmly as her hand came up from under the table so her fingers could run along the rim of her wine glass.

"It is impressive. She's not the youngest to ever make it in, but she's pretty damn close." Seifer flashed Fujin a smile as he attempted to rescue her from the unnecessarily tense conversation, which she begrudgingly admitted to herself was her own doing. "Rajin and I both failed this round, and Fuu here passed with flying colors—which is uncommon. Most of us go through a couple of cycles before we get through. They're pretty strict."

"That's really wonderful." Rinoa's cheeks turned a shade of pink when Seifer's eyes fell on her. Fujin knew that feeling well all too well, and seeing Rinoa experiencing it directly in front of her felt like a new wound on her already fragile mental state.

"Impressive indeed." Caraway interrupted them all, smiling as he wiped his mouth with his napkin before placing it over his plate. "So, you said you've been taking in the sights of Deling. What ones, specifically?"

"To be honest, besides walking around the city I've only made it to the library so far." Fujin offered him a light smile, thankful for the change in topic, and swept up the glass of wine, hoping it would make her look—and feel—less awkward. "I remembered visiting it once when I was a kid. I was pretty taken with the rare books section, so I wanted to stop in and see it again. I haven't been able to tear myself away."

"Our library is one of the best, second only to Esthar's."

Fujin nodded agreeably before absentmindedly resting her chin on her hand. This dinner was dragging on longer than she thought it would, and she was finding it very tiring to make small talk while also striving to be on point. Not slipping up and giving away the fact that they'd all met before was proving to be very difficult in her state of exhaustion—her headache from earlier was still throbbing lightly behind her eyes, and her muscles were still aching. She also hadn't predicted that Rinoa's presence would be so … challenging for her.

"What's been of the most interest to you?" Caraway canted forward, placing his elbows on the table.

"Well, I've been reading up on the sorceress war, actually, which led me to some of the rare sorceress lineage volumes, too. It's been fascinating. Especially with what's happening around here."

"Yes, the city's overcome with occult mania." Caraway groaned in dismay as he scratched his chin. "If the war and sorceresses interests you, why don't you come with me for a moment? I have a few rare volumes in my library that you might like to take a look at. I'll even loan them to you." He pushed his chair back abruptly from the table.

"Ah, I mean—I … I'm not a history buff." Fujin stuttered, his unanticipated invitation throwing her off guard. He was supposed to want to talk with Seifer, and the implication of that had been obvious—she hadn't been prepared for him to choose her as option B. She was suddenly feeling uncomfortable with the prospect of being sequestered by the General in this odd mood of his. She extended a hand towards Seifer, her palm facing upward, as she scrambled to get him back on track with her plan. "Seifer's actually a pretty enthusiastic student of the war."

"But I bet he's not a rare book enthusiast." Caraway caught Fujin's hand in his and pulled her to her feet. She felt her eyes grow wide when they connected with his, as she wordlessly tried to ask
him what the fuck he was doing. The corner of his mouth curled upward in a small smile as he read her shocked expression.

"Come on General, Fujin doesn't want to spend her night looking at your musty old book collection. Don't force my friends to do academic-like things when they visit or they'll never come back." Rinoa whined from the other side of the table as Fujin analyzed her loose definition of friends. "Besides, I was hoping you could chat with Seifer for a bit."

"It's fine, we're here for the rest of the summer." Seifer placed his hand on Rinoa's shoulder and looked towards the General, fully understanding the man had no intention of humoring Balamb Garden's plan on using his daughter as part of their operation tonight. "Some other time."

"Yes, some other time." Caraway offered Seifer a cold nod, and stood from his chair. "Come, let's go take a look. If you'll allow me?" In an oddly intimate gesture, Caraway offered Fujin his arm with a warm smile. Fujin accepted the invitation wordlessly, trying her best to mask her reluctance.

"Bring around the desert." Caraway nodded to the wait staff standing by and led Fujin out of the room—she was sure she could hear Seifer's teeth grinding as they walked away. "We'll be back in a bit."

Caraway patted Fujin's hand as he whisked her down the hallway, nodding to a couple of his staffers who were leaning against the wall having a quiet conversation in the corridor. Caught off guard by the surprise intrusion, they paused when they saw him, and scrambled to look more presentable. Fujin chuckled at their half-hearted attempt.

"Is something funny?" He asked lowly, as they continued their walk. "I'm not finding the humor in this evening."

"It's just … your staff seems pretty relaxed. Chatting in the hallway, unapologetic when they're caught. While you were away, your doorman practically gave Seifer a map to your location and your daughter's." Fujin's eyes grew wider as they passed by marble busts of once revered commanders and expensive oil paintings hanging on the walls.

"They were throwing quite a party here the other night, when you were both out of town. I could've snuck right in, maybe brought even brought that family portrait over there home with me." She nodded to a large painting at the end of the hallway, depicting a young Rinoa sitting on her mother's lap, and General Caraway standing behind them both—a hand protectively rested on each of their shoulders. Even at that young age, Rinoa was beautiful and rosy cheecked; her mother was flashing that beaming infectious smile that Rinoa possessed now, and Caraway even looked kinder and gentler. They looked like a happy family, but Fujin supposed no one would've bothered getting the picture painted if they'd been miserable.

"Taking in the sights of Deling, indeed," Caraway scoffed under his breath as they rounded the corridor. "It sounds like you've been casing my house."

"We were conducting some preliminary ground work before making contact; we weren't expecting your team to be so free with information." Fujin whispered back, as they passed a few more staffers. "Cid sends his regards."

"Ha, I'm sure he does. I wish he would've sent them in a more professional manner." He slowed his gait a bit as they arrived at a large door.

"I hope you don't mind me saying this, but you look unwell compared to the last time I saw you. Well, you look lovely, but you seem a little tired." Caraway corrected, as he disconnected their arms
as he reached for the door. "Is your … condition becoming a burden?"

"No sir," Fujin shook her head as she made a concerted effort to soften her expression. "Just feeling a little under the weather today. It's unrelated."

"Glad to hear it. Right this way." He placed a hand on Fujin's back to usher her over the threshold, closing the door quickly behind them. "And remember, it's Caraway."

Once inside the office, Caraway continued to walk past her to hurriedly make himself a drink from a small bar cart on the far side of the room, before moving to lean back against his desk and face her. Fujin felt as if she was being taken aside for a scolding about their clandestine plan … at least, that's what she hoped this was—all the alternatives were bleak. She was not at all interested in using her covert ops training on old General Caraway.

"Well," Caraway made a sweeping motion with one hand as he lifted his glass to his lips with the other. "What has the great Cid Kramer sent you all here to do, exactly? Aside from having that cadet romance my daughter to gain a seat at my table."

"That was my doing, not Cid's." Fujin laced her fingers together behind her back and took a step forward. To any passerby it would appear to be a respectful gesture, but for Fujin it was muscle memory—she often held her weapon that way, and her fingers fumbled clumsily together when they remembered it wasn't there. "Seifer and Rinoa met organically in Dollet, before we even knew the two of you were connected; it was my suggestion to use her to contact you, and Cid only approved the move. We needed a quick excuse to get back in touch with you, and Rinoa is—"

"Naive." Caraway laughed, though Fujin was certain he didn't find this funny. "She's young and naive because she's still a child. Cid obviously wouldn't care about that though—he grooms all of you to be adults by age ten and hopes you'll be murders by fifteen or younger. Even Galbadia's military has a minimum age requirement." He finished off his drink and set the glass down with unnecessary force on the table. "And now, as we speak, that sorry excuse for a soldier is out there putting his hands on my daughter."

"There's no need to sling insults. Cid wants us to partner with you—this isn't an adversarial move." Fujin interjected firmly, her irritation at someone saying a cross word about Seifer peaked, as she took a few steps to close the distance he'd placed between them. She straightened her back and stiffened her jaw, trying not to let her anger show. "I apologize for the method of approach, but it was the fastest way to get to you without rousing suspicion. Seifer's being respectful and will continue to do so. We'll phase her out of this as quickly as we can." Caraway eyed her skeptically as he pushed himself off the desk, and walked calmly back towards his bar cart.

"So, the old man wants me to keep passing information to you, does he? I wasn't planning on staying involved in this. I was only paying him back for a favor he did for me long ago." Fujin shrugged at that, and crossed her arms over her chest.

"Well, we're here in an undercover capacity to gather intel on the threat posed by this alleged sorceress. Naturally, your continued involvement is what Cid's asking for."

"Alleged sorceress." Caraway chuckled at that, knocked back his drink with ease as he crossed the room, and set the glass down on his desk again. "I don't think you have a full grasp of what's going on here."

"Well, if any of us knew what was going on we wouldn't be here." Fujin tried to be firm, but she was convinced it sounded more like a plea with the slight nervous wobble in her voice. "Will you cooperate with us? Because if you're in, we should speed this conversation up. We need to designate
a drop location for communication, among other things."

"I guess I don't have a choice, do I? Galbadia is my home—*my country*. As long as I'm in charge of the military, I'm duty bound to protect her. From a sorceress, or even from our own president." Caraway sighed and crossed his arms over his chest. "And unlike Kramer, *I fought in the Great War*. I watched countless soldiers die at the hands of a sorceress. I'm also honor bound to preserve their memory, and I'll beat one back again if I have to."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that." The passion in Caraway's eyes as he spoke of protecting his country and honoring his men sparked a resemblance to Seifer and his grand dream: to be *devoted* to something that gave him purpose. He'd told her that night on the boat, as they were tucked snugly under the covers, that it was *her* that he was devoted to. But looking at Caraway now, his eyes full of fire … Fujin wasn't sure she how *she* could be what Seifer was dreaming of.

"Tell Cid that I'll do it. It's good timing—Vinzer's working on orchestrating a state dinner next month with Sorceress Edea as the guest of honor. There were rumblings among the senior staff that his continued public hosting of such a high-profile guest would give people the wrong impression." Caraway scrutinized Fujin's face as he spoke; it made her feel uneasy. "I'll offer him Caraway Mansion as a venue to see if I can get myself on the guest list. As for a drop location … there's a door leading to a maintenance room inside Deling's Gateway, and a utility ladder inside that leads to the next floor. If I leave you anything, it'll be taped to the bottom of the control panel you'll find there.

"Thank you—I'll let Cid know." Fujin paused, her brow furrowing at the new information Caraway had casually supplied her with. "Sorceress Edea, you said?" Caraway continued to examine her face, leaving her question unanswered.

"Funny that Cid didn't mention it..." He mused, as looked at her with new interest. "Was I right about Pandemona, then?"

"You were." Fujin replied flatly, her throat feeling tight with nervousness at the prospect of discussing this with him. *Why did she confirm it for him so quickly?* "I'd appreciate it if you didn't mention it to anyone, and Cid has requested the same." Caraway nodded and pushed himself from his desk again.

"Of course he did." He stopped in front of her, just an arm's length away. "I won't speak on it, and I expect the same regarding my role in all of this should anything go south … if we're going to work together, I need to trust you."

"Of course," Fujin nodded emphatically and extended a pale hand to him. "You have my word."

"Good." Caraway gripped her hand back in a firm shake. "Now in the name of *trust*, I'm going to tell you something Cid should've told you before he sent you here to me."

"Only if it's need-to-know. I'm sure Cid would've—"

"The Sorceress's name is Edea Kramer. She's Cid Kramer's wife."

Fujin suddenly found herself inert in front of General Caraway, the feeling of darkness creeping back up on her now without Seifer there to shine on her like a beacon—dumbstruck and slack-jawed as her words failed her. She'd strived all night to be a consummate professional; to ignore Seifer as he worked Rinoa, and to push aside the physical pain she was in. *But this information?* She felt like a fledgling, sent to do the task of much braver men. *Surely Cid had made a mistake ...*
"I don't mean to alarm you." Caraway's expression softened at her clear surprise as he placed his hand on her shoulder. "But I thought you should know. I'm not sure not everything is as it appears."

"General?" The creaking of Caraway's opening office door and Rinoa's voice echoed into the room, stopping Fujin from asking any more questions. Caraway's hand fell away from Fujin with haste before his daughter caught a glimpse of it. "Sorry to interrupt … Seifer and Raijin say they need to get going—they all have things to do tomorrow."

"Of course," Caraway marched past Fujin towards the bookcase, as Rinoa entered the room and crossed her hands behind her back, standing in wait while rocking on the balls of her feet.

"Which ones are you borrowing?" She smiled warmly at Fujin, who fumbled her words as she searched for a response.

"We settled on the old para-magic manuscripts." Caraway worked on pulling the books from shelf, filling the silence that Fujin couldn't. Rinoa made a face and mouthed a quiet 'wow' to Fujin, to indicate it was something of an occasion.

"I'm surprised you're letting those out of the house," Rinoa opened the door wide to urge an exit as she continued to prod her father. "I don't think they've seen the light of day since they were written."

"Now, now—don't make the girl more nervous to take them than she already is." Caraway jerked his head at Fujin as he tried to rationalize the look of shock on her face. "But … yes, please do be careful with them."

Rinoa playfully stuck her tongue out at him as his back was turned, and then winked deviously at Fujin, glad that her teasing had the impact that she wanted—making the General nervous.

"Maybe you and your friends could arrange to come back and have dinner with Rinoa and I again, so we can sit and chat about them. I'll let you kids work out the details." He pivoted in their direction and placed the books in Fujin's arms, and nudging her out of his office door with Rinoa close behind. "Let's get you all headed home."

Fujin was subdued as Seifer and Raijin said their goodbyes for the evening. She only offered a quiet thank you for the books and a weak handshake, barely noticing when Rinoa stole a tight hug from Seifer and kissed him on the cheek as the General walked away. Rinoa gushed about how lovely it was to spend more time with her, and Fujin actually felt a little badly that she couldn't even feign gratitude for the poor girl. Cid's omission was weighing heavily on her, and the memory of that strange dark feeling was still sunk deep within her; existing somewhere between the gale in her head and the soreness of her body. *Language had never failed her more miserably than it did tonight*—the General held her hand through that entire fucking meeting, and she couldn't even describe to herself what was going on with her…there didn't seem to be enough words to capture it.

The only clear thought she had was how she wished she wasn't doing this right now, and how much she wished Seifer were in charge, instead of her. *Maybe he'd been right … maybe he should be worried about her being in SeeD.*

"Well *that* was interesting," Seifer yawned as he rubbed his eyes, his voice heavy with sarcasm as he led them down the mansion walkway towards the city again. Fujin barely noticed when Rinoa stole a tight hug from Seifer and kissed him on the cheek as he tried to rationalize the look of shock on her face. "But … yes, please do be careful with them."

"No, he doesn't," Fujin agreed, comforted by feeling him next to her again. "But he's going to
"Good, ya know. Maybe we can get more free steak." Raijin turned to grin at her as they made their way toward main street.

"Everything go okay in there?" Seifer arched an eyebrow at her, his concerned tone giving away the fact that he'd rushed them out of there quickly for fear the drunken general was going to get handsy and cross a line.

"Yeah, everything went fine." She nodded, wincing as her head throbbed. "The president apparently wants to hold a dinner of some sort in the sorceress' honor within the next month. Caraway's going to try to host it at the mansion and see if he can't get some more intel for us."

"Perfect," Raijin waved to a bus as it stopped to allow them to cross the street. "Maybe we can just get him to do all the work for us."

"Something tells me it won't be that easy," she mused, as she tilted her face up to meet Seifer's gaze. "We picked a drop location, too. Inside the Deling Gateway." She was lucky that she didn't need to rely on language for Seifer to understand her; he read the signal quickly and easily, without a moment of hesitation.

"Hey, Raijin … Fuu and I are going to go for a walk and check out the drop location. Cool if we meet you back at the hotel?" The three of them stopped once they reached the other side of the street, as Raijin worked through the shock of being asked if it would be cool if they left him alone—Seifer rarely asked for anything, and the gesture wasn't lost on their bronze friend.

"Sure, no problem. I'm bushed anyway … probably all that food." He stretched and yawned, adding physicality into his statement to further emphasize just how okay with it he was.

"Yeah, probably a solid guess," Seifer chuckled, and reached out to clap Raijin's shoulder. "We'll be back in a bit."

"Sounds good, ya know. See ya later Fuu-sama." She handed Caraways books off to him, and gave him a silent nod and a small smile before he walked away.

"Okay Fuu, you've sufficiently peaked my curiosity today." Seifer nudged her in the opposite direction of Raijin, so they could make their way to Deling's Gateway. "Let's get there so we have a quiet place to talk."

"So this is the drop location?" Seifer's ran his hand along the wall in search of a light switch, underwhelmed when he flicked it on and the bulb hanging above them flickered awake, the energy bouncing against the glass with a dull burn. "Not very brilliant of him, considering there's nowhere to hide anything." He felt Fujin push past him, her slight body barely causing a disturbance as she slipped under his arm and through the door.

"There." She pointed at a rickety ladder mounted on the wall leading to another floor. "He said we'd need to climb a utility ladder to reach the right floor."

Seifer strode towards the ladder with her, his long legs helping him arrive first. He gripped one of the rungs and gave it a good shake to assess its safety.

"It'll hold." He smirked as he motioned for her to climb. "Ladies first." Fujin narrowed her eyes at him, but followed his command and walked over to ready for the ascent.
"Hope you're ready to catch me if this thing falls..." Fujin let out a groaned as she lifted her weight off the ground, her foot slipping a little on the bottom rung. "Or if I just happen to slip off ... I'm pretty tired."

"Well, that's why I'm letting you go first. So I can spot you." He cocked his head to the side as he watched her steady herself and rise up a few more rungs, his hand floating just behind her as he reluctantly let her climb. "That and the view." Fujin's faint sound of disapproval echoed into the room above them.

In truth, Seifer was letting her go first because he was genuinely worried about her—**why not be there, just in case she slipped?** She'd become progressively more tired as the evening at Caraway's wore on, and more distant, which he supposed was expected considering the state he'd found her in at the hotel. But seeing her **struggle** like this was rare. Fujin was small but she was a warrior—**a damn good one at that**—and she could take more pain than the average person. The last time Seifer could remember seeing her this weak was when Raijin found that blasted sub floor of Garden, and they wound up getting in over their heads with a Tri-Face. Fujin, who wasn't junctioning any protective magic in at the time, got hit with a pretty powerful flare spell—Raijin had only barely saved her, and even then she'd been covered with terrible burns. When Seifer heard the news he marched directly to the infirmary to make sure Fujin was okay, and then forced Raijin to show him the scene of the crime before their access was revoked. When they reached the subfloor, their bronze friend offered to stay and help, but Seifer refused as he loaded his gunblade in a flurry of blind range. **You've done enough,** he'd replied, which in retrospect he realized was wildly unfair. Seifer had startled Fujin hours later when she opened her eyes for the first time since the attack, and found him asleep at her bedside covered in blood. **He'd murdered every single fucking one of those creatures,** withdrawing the magic from each as they drew their last breaths. He willed the new supply of spells over to her the next day, after Kadowaki's cures started to take effect. He made her junction the flare spells specifically to inoculate her a from fire damage. **We're not going to let you burn up like that again,** he'd said as he glared at Raijin, who was asleep in a chair on the other side of the room. **It wasn't his fault,** Fujin replied wearily, **I wasn't prepared for it. My fault. My responsibility. Not his.**

"Speaking of views," she said as she lifted herself onto the platform above them, "there's a little window up here—you can see the whole city."

"Really? That sounds a fuck of a lot better than this floor. I'm right behind you." Seifer pulled himself onto the metal ladder, freezing for a moment when it creaked under his weight. Fujin's silver head popped back into view above him as a gentle smile snuck onto her face.

"Regretting your choice to come up last?"

"Have you seen your ass?" Seifer shook his head at her as he climbed upwards, the ladder continuing to creak under his much larger frame. **"It's a nice view. Worth breaking a bone or two over..."** He looked up at just the right moment to catch her rolling her eyes, still with a small smile on her face, as she disappeared from his sight again. **"Besides, I'm supposed to catch you, anyway ... not the other way around."**

"Is that so?" Fujin yelled down to him. Seifer could hear her tinkering with something she'd found up there, not waiting for him to join her. He made it to the top rung and hoisted himself up, his eyes landing on the view of Deling through the small window she'd mentioned. The city was lit up with pink and gold neon, flashing steaks of color into the night sky.

"Wow. Would you look at that." Seifer spun around to see if she was marveling at the bright city lights along with him, but instead found her inspecting a control panel on the wall just past the
ladder. "What's that do, make the Gateway self destruct?"

"I don't know … not planning on finding out." Fujin ran her hand along the bottom of the control panel, nodding as her fingers measured the space underneath it. "This is the spot—we'll have to come back and check it regularly…especially if we haven't been able to see him for a while. We probably should've brought Raijin so he could know where it is, too." Seifer frowned at that, crossing his arms over his chest and leaning against the wall with Deling at his back.

"So … you gonna make me ask?" He watched her as she continued to inspect the control panel, oblivious to his gaze and to the meaning behind his question.

"Ask what?" Fujin muttered distantly as she finished her thorough scan of the control panel before standing up to look at him, shrugging. Seifer chuckled in disbelief at her cluelessness, as he held out his hand and motioned with his fingers for her to come close.

"Ask you to come over here—that's what." He watched her as she blinked a few times, his request taking a minute to sink in. Fujin's hand flew to her forehead and she hurriedly walked towards him as she rubbed her eyes.

"Sorry, my mind's all over the place tonight." Fujin stopped in front of him and placed one hand on his chest, gripped the collar of his coat with the other—there was something desperate about the action that both made him worry, but that also made his skin tingle.

"That's alright—I don't need your mind for this." Seifer smirked and leaned down to capture her lips in a deep kiss, his hand cradling her face.

"Say, is that thing in your arm working yet?" Seifer pulled away from her, breathless, as he gripped for her hip and pulled her close.

"Not yet—not for a few more days." He made a playful groaning sound at that.

"Well if you feel better tomorrow we should come back here prepared." He expertly tucked her hair behind her ear and wiggled his eyebrows at her. "You and me, right here—the whole city of Deling lit up behind us. Let's definitely come back tomorrow," he added again with a smirk as less of a suggestion and more of a firm plan.

"Ugh, I think the other day was a mistake—I've made you an exhibitionist." Fujin smiled and pressed her hand to his chest.

"You've made me into a lot of things." He leaned back to get a full view of her face. "A better fighter, a better friend … a better man. And yeah, a little bit of a fiend, too."

"You're giving me too much credit. You were a fiend before all this."

"Not true. I was a saint before you." Seifer smirked as he took a moment to conduct a thorough scan of her body without trying to hide it in the slightest. What a nice change, to be able to look freely now instead of all those pained stolen glances he'd taken over the years—the ones where he couldn't really quiet get a good idea of what she looked like because he always had to look away before she'd catch him.

"Hardly." Fujin scoffed, leaning away from him. "I think you're forgetting just how much I've seen over the years." A husky laughter emerged from the pit of Seifer's stomach as he pulled her back into his orbit, his knee between her legs and his arms crossed steadfastly around her waist.

"Okay, so that's a hard sell. I'm not a saint." He smirked up at her as he pulled her tightly against
"But I'm pretty sure a saint would bore you to tears."

"I'm pretty sure anyone but you would."

"I hope so," Seifer laced his fingers together behind her, locking her in place as he pressing his lips to hers once more. "Well, now that I've got you here as a captive audience … how was tonight for you? I tried my best to keep it … tolerable." He didn't want to say her name when they were alone together—it seemed especially cruel to put her through that after bearing witness to the spectacle, even though he'd tried his best to keep Rinoa at a distance.

"It was fine … thanks, for asking though." Fujin replied, unconvincingly, as she looked down at her hands to inspect her fingernails. She changed the subject quickly. "Caraway was tricky to manage though."

"Yeah. I wasn't impressed with some of the shit that came outta his mouth … it was hard to keep a lid on it when you guys walked away."

"What, were you jealous?"

"Jealous? Of old General Caraway?" Seifer rolled his eyes and Fujin managed a tired smile. "Fine, but I mean come on … did he really need to tell you to call him Caraway? You wanna know what he told me when we left and I called him Caraway?"

"What?" She asked, tilting her head up at him. Seifer felt warm at the soft tone of her voice and the feeling of her hand against him as she fiddled with the necklace he was wearing.

"He told me to call him General Caraway. Fucking prick."

"Ha," Fujin chuckled. "I guess I missed that."

"Yep, apparently I'm not his favorite person anymore."

"I don't care if he hates all of us, I'm just glad he's going to cooperate. It makes things easier." Her eyes darted away from him again as she continued to fidget with his necklace. "Nothing's really easy though. I have so much to tell you..." Fujin shook her head and stared off into the distance.

"Good, because I have a lot of questions, Fuu." She nodded at that, and looked up into his eyes. "Go ahead," she made a knowing motion with her hand. "I don't have the energy to protest, even if I wanted to. Ask away."

"Well, for starters … what the hell did I walk in on at the hotel today?" Seifer adjusted his position at the window, allowing some of the light his body was blocking to spill into the room and illuminate her face. "Because when I got back you just about gave me a heart attack with how still you were, and then with how sick you seemed. And don't tell me it was a flu, or a drink …" He tried to keep his tone even and not let his irritation at being lied to sneak in—he had to be mindful that their dynamic had changed in more ways than just one.

"It was the wind." Fujin admitted freely, her gaze uncoupling from his as she looked past and out at the late evening sky. "There was another event, the day you guys left for Timber. I was in the library and it came back … and I heard this voice but none of the words made sense. It knocked me out … I've been in bed for days, exhausted and with these crazy muscle aches. I should've told—"

"You're damn right you should've told me."
Well, that hadn't exactly been his best effort.

"I'm sorry. I knew you'd come back if I did, regardless of what I ordered you to do."

"Of course I would have," he snapped again without really meaning to. He clenched his eyes shut and tried to focus before speaking again. "Fujin, I appreciate what you're doing, I really do—but we don't need to get into SeeD this way. You don't have to do this for us."

"It's already done." Fujin leaned away from him to distance herself from his wrath. "Besides, we didn't really have a choice. Cid would've sent us anyway." Seifer snapped his head up at that comment, panic reverberating through him at the thought of Fujin still not seeming to understand.

"Hey, look at me—right now, dammit." Fujin's eyes shot up to meet his gaze instantly—an action deeply engrained in her after years of obeying his every order. Lately, Seifer was wishing he'd noticed things had gotten this bad … that she would jump to attention and cater to him every time. He would've put a stop to it long ago. "You always have a choice, Fujin. Don't you ever put yourself in a dangerous position because you don't think you're allowed to choose yourself." He locked his jaw as he tried to ratchet down his anger. He wasn't mad at her—he was just pissed that Fujin never learned it was okay to put her own survival above everyone else's. And that he was partially to blame for that…

"If you're ever in danger, you promise me that you'll put yourself first. Whether that means calling me back from Timber … or disappointing me…whatever it is. I mean it Fujin. I can't ever walk in on something like I did at the hotel again and think …" His throat became tight, unable to finish the words.

"Seifer, I—"

"Don't." He held out a hand to silence her excuse. "Just promise."

"Okay." She said in a hurry, put off by the tight sound of his voice as intense anger bubbled behind it, no matter how much he tried to push it down "I promise."

When Seifer was finally able to beat back his rage, he once again broke the silence that settled between them. "What else happened?"

"Not much more …" Fujin spoke softly, still rattled by Seifer's display of emotion—he was sure she'd caught him getting a little misty-eyed at the thought of losing her. "I've just been having these crazy dreams—fever dreams, you know." Fujin glared over at that casually as she continued her storytelling. "And then when we saw the sorceress today … I felt something. I'm having a hard time describing it …" His throat became tight, unable to finish the words.

"Tell me anyway." Fujin seemed surprised at the request—that he was waiting for an explanation, and wasn't so furious with her for hiding more that he was going to storm off like he normally would. He wasn't mad at her anyway. None of it was her fault, he thought to himself as she leaned in to press her cheek against his chest—he was pretty sure she was incapable of doing wrong.

"I felt …" she began, shaking her head at her inability to describe it, as if she didn't believe it could be true herself. "I don't have the words. It felt like the end … and the beginning … like this space between life and death … I don't know. That sounds crazy, doesn't it?"

"Everything sounds crazy lately." Yes, it did sound fucking crazy. Seifer rolled the word death around in his head—it had come up too many times for his liking over the past couple of weeks. "Did the feeling go away when she left?"
"Yes … and no. I don't think I can ever forget it." Seifer pulled back from her so he could see her eyes again.

"Fujin, I won't lie to you—I think that sounds pretty fucking dangerous." Seifer felt her ribs expand and contract as she let out a heavy sigh. "We need to call Garden. We need to get in touch with Cid, and tell him about what's going on with you and get you out of here. Raijin and I can stay behind if you want, but you shouldn't be here."

"I still have so much to tell you, and I'm too tired to get to it all tonight." Fujin shook her head, and reached up to touch his cheek. "But out of everything we should go over, you need to know that we can't call Garden right now."

"What? Why?" Seifer face scrunched in confusion.

"It's Cid … he hasn't been honest with us." Seifer studied her face, realizing that he'd never seen Fujin look so lost before. "Carway just told me that the sorceress' name is Edea Kramer. She's Cid Kramer's wife."

Well, shit. Not being honest was an understatement.
His mouth felt dry.

There were definitely other things he should be focusing on, but right now his tongue was as dry as a fucking desert. It had been that way all evening—like he'd fallen face-first and wide-mouthed at the beach. Which was surprising, given the volume of water he'd had at Caraway's to keep his hands, and his mouth, occupied. It lessened the chances of Rinoa going after either of them, and helped keep him from going after Caraway with any pointed barbs.

Seifer thought he managed to quench his thirst just before they left the mansion, when Caraway and Fujin reemerged from the General's study with Rinoa in tow. He'd refilled his glass from the pitcher of water left on the table—laced with lavender and mint, which Seifer could've done without—and took a big swig as the three of them entered the dining room; Rinoa jovial, Caraway victorious, and Fujin looking like she'd seen a ghost. Seifer had been wondering what was taking so long, running a multitude of scenarios through his head that all ended with Fujin being overpowered in one way or another by the great general of the Galbadian army. He drank the water fast to stop his lips from asking what happened right then and there—a task that ended with a rogue mint leaf getting stuck in his throat.

The chest rattling cough that Seifer expelled to dislodge the thing was read by Caraway as a reaction. He smiled smugly, his hand placed firmly in the middle of Fujin's back as he ushered her towards the dining room. His eyes reflected a wordless threat that Seifer was sure only two men could understand, spoken through the language of control and power: you thought you could get to the core of me easily, but I can just as easily get to the heart of you; tread lightly. Seifer took another sip of water to wash the mint leaf down before standing abruptly to intercept her and put distance between the two of them. He hated that Caraway saw it—Seifer hadn't touched Fujin all night, had barely looked at her, and yet the man still saw it.

Considering the relief he'd felt to get her back under his wing though, he supposed it was fairly obvious. His heart stopped racing, his thirst was forgotten—he realized he'd been sweating when they finally made it outside and the cool summer breeze met the thin film of wetness that covered his skin; a nervous sweat—now that was a first.

But now that that Fujin was standing here in front of him revealing that their mission just got a fuck of a lot more complicated, his mouth felt like it was full of sand all over again. It was an unpleasant feeling, coupled with anxiety a whole host of emotions he wasn't used to—fucking awful feelings. Seifer often heard stories about SeeDs who were rendered motionless by fear in the heat of a fight; they were decommissioned and sent off with nothing but a one-way ticket to see a shrink in Deling and a letter thanking them for their service. It always baffled him to think that they allowed fear in, and worse: that they allowed it to be powerful enough to control them. As he worked his tongue against the roof of his mouth to generate the dampness it needed to speak, he thought he might just understand them a little better now.

"What do you mean, Cid's wife is the sorceress?" Seifer shook his head, throwing her hand from his face in in the process. "Are you telling me that he sent us out here to spy on his wife?"

"I don't know." Fujin's gaze fell to his chest, her lips curving downward into a frown at the feeling of being shook free of him. "Caraway asked me if he'd been right about Pandemona, and then he told me that—"

"Wait a minute." He crossed his arms over his chest, hunching to get closer to eye-level with her.
"What'd you tell him?" The question triggered something in Fujin, her eyes narrowing and her chest heaving, as if for the very first time she realized she'd made a mistake.

"Fujin." Seifer commanded, not asking the question again.

"I … I told him he was right."

"Fuck." Seifer muttered. He turned his back to her and bit his cheek lightly, taking the liberty to roll his eyes while she couldn't witness it. His hand flew up absentmindedly to rub at the muscles of his neck, which were still sore from that tense training session with Raijin all those days ago. "So he knows about you for sure now, too."

"I didn't give him any details." Fujin's voice responded with a hint of desperate panic as she scrambled to make sense of her action.

"He doesn't need details Fuu. This is an information war and you just told him you've got a sorceress in your head—that's a fucking gold mine." Seifer sighed and placed his hand on the concrete window ledge, resting some of his weight against it. "Son of a bitch. That's exactly why he pulled you aside."

"It didn't seem like a play. It was too organic." Her voice rang out behind him, unsteady and unsure. "He almost seemed concerned. Almost—"

"What? Fatherly? With just a hint of old letch?" Seifer spun around and leaned back against the wall again—it came out a little cruder than he'd meant for it to. "C'mon Fuu, it's a pretty transparent move. You're an orphan. You're vulnerable because of this stuff with your family and this stupid fucking shit with Rinoa."

"I didn't realize it was that obvious …" She whispered, her eyes fixed on the floor. "I thought I was doing a better job at hiding that."

And normally, Fujin did do a good job at hiding things—there were so many things Seifer was still learning about her because of that. She kept things close to the vest, even with the closest of friends; she wasn't remotely like all the other girls he'd been interested in over the years, who had shallow interests and inner lives. Maybe Seifer was giving himself too much credit, but he always thought he could look at those girls and know exactly what was going on behind their eyes—he felt like he knew everything about them in a day's time. But Fujin … he'd known her for the better part of a decade and he was still discovering things about her. He always secretly prided himself on being the one she allowed to know her most, though—even before this relationship of theirs started. He knew how she liked her coffee, and that spiders made her skin crawl. He knew all the Raijin-isms that drove her up the wall … and he knew how to get Raijin to use those Raijin-isms when he wanted to have a go at her, and add some excitement to the trio's day.

Most of all, he knew that she was a master of secrecy. Ever since that day they were kids—right around 10 years old—and a badly aimed tennis ball he threw broke a model pirate ship that Raijin had spent countless hours painstakingly assembling. Fujin pretended not to see it, and didn't breathe a word about who was guilty of the crime when Raijin discovered the ship's demise. After that, Seifer that if he ever murdered someone on a whim, Fujin was the one he'd choose to help him bury the body and destroy the evidence. He could count on her to easily transition from committing the deed to casually sitting and having a slice of pizza with him afterward, never speaking on it again unless he asked her to. Her penchant for keeping things siloed made her a great accomplice.

… He couldn't say one way or another if it made her a great leader; that was still being bore out. Right hand to the gods, he believed she could do anything she put her mind to. But she was her own
worst enemy—a thing the two of them had in common.

Fujin didn't like trusting people with information, and when she did choose to share, she apparently tended to make the wrong choices. Take this mission, for example—because it was recent, relevant, and the only fucking example he had. Seifer was bewildered by how she'd decided not to tell him she'd been experiencing more symptoms—which apparently culminated in some sort've three-day near-death experience—in the name of keeping the mission on track. Yet, she told Caraway about her sorceress affliction without thinking about the consequences. She told Seifer this news about Cid Kramer's wife being the sorceress without hesitation; as if he wasn't going to insist that they immediately return to the hotel, pack up their shit, and take the first train back to Balamb. No way were they getting involved in some marital spat and risking their lives in the process. No way was he going to let her risk her life for Cid, who couldn't even manage to tell them the truth. A piece of paper signed by the Balamb administration might've decreed her "leader" of this little voyage, but that didn't mean she knew how to make the choices that were fucking right.

So, there it was—the hard truth he'd been trying to bury ever since they'd exchanged words outside the Dollet bar. Seifer did believe that Fujin could do anything she set her mind to … unless it contradicted what he thought was best.

It wasn't fair, and Seifer knew it—he knew it made him an asshole to feel so sure about it. But he thought it all the same; he couldn't stop himself. Did his deep appreciation for her depth of character make up for the fact that he wasn't truly following her lead? Was the sordid truth made any less terrible, in part, because of how he felt about her? Because right hand to the gods, he fucking loved her.

"C'mere," Seifer spoke plainly, his hands slicking her hair from her face and sliding down to rest on the back of her neck, his thumbs stretching out to touch her earlobes. It was a deliberate action used to subdue her; a tactic masquerading as tender gesture, meant to assert his dominance. It was one of the many things that Garden taught them—manipulation using the mind and body to gain the upper hand. "We need to get out of this, Fujin. With the sorceress being Cid's wife, it's getting too complicated. Caraway officially knows about you now, and I don't think it puts us in a good spot. Maybe we were fine before, but now…"

"Maybe you're right." She admitted as she closed her eyes—the lights of the city casting a pink glow on her pale skin. A bell tolling in the distance marked the dawn of a new hour. "There are too many threads here and I can't figure out what it means. And you're right, this thing with Rinoa is … difficult. And now with Cid… I don't know, Seif. Maybe I'm not ready for this."

The slight tremor in her voice made him take pause—his hands suddenly feeling like volatile instruments. He wondered what it said about him, that at the first opportunity to show her some support, he went and undercut her instead. He wanted to make her better, like she made him … not make her doubt herself. And here she stood, blind in his grasp, not even suspecting that he'd just been trying to get his way.

Fuck. She looked beautiful standing there in that pink light—it compounded the guilt he felt for using his training on her, and for making her question herself.

Seifer cleared his throat, removed one of his hands from its position at her neck to stroke her hair a few more times, and wrapped up his internal struggle quickly, before he changed his mind. He reached down to lift her chin with a couple of sure fingers.

"I didn't say you weren't ready for this." Fujin opened her eyes—the lights of the city reflecting back at him. "I'm … just a little shell shocked. Hell, maybe I'm jumping the gun here."
"But you just said—"

"I know what I said." Seifer cut her off, and tried to put some distance between them, knowing now that letting her lean on him both metaphorically and physically in this moment wasn't helping her be strong. He nudged her away from him, not quite at arm's length—not so much that it would make her feel rejected, but enough to encourage her to stand on her own.

"It's late and we're both tired. All I want is for you to be safe. I'm prioritizing that over everything, I think." The words came up hard—he hated the taste of choking down his own pride … but he hated the taste of injustice towards Fujin just a little bit more.

Fujin nodded as she looked away from him and scuffed the floor with her boot. She looked fragile when she did it—breakable, like glass. Mortal, like that time she'd been burned.

"Caraway made me feel unprepared tonight," she whispered as she started down at her own hands. "And I think he knew it."

"Of course he did," Seifer agreed. He was going to support her, but he wasn't going to flat out lie to her. He put his hands in his pockets so he wouldn't instinctively grasp for her to try and make her feel better. "He's the leader of the Galbadian military—you don't get there by chance."

"True," Fujin mused, her body half-turned from him now as she pretended to inspect the room again, needing something to keep herself busy. "I just felt … like I was playing soldier, you know? I wish he'd just taken the bait and talked to you."

"I'm glad he didn't," Seifer replied, honestly. "If I'd talked to him, I would've blown up at him and ruined everything. At least we have options now. And speaking of that …" He pushed himself off the wall, his hands still in his pockets—he couldn't put them on her again on his own accord yet, knowing that he'd just used them against her. "Can I recommend that we shelve this for the night, and reconvene on it tomorrow? We can get our heads clear, come up with a plan. Hell, we can even talk it out with Raijin tomorrow too … a slightly more neutral party, maybe."

"Raijin." Fujin's tired eyes snapped up to meet his, mustering look of panic as she remembered the brief conversation they'd had when Seifer came home from Timber. "You mentioned earlier …"

"We don't need to talk about that." Seifer freed one of his hands to wave her off. He'd hoped she'd forgotten about that. In the grand scheme of things, with all this happening around them, it seemed petty to dwell on it now. "I'm not entitled to all your secrets." He wanted to know them all, but knew he wasn't owed them.

"I know, but all the same …" Fujin grabbed his hand and stepped closer to him—her touch ending the silent struggle he was having with himself. "I hope you know that was one-sided. I didn't tell you because I didn't want him to be embarrassed."

"Well, the sheer volume of photos he took of you was pretty embarrassing already. Not sure it could get any worse."

"So that's how you found out. I imagined some sort've nightmare scenario where you two of you talked. Raijin confessing, or something," Seifer shook his head at her, thinking again of that model pirate ship of Raijin's he broke all those years ago, and how it was high time he and Raijin had a few more secrets of their own.

"Nope, he hasn't said a word. Hell, he's been sleeping with a lot of women. He's probably over it by now."
"I hope so," she frowned, and reached to pull his other hand from his pocket so she could grasp them both. She ran her fingers along his palms, before lacing them with his. "It felt awful, doing that to him."

"Well, then let's stop talking about that too. It's been a bad day already. We don't need to make it worse for no reason, eh?" Seifer bowed his head sheepishly before continuing—both of them unable to look at each other. "Sorry, for giving you a hard time."

"You didn't say anything I wasn't already thinking," Fujin sighed, squeezing his hands.

"All the same … I don't wanna make it worse." He tugged at her gently, drawing her closer to place a firm kiss on her forehead. "Let's get back to the hotel; get some sleep." Fujin nodded, letting him slip away to begin the climb down the ladder first.

As Seifer watched her descend, his feet now firmly planted back on the first floor of the Gateway, he felt the ache of incompleteness—this whole thing was very much out of his grasp, and he wasn't sure what to do if he couldn't bring it to a resolution for her. That was probably what being supportive was—being there for someone no matter what they chose, no matter how things turned out, no matter how it made you feel.

When she was within reach, Seifer resisted the urge to let his hand hover behind her or to grab her by the waist and lift her from the rungs himself—not just to speed up her arrival, but because his first instinct that she was safer in his hands. But after what he'd done earlier … he wasn't so sure anymore.

The whining creak of slow wheeling drawers and the rustling of clothes roused him from his sleep. Seifer rolled to his side, his heavy eyelids lifting just enough to catch Raijin stretching a t-shirt over his head. His brown short-shorn hair was a little mussed, sticking up in uncommon places like he'd been tossing and turning all night.

Seifer watched as Raijin sat down on the foot of his bed slowly, careful not to make any noise that would wake his friends up, and began to stretch on a pair of running shoes with a gentle touch. He raised both of his bronze hands to his face, running his fingertips along the soft skin under his eyes and shaking his head a little as he tried to use the movement to bring his still asleep brain to the new day.

He pivoted towards Seifer and Fujin, letting out a small yawn as his eyes fell on them. Seifer's wakefulness went undetected as a small wistful smile appeared on Raijin's lips. His chest heaved with a quiet sigh, and then he stood to exit the room, closing the door quietly behind him.

The color of the dull orange sunlight shining into the room told Seifer that the hour was early—far earlier than Raijin usually woke up. In all the years that they'd known each other, Seifer had never seen Raijin go out for a run at the crack of dawn voluntarily. The only member of their trio that did that was Fujin, and she'd barely been able to coax either of them out of bed to join her—maybe once or twice. This must really be eating at him…

Seifer arched his hips to roll onto his back, throwing his arm out and dragging Fujin closer to him, the disturbance waking her up…which he'd selfishly intended to do.

"Mmmm," a scratchy, sleepy sound emitted from her throat as she pressed his face into the crook of his neck. "What time is it?"

"Not sure … early. The sun's just coming up." He kissed the top of her head as he gazed out the
window to assess the shade of the sunlight. "Raijin just left…I think he went for a run."

"A run? At dawn?" Fujin croaked, as she snaked an arm over Seifer in kind, her fingers lazily sliding over the muscles on his stomach. Neither one of them addressed Raijin's behavior any further—they both knew someone needed to talk to him, and they both knew who it should be; no need to discuss the uncomfortable topic amongst themselves.

"I was thinking …" Seifer moved his hand upward to tuck her hair behind her ear. He liked how quiet this was—just the two of them in the dim light of the morning. He could get used to this. "Wanna get outta here today? Maybe drive to the coast … see the ocean. Just you and me."

"You don't have plans to meet with Rinoa?" Fujin tilted her face up to him and raised a pale eyebrow.

"Not until later, and even that's just going to be quick—she wanted to show me some antique weapons store in the shopping district. I'm going to keep that short."

"And Raijin?"

"We'll leave him a note." Seifer shimmied onto his side to look into her eyes. "You'll be seeing him later anyway, right? Besides, it might do him some good not to see us for a day. Plus, we can talk through some stuff with the mission, if you want. Or you can talk and I'll try to listen." Fujin smiled softly at him as he moved his hand to her face. His finger reached out to touch that eyebrow of hers, mystified by its graceful lift.

"When do you want to leave?"

"Whenever you want." Seifer smiled back as he leaned in to kiss her.

Her mouth was soft against his—her breath smelling sweet somehow, despite just waking up. Seifer always found that he enjoyed the scent of her in general. It was a very distinct smell that drove him mad over the years; like a biological signature beckoning him, reaching out to some base part of his brain that had never evolved with the progress of mankind, and wasn't meant to. She was his match—his body had always known it.

His tongue dove deeper; he wanted to sink into her. He wanted to seek out that unique taste of hers that drove him to the edge. Hyne, Fujin probably thought he was trying to count her teeth, and he honestly couldn't say he wasn't. Seifer had been trying to quantify her these past couple of weeks—there was so still much about this side of her he didn't know, and he wanted to know it all. How long could she withstand this particular brand of sweet suffocation? How much pressure did it take to bring her to the edge? What sequence of actions did he have to take for her to make that faint humming sound that reverberated in his own throat and brought a smile to his lips, along with a different kind of pleasure—the sort that made him happy because she was happy. If only there were no problems—if only they could be alone together without the rest of the world to worry about.

"Seifer," his name escaped her lips in a breathy request as he was distracted by one of those very hums. "Lock the door."

"Why? Did you want something?" He grinned against her lips and whispered lowly. Part of him enjoying playfully feigning ignorance, and the other was enthralled by her asking to have him again, for the first time since Dollet. But her cheeks turned a deep rosy color in bright light of day—she grew timid at the prospect of vocalizing it more than she had. He laughed, pushing the blanket aside as he slid away from her and walked towards the door, twisting the interior lock with haste and then stopping at his bag to grab the necessary equipment, which was thankfully getting phased out soon.
He hurriedly shed his clothing on the walk back, joining her on the bed again—the entire odyssey taking only seconds. They hadn't slept together since they'd left Garden and he was desperate to finish mapping her out.

"Hyne, I missed this." He whispered, as he worked to help her remove her shirt. He was glad to find nothing but skin underneath, lit up bright by the breaking dawn. He relished the slowness of it, the visibility of it, and how far away it made everything else seem. But a gnawing feeling of guilt in his gut stopped his hands from moving farther. He gripped her ribs, sighing shakily.

"Fuu, you know I believe in you, right?"

"Yeah, of course." He wasn't convinced she was listening fully—her voice sounded distant. But as her hands stretched towards him and pulled at him to come closer, coaxing his own hands to move, he couldn't remember why he'd asked in the first place. He settled his body between her legs and moved to join with her … forgetting there was a world outside of that hotel room altogether.
Okay folks, this will most definitely be the last update for a little while ... possibly until May; I'm going to be busy with projects and travel, but I promise I'll pick this up. I'm also going to do a quick audit of the past three chapters and spruce them up because I know they're not at their strongest. I'm mostly just excited to move on to the next part of the story but had so much to cover before I got there ... thus the very long chapters. Anyway, hopefully this doesn't disappoint. I'll invest a little more time in making better when I can.

The weather turned quickly. Billowing clouds, gray with the weight of water, gathered in the sky to form a thin blanket over the sun. Fujin watched them in silence, her mind floating along with them as the world rotated on its axis, the sky seeming to shift in a different direction than their car was traveling—it made her dizzy.

Rivulets of rain streamed down the windshield. The force of the wind scattered them to the side in twisting streaks that spat in through the window she'd cracked; an attempt at ridding the cab of the car from the heat of breath and body that was steaming up the glass.

All signs pointed to it being a fleeting storm. The sun shining through the rain made her confident it would clear within the hour. But a frown formed on Seifer's statuesque face at the prospect of it ruining their seaside day trip. He thrived in warmth and sunlight, and valued the opportunity it gave him to get things done. Most people wouldn't know it, but Seifer was very goal oriented, it's just that his goals just weren't always grounded in realism … which often meant that when he didn't meet them his temper took hold. She supposed there were some things people never grew out of.

He'd been intent on sitting outside in the fresh air with her and having a conversation, away from the hotel where they didn't have much privacy and felt guilty for requesting it. At the moment, he was probably thinking he could make due with parking on a bluff somewhere and watching the sea from the front seat of the car. But Seifer always doubled-down on things, even when the outlook wasn't good. It was more likely they'd sit outside in the rain anyway and he'd begrudgingly bear with it and probably hate every second of it.

Still, Seifer's disappointment at the weather was mild compared to how he'd normally be. He'd been in a fairly relaxed and carefree state after what they'd gotten up to at the hotel this morning, after Raijin left for a run and she'd found herself missing the feeling of Seifer everywhere. Of being with him and feeling alive. She'd caught him by surprise, and it wound up being unrushed and soft—the day too fresh for rigor and Seifer too pleased with the sunlight to not savor what it offered. He'd swept her up afterward, warm and sweaty and smelling of last night's sleep, and muttered a laughter laced 'well, good morning to you too,' before heading to take a quick shower. It was the stuff of dreams—things she used to imagine, and never thought would be real …

Unlike Seifer, Fujin loved rainy days. The soft light from an overcast sky was much gentler on her eyes and skin than the burning sun, which was too much for her to bear sometimes. A summer day
was something she'd learned to love over time through him, not something she inherently chose to love. Raijin, on the other hand, was a bit like the both of them—loved the sun and rainy days, though Fujin always knew he was more relaxed on rainy days spent with her over the years than their summer beach excursions with Seifer. Raijin told her once under the cone of silence that Seifer's constant showboating drove him crazy—a comment he took back later that same day after suffering a harsh glare from Fujin, who didn't need him to vocalize it anyway; she felt Raijin's displeasure in the same way she could feel Seifer's … the only difference was that she paid closer attention to one than the other.

As Raijin popped into her mind, Fujin couldn't help but feel a little badly for leaving him behind without warning today. She and Seifer had been wrapped up in themselves and hadn't been very good friends to him lately, but Seifer seemed to need the freedom to not take it into consideration today—a relationship need, and a not a friendship need. So she complied with his grand scheme of sneaking off in the early morning without showing her hesitation. As they drove along the winding road towards the Galbadian coast, she couldn't help but feel guilty and think of how much Raijin would've loved to spend time with the two of them on this little road trip, trapped in a tiny car with the oppressive steam of summer. The heat from a third body would've forced them to roll the windows down and blare their music to hear it over the storm—they'd get charged for soaking the seats of the rental car, but they wouldn't care; Garden got a discount, even when paying for breaking the rules.

The thought smacked of nostalgia, and made her yearn for when her only concerns were Seifer's too fast driving and the rank smell of Raijin's sweaty feet propped up on the dashboard. With all that was happening as of late—this thing between her and Seifer taking off and the quiet rift it created, her heritage found out, Pandemona, and Edea Kramer being revealed as the sorceress—Fujin wasn't sure the three of them could ever go back to that time at all. It slipped away from them gradually with each passing day. Though the three of them were immersed in one another's lives for years, Fujin never realized that they were growing individually all that time … she hated that it happened, and hated that she hadn't noticed it.

The warmth of a golden hand squeezing her just above the knee made her remember that good had come of it too. More than good—the thing she'd always wanted. It was hard to stay steadily angry at the loss of youth when time was what was required to usher in a new era that she was very much excited about, even as the weight of the mission kept her happiness anchored.

The mission was what was making her like this—reflective on the past and the onslaught of change they were facing. Specifically yesterday, when she saw the sorceress and that strange feeling overcame her. Despite her exhaustion, Fujin tossed and turned all night—that deep, black feeling clawing at the inside of her skull. While Seifer slept peacefully beside her on their makeshift double bed, Fujin laid flat on her back and stared up at the ceiling, thinking about death.

It wasn't exactly unique to the sorceress experience—the topic started to grace her mind more often once she passed her exam and was admitted to SeeD, when putting her life on the line had suddenly become a reality and not a training exercise. Fujin wasn't ruled by any particular faith so she supposed any of the current running theories, like her soul going to be with Hyne or resting with the old gods of war, could be plausible. But logically, if she couldn't remember there being a time before she was born, how could there be something beyond living? How could she could be here one minute, and the next just be gone?

Death was horrifying to think about, and she'd admittedly spent a couple of panicked nights in her dorm having an existential crisis this year—her own pragmatic mind causing a deep inconsolable turmoil at the fleeting fragility of life. And here she and her friends were, standing on the edge of the imaginary unknown, tilting forward and daring a strong wind to push them.
Fujin wondered if she'd been transported into some portion of that unknown space when she saw the sorceress—to that blank, dark spot where souls resided before they materialized, and then returned to in the end. She didn't get a feeling of recognition there at all—not an ancestor, any of their SeeD friends who had died on missions already—there was just nothing; not even a floor to plant her own two feet on.

Lying snug under her blankets last night, Fujin was struck by a deep grief. If that nothingness was what she thought it was, then she was forever changed—she couldn't fathom not being with Seifer and Raijin on every journey; she didn't want to be in a space where Seifer wasn't; where Seifer, and history, and memories of the world didn't exist. And then there was the other reality that her mother's own soul seemed to be trapped in a nebulous space too…

"Damn rain," Seifer scoffed from the driver's seat as they rounded a bend. He removed his hand from her leg to flick the windshield wipers up to a higher speed, sending the light rain flying from the glass in sheets. "The glass is all fucking foggy."

"That won't help. It's on the inside." Fujin leaned forward, running a finger along the glass and taking a film of moisture along with it, revealing a thin line of a clear view of the road. "Maybe roll down your window." Seifer glanced sideways at her and grimaced.

"And get wet like you are? No thanks." Fujin shrugged, and turned her attention back to her own window, her eyes following Galbadia's flat landscape and falling on a crumbling structure in the distance.

"What do you suppose that is?" She asked, rolling down her window just an inch more to get a better view.

"What?" Seifer craned his neck a little to glance out her clearer side of the windshield, and then begrudgingly reached over to roll down his own window a hair, muttering curses under his breath all the while. "Oh, that. That's the Tomb of the Unknown King. You've never seen it?"

"No," Fujin shook her head and turned towards him. "I'm surprised you know about it, though. Did you guys come out this way before heading to Timber or something?"

"Nah. I guess I forget that Raijin and I have spent a little more time roaming around Galbadia than you have." When Seifer saw evidence of his side of the windshield clearing up with the admission of some air, he rolled his window down just an inch more. "I've heard a lot of the cadets in the classes ahead of ours talk about it. They say there's an ancient GF inside of there somewhere, but that it's a pretty dangerous place to go." A devious smile formed on his lips as he nodded in the monument's direction. "Wanna go find out? Steal the spirit of a king? At least we'd be out of the rain."

"No thank you," Fujin shook her head and crossed her arms over her chest. "I have plenty of GFs as it is. I don't need another one." It was a half-truth; she was more concerned about taking the extra risk.

"Who says you'd get to keep it, huh?" The sly smile stayed in place as he reached out to tickle her ribs.

"Stop. You know I hate that." Fujin squirmed and chuckled involuntarily as she edged away from him. "And you hate GFs."

"Good point." Seifer turned his full attention back to the road as they moved closer to his intended destination—a craggy cliff at the continent's edge. The car rolled to a slow stop, the brakes emitting a low squeal as they stilled the tires in the rain. "Let's just park here for a bit, see if this clears up."
Seifer unbuckled his seatbelt and readjusted his seat to give it more of a lean, before resting a hand on her thigh again. A contented sigh escaped his chest, as his eyes settled on the rolling ocean waves in the distance.

"Now this is more like it." He squeezed her leg, his voice light with relief. "Just us. No Deling. No Caraway. No Raijin. No Rinoa. Hyne, I was starting to feel like everything was a little outta control for a minute there."

Fujin murmured in agreement and placed her hand over his, unthinking, and leaned back against the headrest of her seat, her gaze shifting to the coastline. She hated to admit it, but she still felt a little nervous around him at times—a small part of her questioned whether or not he wanted the same old Fujin or that different, more feminine and romantic version of her that appeared every now and again. She wasn't sure she was consistently capable of that.

"So …" Seifer shifted in his seat, readjusting his shoulders in that way he did when he had something important to say. "There's uh … something I should tell you." Fujin turned to find staring straight ahead towards the ocean still, but his fingers were fidgety against her leg—he was battling some of his own nerves too.

"Last night, when we were at the Gateway and you were telling me about Cid's wife …" He pivoted to meet her gaze, being more thoughtful than normal with his words. "And you were talking about how you didn't really trust yourself in this. I didn't realize it until it was happening, but I started to … exploit that. To try and get you to leave Deling."

**Exploit**—a nefarious term in any context, but within the vernacular of the Garden system, spectacularly so. Exploiting was something they did to an enemy or a source, to further their mission. A tactic they used to get the information they needed and results they wanted by leveraging information over someone. It worked well, especially on the weak … especially on the emotionally compromised. And it had worked especially well on her.

Fujin already knew that he'd used his training on her. Not at the time, when they were facing each other in the Gateway and his low raspy voice rang out a concern that seemed well-placed. But afterward, on the walk home and lying in bed as he drifted off to sleep and she laid awake beside him; she mulled the evening over in her mind in search of an essential truth behind his quick change of heart. *Hell, maybe I'm jumping the gun here,* he'd told her, with a hand still against her face, tenderly leveraging affection. *Since when did Seifer ever easily admit to wrongdoing?*

Fujin should've been furious but in the hierarchy of shit they were dealing with, Seifer being his usual self ranked fairly low on the ladder. He used his friend's devotion against them more often than he realized, but the thing is … Seifer wouldn't be a good soldier if those tactics weren't built into his DNA … and neither would Fujin. It was Garden's training applied to all aspects of their lives.

It was hard to fault him for something that was just as much a part of her as it was him—they were perfect soldiers, and there were consequences that came with that. So, she couldn't blame him—even if it meant Seifer intentionally identified a weakness in her and took advantage of it; even if it meant she'd been *handled* by two men in one night. The terrible truth about it was that it more unsettling to know she had something to exploit, and how easy it was to identify. It was evidence of her own true weakness right now.

"I didn't even really realize I was doing it until it happened," Seifer continued, her silence causing him to shift awkwardly in his seat and swallow a lump in his throat. "And then it was just … happening. But I stopped when I—"

"Seif, it's fine, there's so much more to worry about right now." Fujin sighed and gripped his hand
tightly. She didn't think he'd admit he did it though, much less feel guilt about it—an emotion he didn't wear often. "I know you don't want to be here. I know you don't want me involved in this. I know it's not … an ideal spot for you to be in, taking orders from me. You haven't fooled me—it's not a secret."

"Yeah, but I shouldn't be doing that. Not to you." Fujin shook her head at him, and then turned to look out the window.

"I shouldn't be letting you do it. I'm in my own head. I just can't stop thinking about the sorceress, and my mother. I—" She stopped herself, and removed her hand from his, crossing her arms over her chest to combat the chill that was setting in from the cool air.

"Listen, I actually need to tell you something, too. While you were in Timber and I was conducting my research, I found …" She didn't want to tell him, for fear this entire thing they'd started would come crashing down. But she had to—she couldn't live with the thought of her mother's sorceress spirit being released one day, potentially releasing whatever hold it might have on Seifer along with it.

"Sorceresses apparently have this power over people—a magnetism, of sorts. It proves to be … well, really effective on men. With Caraway acting strangely towards me and a few other things that have happened … the guy at the bar a few weeks ago…"

Laughter erupted from Seifer's side of the car before she could finish—a low raspy chuckle that she recognized as him thinking she said something utterly ridiculous.

"Is that what's been eating you?" His free hand found her face, touching her chin so that he could look into her eyes, with a grin spread across his face. "You think the sorceress in your brain bewitched me?"

"It's possible." She found his humor at the topic more offensive than him trying to manipulate her. "Everything else's been true so far. What if it's causing what you're feeling … or part of it… and it disappears when she's gone? If she's ever gone."

"Yeah, but Fujin—come on." Seifer tried to stifle his laughter, reading her irritation. "This thing between you and I started years ago. Pandemona's only been around for a few months. I mean if it's true, the worst it could've done is expedite things…." A smirk played on his lips, his eyes softening. "Which I'm not mad about because we're having a lot of great sex."

"Cut it out. I'm being serious." Fujin shoved his arm away.

"Hey, so am I." She crossed her arms over her chest and groaned as he continued to chuckle.

"What? It just doesn't add up. The only way what you're saying makes sense is if sorceress powers were passed down genetically. I know you're from some sort've long line of sorceresses, but considering we've never seen you float, or disappear, or do anything too spooky—"

"Long line of sorceresses?" Fujin turned to him, perplexed. She found Seifer staring back at her, wide-eyed and eyebrows raised at revealing something he shouldn't have. "Where'd that come from?"

"Uh …" He deflected her gaze, turning away from her and tapping his fist down on the steering wheel. "Shit. From the file Cid gave you on your mother … which I wasn't planning on talking about until this was all over and we got back to Garden."

A long line or sorceresses? Did that mean that she had powers … and did that mean they were more
potent? Fujin had been intentionally keeping rational thought a safe distance away from this new space in her life, where Seifer magically loved her out of the blue and she was happy to be a dreamer, right along with him. But it sauntered in to her mind now, an unwelcome guest whispering I told you so's. She knew there had to be a reason Seifer felt this way about her. She knew it couldn't be real.

The rain continued to fall, echoing a muted metallic cacophony as it dashed against the glass and the body of the car. Seifer was talking to her in a rushed voice, his hand back on her knee and his body craned towards her to get her attention, but she couldn't hear him above the sound of the storm and her own cruel thoughts; a steady reverberation of all the reasons she never approached him over the years. She remembered the morning they departed from Dollet, and how she'd wondered if this thing with him had all been a dream, as the nautical wind stung the spots where his unshaven face had chaffed her own—she didn't think it could be real. And maybe she was right. What do you do when you have everything you ever wanted … but it slips through your fingers like sand? Fujin didn't want to know…

Such unbearable sorrow awaits you … Fate is a wicked thing, she thought to herself, recalling the words from her mother that echoed in her head at the library, when the wind overtook her. It's you. It's us. Maybe this is what she'd meant.

Everything was spiraling out of her control, shrinking in and down on her. Fujin tilted her face towards the open window, her hands rushing to roll it down more but fumbling, as she tried to take breath deep enough to fill her lungs. She needed to breathe. She needed the wind.

She didn't notice Seifer move; she didn't hear him opening his car door or see a flash of him walking towards her. One minute, he was beside her and the next he on the outside of the passenger's side door, prying it open and pulling her to her feet as the seaward wind whipped around them. The prospect of his insincere touch made for a painful deliverance.

"It's not true, what's going through your head right now. Just stop thinking it; because it's not fucking true." He placed a single hand on the small of her back and pushed her forward towards the bluffs. "Let's walk a little. The rain's letting up."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Fujin ignored his observation, still struggling to take a deep breath.

"You said to tell you anything that was relevant to the mission. It wasn't relevant."

"Isn't it?" She snapped unintentionally. "Who knows what a sorceress bloodline means, and the impact … Just look at you and Raijin." She started to laugh at the absurdity of her two friends quietly shading each other over the past couple of weeks.

"What's it matter? Even if it is true, it's genetic. Like eye color, or … handedness."

"Handedness?" Fujin scoffed, insulted at his simplistic comparison. "You know that's not the same thing." Seifer grimaced.

"You're over-thinking it. I'm not worried, and you shouldn't be either. You're smarter than this." He countered, as they reached the edge of salt slicked rocks overlooking the water. He tugged off his coat and tossed it on the ground, offering a dry spot to sit and motioning for her to take a seat. "Now sit down—we're gonna have a nice fucking morning, and you're going to relax and we're going to talk about something else."

Seifer plopped down on the ground and dragged her down with him, forcing her to settle between his legs as he wrapped his arms around her waist. He'd been wrong about the rain letting up, and
she'd been right about his double-down stubbornness to sit outside in it anyway. He wiped his face before placing his chin just above the crook of her neck.

"Wouldn't this be a nice spot to live?" He whispered against her ear, nodding out at the ocean as he forced a new topic. "No one around for miles, just a quick drive to Deling."

"What else did it say?" Fujin commanded, ignoring his attempt at casual conversation.

"Come on, I don't wanna—"

"What else?" He groaned, muttering a low fuck under his breath before tightening his grip on her.

"That she was executed at the directive of Adel herself," he sighed. "For handing details about Lunatic Pandora to the Galbadian army. That's all though … you know everything else already."

"Lunatic Pandora? Odine's Lunatic Pandora?" Fujin pivoted to face him, her eyes narrowed. "And you didn't think that was relevant?"

"No … I did." Seifer was studying her face, reading the furrowed lines to judge how angry she was. "You've been through a lot. I wanted to give you a minute to catch your breath."

"That's not your decision. If it's relevant to the mission, you tell me about it. Hyne, Seifer. How many times do we have to do this?"

"Hey, ease up will you? This is new for me too … I'm really trying here." There was a pleading in his voice that struck a nerve in her, drumming against that soft spot she'd always had for him and making her chest flutter.

"What if this isn't real?" She looped an arm around his leg absentmindedly, as if he was slipping away and she was trying to get a sturdy grip. "I could never go back to how things were, after all this."

"Fuu, I'll be the first to admit I have no fucking clue what's going on. Sorceress lineages and talking wind … that's beyond my pay grade." Seifer bent in to kiss her temple, and then placed his cheek against her ear. "But the one thing I know for sure is you."

"Seifer—"

"Fujin, I love you. That should be enough. That should be all you need to know." He cut her off before she could protest. "I think this thing that happened while we were in Timber really fucked with you. You're a wreck."

"No, it was the sorceress," Fujin admitted, as the feeling of his arms around her and his lips at her neck brought her anger to a full stop. "You remember, how on the boat you'd said you heard a voice say that death was coming for us?" Seifer nodded against her in confirmation, as had hand gripped her.

"The sorceress …. She felt like death to me; I saw her and I was dragged into this …. dark energy. And then I had this incredibly vivid dream that you killed me. Strangled me with your own hands."

"You what?" He laughed out loud. "Of all the crazy shit you've said over the past few weeks, that is by far the craziest."

"I know, but Seifer—"
"Fujin." He readjusted and maneuvered her body so he could look into her eyes. "It was just a dream."

Just like your dreams are just dreams? Fujin wondered if the blurred lines of what was real and what was imagination extended to both of them. She thought better of asking though—she didn't want him to feel like she thought he was capable of hurting her.

"I'm getting a bad feeling from all of this." Fujin shook her head, her damp hair falling in silver shards and obscuring her vision. "Maybe I'm wrong … maybe it's just the stress of all of this."

"What can I do?" Seifer implored, staring down at her earnestly. "I promise you I'll do anything to make this easier for you."

"I don't think it's going to get easier … maybe you're right. Maybe I just shouldn't think about it for a while."

"Which is exactly why we're here." He pulling her against him again. "Don't you think this would be a great spot for a house?" Fujin forgot that the original reason she agreed to come here at all was that Seifer also needed a day off—he wasn't interested in the mission in the slightest this morning.

"Actually, no." She played along—half-heartedly, but along all the same. Maybe if she tried, like he was trying, she could have just a moment of solace with him again. "I always thought an island would be best."

"Isolationism. I like it." Seifer mused, as his fingertips ran along her ribs. "Which one?"

"The Island Closest to Hell, maybe." Fujin looked towards the southwest. "So many monsters to fight—you'd never get bored."

"Yeah, but as we already know I was born there. Seems kinda sad to return to the same place to live out the rest of my life." She chuckled at his reference of that old mythology they'd created for themselves when they were kids—back when they had no past, and had to conjure up their own for comfort. "What about the Island Closest to Heaven? It's supposed to have a good climate, and it's smaller … no room for other people."

"Actually, yeah—one of my fieldwork classes accidentally wound up there once. The instructor went to the wrong coordinates and didn't realize it until too late—not sure how, since we had to climb the side of it to get there. We saw Marlboro and she rushed us back onto the boat. Not before I got a good look though—it was warm, and green. I didn't see a good beach, but better to keep people away." She smiled at the memory, and how Zell Dincht had trembled and shouted for shore as they repelled down the side of the mountain, even though there was no beach in sight—fear of the monster and the fall had taken hold of him, and he hadn't remembered that they came over on a boat and not a fucking land bridge. She wouldn't tell Seifer that though—poor Zell endured enough. "I suppose that would work. I didn't realize we were sharing, though. Have it all planned out, do you?"

"Mmmm." Seifer murmured against her ear. "I do. I have plans Fuu—you don't even know."

"Bet they didn't involve any of this crap." She deflected, feeling nervous at the talk of plans; it brought back the memory of seeing those plans flash behind his eyes back in Balamb, when he'd been daydreaming about the future. Those very plans, which seemed to be coming on fast and strong, were what made her think some other power was influencing his feelings towards her.

"No … but there's room for the unexpected, I suppose." She felt him pull away from her a bit to study her—his hands tucking a few strands of her hair in that comfortable way he did … like he'd
been doing it for years. "So you like the Island Closest to Heaven, then? I'll remember that."

"Why? In case Balamb Garden decides to persecute me for being a sorceress?" She tried to use humor to avoid the topic, while still bringing reality to the forefront. They still had so many problems to face … she couldn't manage the future just yet.

Seifer laughed, placing his hand on her cheek. If he could tell she was bothered by his honesty, he didn't mind—he was always so much more confident and self-assured than she was. Fujin always questioned if something was going to happen; for Seifer it was always just a matter of when.

"No," he whispered, his voice edged with a smile, and left the single word solitary in her mind without clarification. "Now pipe down, Sanada. I'm trying to enjoy the view."

He bent down to kiss her; the ruthlessly gentle pressure of his lips ushering the disaster scenarios out of her mind. As the kiss grew deeper, Fujin's thoughts rattled around in pleasant broken sentences. Seifer knows. Plans. The one thing I know for sure.

But there was one—just one that rang out full and clear that she couldn't shake….

Fate is a wicked thing.

Raijin was sitting at the table when Fujin returned to the hotel room, hunched over the notes she'd taken and the books she'd brought home. He was engrossed in the text, his large bronze hand at the ready to flip another page—she could tell he was reading her brief notes on Odine by a small diagram of one of his inventions she'd drawn in the margin.

"Welcome back you guys." He scratched his cheek with his hand and yawned as he looked up, finding only Fujin walking in the door. "Or hey, welcome back just you, ya know?" A small smile snuck onto his face at his own joke. "Where's Seifer?"

"He had to go and meet Rinoa. We were running late, so he just took off from the car rental place."

"Oh …" Raijin winced at the mention of her name. "Uh … sorry Fuu."

"It's fine—it's what we're here for." Fujin plopped down on the foot of the bed Raijin had been sleeping in, carefully looking around the room to guess what else he'd been up to today. "Sorry for just taking off like we did. We were in a rush since Seifer had to get back here …"

"Nothin' to be sorry about." Raijin put on his best brave face, but his sorrowful eyes told a different story. "You guys gotta do what you gotta do. You wanted some time alone. I wasn't born yesterday. I get it."

"No Raijin, really. I'm sorry." Fujin exhaled, her shoulders slumping. She offered him an apologetic smile as their eyes connected. "It wasn't time away from you—not really. Seifer thought I needed a break."

"Well, he knows you best right?" He stood up to stretch his back. "I'm just glad someone's back. I need an excuse to go out and do something. Wanna go grab some food?"

"Sure, but first … sit down with me for a second will you?" Fujin patted the spot on the bed next to her. "I want to talk to you."

"Ah … I don't think …" Raijin hesitated, glancing awkwardly around the room. "I don't that's a good idea. Seif wouldn't like it very much."
"He isn't here." Fujin shrugged as she gazed up at him. "And I want to talk to you."

"But we already talked." He waved his hands at her in an attempt to sweep all this under the rug. No doubt Raijin already felt the silent heat of Seifer's rage when he discovered the two of them had a secret, and didn't want to feel it again. "No need to drag up the past, ya know?"

"Raijin, sit down … please." He groaned and obeyed reluctantly, shaking his head as he settled on the bed next to her.

"Just so ya know, I was never planning on bringing any of this up." He defiantly crossed his arms over his chest. "I've … matured. Moved on. Cut it off." His hand dashed out in a slicing motion, his jaw squared. But when Fujin laid a hand on his shoulder, and he turned to look at her, she felt a pang of sadness in her chest at the gentle look in his eye. "I'm totally fine. There's enough to worry about —ya don't need to worry about me."

"You're important too, though." Fujin gripped his shoulder to emphasize the sentiment. "You're still very important to me Raij. I'm sorry I haven't been a good friend these past few weeks."

"Stop apologizing." Raijin folded his hands in his lap and stared down at them. "You've been fine. Seifer's been a little tough to deal with though."

"I think he knows." Fujin waited for Raijin's reaction, but he was unfazed by the revelation.

"Yeah … I think he might too." Raijin nodded, cracking his knuckles. "Did he say anything to you?"

"Not really. I just have a feeling." Fujin told a white lie and shook her head. "Isn't it weird that the three of us are so open with everything except this stuff?"

"Not really." Raijin mimicked, shoving her with his shoulder. "This is the stuff that makes things more complicated, ya know? Makes sense we'd all be like this." He cleared his throat and squared his shoulders again. "So … you guys seem happy."

"I think so. Kinda hard to focus on anything besides the mission and what's going on with me right now though." Fujin shrugged. "Are you okay?"

"I think so," he mirrored her again, both of them chuckling quietly. "It's not even you guys—I knew that was gonna happen eventually. I already got used to the idea. It's just a change, ya know? It's always been the three of us. Now you guys are your own thing…” He held his hands up in surrender. "Which totally makes sense. We're just all we've ever had. I don't want to get kicked out the family, ya know?"

"Raijin that would never happen. We need you. Even more than you need us." Fujin slipped her arm around Raijin's back in a half-hug, and Raijin slung an arm over her shoulder. "I need you more than you know."

"Geez, way to make a guy blush," he sighed and hugged her tightly. "That's why I've always liked you best."

"I know." Fujin tilted her head up and gave him a small smile. "Let's go get something to eat. I can fill you in on all the things that have been happening."

"Yeah, I'd like that." Raijin smiled back at her—a genuine smile, and not that of someone trying to put on a front. "I feel like I've been outta the loop a little."

"That's my fault." Fujin, in her usual fashion, had been trying to keep her new world with Seifer and
her old life with Rajin at arms length. She'd originally told herself it was for Rajjin's own good, but was only just realizing it had been for her own. "I was trying to keep things normal."

"Well stop. I think we just have to come up with a new normal now, ya know?" He tapped her thigh with his hand. "Things won't get better if we don't let the change happen."

As Rajjin hoisted himself from the bed and walked to snag his wallet from the table, Fujin realized for the first time in all the years they'd known each other just how inadvertently wise he could be. Sure, he was mostly goofy all the time, but Rajjin he had these rare moments of clarity—of seeing right through something, precise and to the core of an issue. Was he always eloquent about it? No, ya know, he wasn't. But there was a sage gracefulness about it, coupled with his always unspoken truth that collective need came before individual desire for him, and that he always wholeheartedly confided they would rise above and beyond any obstacle they faced.

It was good she'd be spending a lot of time with him this next month—she could use a little bit of that kind of confidence.

It was hard to come off of a morning like that with Fujin and immediately dive into a scenario where he had to play a different part. Seifer never did like pretending to be something he wasn't, never enjoyed pandering to someone else's ideas about him; he had a very clear picture of his own identity, and hated it when someone asked him to fog up the lens. The instructors at Garden were the frequent offenders, always pulling him aside after a rowdy day in class and telling him how much potential they saw in him, or how they knew he was a good kid underneath all the rage—projecting their own insecurities onto him about being unable to teach him. *If he would just listen, if he would just do the work, if he would just be quiet ....*

If he would just be the exact opposite version of himself, he would fit in just fine there.

Pretending to be someone he wasn't was always a thorn in Seifer's side—even in the smallest scenarios—and this little shopping excursion with Rinoa was no exception. The afternoon was originally presented as a trip to check out some old weapons he might like at a local junk shop, but after a short fifteen minutes of that she dragged him along on what was very obviously meant to be a date. She paraded him past booths of fresh cut flowers and made exaggerated observations about how pretty they were in an attempt to score a few; stopped to try on a few scandalous dresses that even Seifer told her were a bit much, and he'd never really been one to encourage a woman to cover up.

"Seifer, what do you think of this one?" Rinoa queried as she emerged from the dressing room after quickly shimmying into a pale blue dress in one of Deling's boutique stores. She inspected herself in front of a full length triptych mirror, her hands smoothing out the silk fabric against her thighs.

"Looks nice …" Seifer shrugged from his seated position on a nearby bench. "It's not very stately though … maybe something with a little more fabric?" Rinoa turned around coyly and grinned.

"Depends on the impression I want to make, I suppose."

"I suppose it does." Seifer groaned inwardly as she popped back into the dressing room to try on another outfit. He'd always assumed that the girl-drags-guy-shopping scenario was just a trope used in movies, but apparently it was a real thing that happened. He was thankful Fujin was feminine in all the ways he liked, and not in all the ways that would drive him up a fucking wall. But at least there was a silver lining to this little excursion: the dress was for a state dinner at the mansion, which Seifer was invited to as Rinoa's plus one.
According to Rinoa—who was oh so excited to be surrounded by the upper echelons of Galbadia despite her loyal ties to the Timber resistance movement—the General had apparently attended a cabinet meeting just this morning and proposed the idea of hosting the sorceress at a state dinner at Caraway Mansion. President Deling gladly accepted, and the household staff was already buzzing with plans of who would be on the guest list and beefing up Caraway's security staff a bit.

"It's going to be so much harder to sneak out with all the new staff he's probably going to hire." Rinoa carped from behind the dressing room curtain. "I'm not sure what the point is—it's just one night, and the President's security detail will be there."

"It's better to have your own people on staff that you trust." Seifer called out as he remembered Fujin's critique of Caraway's staff. "They may cramp your style a bit, but for the line of work your father's in, it's probably better for your safety and his to have more well-trained staff on site."

"Sure, I guess it's a good idea." Rinoa walked out again wearing a black dress with short sleeves that hit her just below her knee, twisting in front of the mirrors to get a look at all angles. "I mean, I'm not staying there after this summer is over anyway, so I don't really care one way or another I suppose." She turned to him and held up her hands, presenting herself to him. "What do you think?"

"Much better, Duchess." Seifer nodded and Rinoa stuck her tongue out at him at the use of the nickname. "Looks great." She pivoted back to the mirror to take a second look.

"So ... you're not planning on staying in Deling?" Seifer asked, his curiosity genuinely piqued. "How's that gonna work? You're too young to be out on your own."

"I'm not too young. You and I are practically the same age, and you're already out on your own."

Rinoa mused, as she pulled a pair of black heels from a nearby shelf and slipped her feet into them, reassessing herself in the mirror.

"That's different. I've had training, and when I'm finished being out on my own I have a place to call home still." Seifer wasn't sure why he was being antagonistic—he didn't really care what the girl did after they were finished here in Deling. But something about how naive she was grated on him.

"So do I." Rinoa shot back proudly. "I'm moving in with Zone and Watts in Timber. They have a spare room. We're planning on taking our movement to the next level, and I can't work on that here."

"What about your father?"

"What about him?" Her narrowed eyes connected with his through the glass before she slipped back out of the heels and walked into the dressing room to change again. "I'm not even telling Caraway that I'm leaving—he'd just try to stop me."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to overstep." Seifer called out, trying to keep his voice smooth and gentle despite his irritation at her childish reaction having to pretend to care at all. "He just seems to be pretty concerned about you, that's all. I don't know what that's like."

"That man has been suffocating me for years." He heard her placing the dresses she'd tried on back on their hangers—a sign she was finally readying to leave. "Ever since my mother died, he's treated me like I'm made of glass."

The source of Caraway's overprotectiveness towards Rinoa wasn't a mystery to Seifer. It was incredibly obvious that the man was still grieving over the unexpected loss of his wife, and knew he couldn't live with himself if something happened to Rinoa too. So, the General tried to control what he could just to keep Rinoa safe—from growing up too fast, from getting hurt, from anything and
everything. To Rinoa it looked stifling and cruel, but to Caraway … it was the only way a broken man knew how to love. Seifer wasn't sure he and Caraway had much in common, but he could identify with that fear of losing someone pretty easily. *Hell, he'd almost been paralyzed yesterday when he got back to the hotel room and found Fujin motionless—he was sure his own fucking heart had stopped.*

"So, what are your next steps?" Seifer changed the subject—he didn't want to know what an angry Rinoa looked like. Personally, a happy one wasn't something he found very tolerable.

"I don't know, exactly. All I know is that I want it to be something big." Rinoa sighed, emerging from behind the curtain with a pile of dressed draped over her arm, holding the black one Seifer approved out at arms length with her other hand, examining it. "I think I need to get this hemmed a little. Did you bring a suit with you?" Her train of thought jumped the tracks, back to the impending dinner party.

"Yeah, I have one." Seifer nodded as they made their way to the counter. "A grey one with a black tie … it should do."

"Perfect!" Rinoa gushed, leaning in to kiss his cheek before placing the extra dresses on a nearby rack. "I'll just be a minute more; you can wait outside if you want, and then maybe we can go get a coffee or something?"

"Actually …" Seifer hedged, knowing that what he was about to do was not exactly kosher. But, Rinoa had just leaned in to kiss him, and he knew all too well where prolonged alone time with her was headed. Even though getting close to the Duchess was sanctioned by the priorities of the mission … he couldn't bear doing that to Fujin with everything that was going on. "I should probably meet back up with my friends. We had plans to go and train."

"Oh … okay." Rinoa didn't attempt to mask her disappointment—her suspicion that she was being blown off registered the instant the words fell from his lips. *He had only spent a couple of hours with her, after all. "Well, at least wait for me and I'll walk back to the hotel with you?"

"Yeah, of course. I'll see you outside." Seifer disengaged, with Rinoa lingering for a moment to see if he would show her any parting affection. He only stuffed his hands in his pockets, offered her a quick smile, and sauntered toward the exit. He could tell that it hurt her feelings; the girl was apparently *very into him*, and it was going to be impossible appease her while also staying loyal to Fujin—*there had to be some give and take in all of this; something needed to be let go.*

The way he saw it, he'd sacrifice *almost* anything to make this thing a success for Fujin. He was sacrificing his dignity and letting General Caraway insult him. He was sacrificing just a sliver of his claim on Fujin's heart to make space in their new life for Raijin—and that was a sacrifice he knew he needed to make for *all of them*, not just Fuu. Hell, he even gave up his spot as leader of their little trio fairly easily just so she could succeed. But he wasn't willing to sacrifice *her* to make this a success. No matter what Fujin said, no matter how strong she was, she was still *human*. He knew for a fact she couldn't handle Rinoa on top of everything else, and that continuing this would just put an added strain on them. *He was doing the right thing by creating some distance with her.*

Rinoa joined him in the street shortly after, chattering nervously about getting her dress hemmed, and how much she was looking forward to taking him to the state dinner—she was trying to keep the conversation casual, sending that something was amiss. Seifer didn't say much—he smiled where he should, nodded when it seemed appropriate—gestures that were just enough so he didn't seem rude.

When they finally reached the hotel, Rinoa touched his arm and tugged him away from the entrance off to the side of the street. Her eyes were downcast, and the corners of her pink lips were twisted
"Seifer are you … mad, or something?" Rinoa rocked back and forth on the balls of her feet, teetering a little before shifting her glance upward to look into his eyes. She looked as crestfallen as a scolded puppy. "It's just … I really like you, but you barely touched me in Timber, and now you don't seem very happy to see me. Things just aren't like the night we met in Dollet. Did I do something wrong?"

Seifer knew Rinoa could tell something was up, but the forwardness of her observation surprised him—he didn't actually think she'd be bold enough to call him out on it. He pressed his lips together, rolling her question around in his mind. Was he mad? Sure. Come to think of it, he was pretty fucking pissed. But it had nothing to do with Rinoa, and everything to do with Cid Kramer and the shitty situation Fujin was in because of him. But mostly, Seifer was pissed because he'd promised Fujin this morning that he would do something to make this whole mission easier for her … and he knew what he needed to do. But he also knew there'd be hell to pay when he was through with it. Shit. This was never easy.

"No, I'm sorry … I'm not mad. You didn't do anything wrong." He looked down to the ground and sighed. "But you're right; something's not quite right here and it's probably my fault. I mean, I know it's my fault." Rinoa's brow furrowed at the tone—she knew this was about to take a turn.

"I've been distant because I've sort've been in this complicated … thing with Fujin for a long time now." Seifer instinctually paused for a reaction, but Rinoa only blinked and stared at him wide-eyed in surprise. "And things kinda changed between us after I met you, and we've been … going through some stuff." Seifer made a circular motion with his hand to illustrate the movement of working through something.

"Oh …" Disappointment overcame Rinoa's face—the corners of her pink lips drooped even farther downward. "I see…"

"You're a great girl." Seifer emphasized as he placed his hand on her shoulder. "But Fujin and I have a lot of history, and I care about her a lot …"

"So that's why you and Raijin were so weird when I brought her up on the ride home." Rinoa laughed lowly and shook her head. "I feel like such an idiot. You weren't even interested in me this whole time."

"That's not true. You're beautiful and funny. I really was interested in you." Seifer felt like he needed to give her something—the girl only wanted to have some friends her own age, wanted somebody to show her an ounce of love, and wanted to feel alive. He'd been so self-absorbed lately, he was only just realizing that Rinoa has a little more in common with them than he originally thought—she was searching for her place in the world too, just from a different perspective.

"I'm really sorry. I thought I might be able to make it work. But I can't … I'm in—"

"Please, spare me." There was a biting irritation in her voice. "It's … fine. I mean, it's not like this was going to last for long." She tried to shrug it off as best she could, and she let out a heavy sigh again as she tried to rebound from the embarrassment. "I'm such an idiot—I just invited you to this thing, and I didn't even notice…"

"We can still be friends." Seifer shrugged, and gave her a warm smile—he'd been hoping for an easy segue to the topic of the dinner. "And I'll still go with you. Just … as a friend."

"A friend." Rinoa turned her back to him and crossed her arms over her chest. "And you and Fujin?
Well, that's just perfect."

Seifer didn't need her to finish the sentence—the tone said it all. The girl was naive, but she didn't lack confidence. How could someone like him be more attracted to Fujin than to Rinoa? How could he compare her vibrant warmth with Fujin's cold distance? What made her so much better? The simple answer was everything; Fujin understood him in ways that no one else did. But explaining the finer details of why he was over the moon for his pale friend wouldn't improve this little situation. Better to glaze over the veiled insult, and move on to the task at hand—keeping Rinoa under his wing.

"I'm really sorry Rinoa ... but hey, for what it's worth, the three of us really like you and we respect what you're up to in Timber."

"You do?" Rinoa turned back around and flashed him a faint, sheepish smile at the compliment, while Seifer cringed inwardly at the falsehood. Outwardly, he nodded enthusiastically.

"Absolutely. We actually think you've identified a growing threat in the region, and we're thinking we might mention it to our headmaster." Seifer moved to lean back against he wrought iron gate that lined the edge of the street. "Fujin actually mentioned it, after dinner last night."

"Wow, to your headmaster?" Rinoa leaned next to him, stepping directly into the trap he'd laid for her. "What do you think he would do about it?"

"I don't know," Seifer shrugged as he looked down at her. "Given our close ties to Galbadia Garden, he might not want to get directly involved ... but who knows ... maybe SeeD could assist the Timber Owls sometime in the future. Or maybe just Fujin, Raijin and I could help you with your next big plan." Seifer winked at her, and Rinoa laughed lightly and nudged him with her shoulder.

"Thanks ... for being honest, I suppose." She sighed again and looked up at the glass windows of the Galbadia Hotel. "Can't say I'm not a little bummed ... I really like you."

"You'll meet someone better." Seifer insisted, meaning that she'd meet someone better suited for her. "But hey, I'll still go to that dinner with you. Actually, if we're gonna tell our headmaster about the Timber resistance movement, it might be beneficial to be there. Meet President Deling ... see if I can glean anything from the conversation."

"Sure ... I'd like that." Rinoa smiled up at him. "Hey, I sort've feel like I'm a spy now—part of your little team. That's pretty neat."

And just like that, the course of their mission was altered with a unilateral decision. Their total reliance on General Caraway was removed from the equation, and instead Seifer placed his faith in someone who he knew he could have a little more control over—a girl so desperate to find her own place in the world that she didn't even realize almost everything he'd said to her since the day they met was a lie. Caraway would be mad if he found out, and diplomatically it put a lot at risk—the Balamb-Galbadia-Trabia partnership was already imperfect, and interfering with Galbadian politics was no way to make friends for Balamb Garden. Cid would have his head, and his SeeD career, if this thing went sideways. None of that scared Seifer much though. A little shade from the great General Caraway and Cid Kramer? He could deal with those consequences just fine.

It was Fujin's wrath that he was scared of ...
Dust

Fujin never did like doing something on principal, because holding fast to something on principal was usually a losing proposition. What was the point of wasting your energy and digging your heels in on something just to dig your heels in? Usually what was referenced was pride, or the right thing to do—the things that people who lived by principal thought sacred enough to defend at all costs. But pride belonged to Seifer, and the right thing to do belonged to Raijin. As for Fujin ... well, she had a moral code that she followed, but it was a flexible one that bent to suit her needs.

She credited her SeeD training for that moral flexibility. Garden wanted them all to turn a blind eye to the ugly realities of making a living as mercenaries; to switch their humanity off when necessary to get the job done. It sounded cruel, but it was useful when it came to missions more serious than wrangling monsters or aiding in political disputes. A SeeD's body count added up over the years; if you killed on the field, and couldn't remain ambiguous about the merit of it, you'd go crazy.

Fujin learned that hard lesson almost a year ago when she went on a routine training mission to Centra and wound up killing a man—the first and only one she'd killed so far. There was nothing extraordinary about the job. Balamb was hired by a small village to reign in a roving band of robbers who'd committed a variety of petty crimes along the southern edge of the continent. It wasn't supposed to be dangerous; it had been deemed safe enough for students to support and observe and for the most part, the mission went according to plan. SeeD had the rouges surrounded and were reading the criminals their rights in record time; they were to be transported to D-District Prison immediately to await trial. Justice—or at least one small town's purchased justice—was served.

Fujin stood off to the side with a few classmates and looked on as the scene unfolded, adrenaline rushing through her veins and her heart drumming in her ears, when her well-trained eye spotted movement in a thicket a little more than 20 feet away. It was a young sniper, edging slowly from behind the trunk of a tree, with his gun trained on one of the occupied SeeD instructors. Her eye darted to her classmates, and then to the SeeD team again when she realized that no one else saw it coming.

Releasing her shuriken was second nature, like gasping for air when surfacing through the water's skin, or squinting your eyes under the light of the burning sun. The desire to survive drove the weapon from her hands, and it sliced through the air towards the man who also didn't see it coming.

The sound that rang out when the familiar metal reached his flesh was unnatural and made her stomach churn. The weapon returned to her shaking hand within seconds—stained with blood, its violent job complete—and the man's body slipped to the ground in a falling stack. How casually the seasoned SeeD in the sniper's sights regarded it, only quirking an eyebrow and muttering a muffled 'nice save, rookie,' before getting back to the task at hand.

Fujin gawked at the husk the man left behind in awe, in the truest sense of the word. How easy it had been to take a life. Her young classmates, on the other hand, weren't prepared for death that day—the sounds of vomiting arose on either side of her.

Adrenaline was truly the only thing that kept her from emptying her stomach too—an uncool thing to do in front of the higher level SeeD who were making early bets on which upcoming students were the best and brightest. They pegged Fujin a star that day, and when they finished booking the criminals at D-District and ushering 'the kids' off to bed in Galbadia later that night, they invited Fujin out for one drink in the hotel bar to thank her ... and to settle her nerves. In hindsight, she figured they understood the emotions of a first kill all too well.
But even after the drink Fujin was unable to sleep. She pictured that stack of flesh crumpling in pile on the ground over and over again; the sound of the slice echoed in her ears and the warm coat of blood on metal felt like it was still touching her hand. She wondered what his name was … why he chose to live the life of a criminal … if there'd been another way.

Looking haggard in the morning and feeling uneasy in her own skin, Fujin's guilt only seemed to grow. Her classmates continued to congratulate her awkwardly as they readied for the trip home. For killing a man. For snuffing out a soul. She wanted them all to shut up. She wanted to scream. She wanted to be back at Garden … she wanted to see Seifer.

The instructor whose life she'd saved must've noticed she was unnerved. He approached her in the hotel lobby before they departed, placing his hand on her shoulder and drawing her away from the others. I don't know if I've properly thanked you. So… thanks. He squeezed her shoulder, and leaned in close to her to whisper. Don't carry it with you, okay? In the end, it's either you or them in the dirt, Sanada. We've all gotta return to the dust sometime … and it's more than okay to fight when it's not your time.

We've all gotta return to the dust sometime … His words echoed in her head all the way back to Garden, and as she instinctually sought out Seifer and Raijin the second they arrived on Balamb soil. As her feet carried her down the familiar corridors that now seemed foreign and forever changed, Fujin saw nothing but fine clusters of dust spinning through the rays of afternoon sunlight.

She stumbled into the Disciplinary Office, bedraggled and blinking and reeling from the revelation that this is what it meant to be in SeeD—to be a jury, judge and executioner in an instant. Her friends were alarmed when she burst into the room. A rubber ball Raijin was bouncing against the wall froze in his grip, and Seifer sprang to his feet with his brow already furrowed. He hadn't expected her to be gone for the night, and according to Raijin's retelling of the events later that day, the blond had gone up one side of Xu and down the other to find out where the fuck Fujin was. Seifer started to scold her for not finding a way to get in touch with him. Shit, where the hell have you been? I …. well, Raijin and I, we were worried—but he bit his tongue when he realized that she was lost in thought. She hadn't really arrived back home yet.

I killed a man yesterday. She whispered, ignoring his chastising, her hand fluttering to touch her throat to feel the vibration of the words; to make sure they were real. On the mission I … I killed him.

Raijin inhaled sharply and canted forward in his chair, readying to stand. But he stifled his movements as Seifer passed by him in a blur and descended on Fujin, gathering her up in his arms without hesitation. She was the first in their trio to take a life—to this day, Seifer and Raijin still hadn't—and it was the first time he'd ever held her like that.

That's … okay, Fuu. That's a good thing. Seifer reasoned, his hold on her tight as he gripped the back of her head and pressed it against his chest. It was probably him or you, right?

I'm not sure. The words escaped in a gasp, and she tried to shake her head but his hand kept her still.

Then you did the right thing. You were being safe. Seifer nodded at his own statement. He pushed her away from him and gripped her shoulders, bending down to look her in the eyes. You always be safe—got it?

Raijin nodded in agreement, and Seifer helped her to an empty chair so she could sit down as she recounted the tale—the awful sound, the vision of slumping flesh, the students retching on either side of her—all of it. Raijin turned green at the description, but if Seifer couldn't stomach it he didn't let on. He just listened to her, his arm firmly staying put around her shoulders, offering continued silent approval of the judgment she passed down. His approval made everything a little better …
It would be a lie to say she didn't still struggle silently with the horror for a while after that—the thief's visage haunted her dreams like a ghost still clinging to life, deigning her a criminal. But the instructor thanked her and praised her, and Seifer ... he was glad to see her come back to him, glad that she was safe. Could she really have done the wrong thing? Could it really have been done any differently? The answer had to be no, to live with what she'd done and would do again and again. It had to be no for her to believe that she was still a good person, and that Seifer was a good person for valuing her life more than a stranger's.

So yes, killing a man for the first time taught her to be flexible about what was right and what was wrong … to seek out those foggy areas where your own self-image couldn't be reflected back at you. Doing a thing 'on principal' was foreign to Fujin now, because it inherently felt like it needed to come with a clear point of view of what was right and what was wrong … and she didn't have the luxury of that any more.

Why in Hyne's name she felt the the need to dig her heels in on being mad at Seifer for making a choice about their mission—about Rinoa—that actually made her happy and should relieve some of her stress … she couldn't be sure. Fujin supposed it was the personal nature of it; the repeated offenses, the fact that he refused to listen to her and that he made such drastic, mission-altering choices without consulting her. And the fact that at some point she'd need to explain it to Cid and cover Seifer's ass when the headmaster was inevitably furious they'd placed all their eggs in the basket of a flighty girl in exchange for Balamb's assistance in a possible revolution. Against Galbadia, which essentially meant against Galbadia Garden. Just those small things.

On principal, aside from general pleasantries, she'd been refusing to talk to him for two days straight. She enlisted Raijin to help her rearrange the furniture in the room—moving the beds paramount—and tasked the bronze member of their party with every mission-related initiative she could. She made copious notes, and added them to a stack of papers singing Raijin's praises that would be added to his permanent file; it would bolster his SeeD rank when the mission was complete. Her reports included ridiculous things that genuinely held no merit, like taking the initiative to retrieve sustenance for the team or keeping the quarters clean. Seifer's file, on the other hand, remained empty of additional praises on principal. She left each of their folders in plain sight on the table they shared for meals at least two times a day. She wasn't fucking around.

Sure, Seifer apologized for doing it, but he was unapologetic about the repercussions altogether. He came back from that afternoon excursion with Rinoa (whom they'd all for some reason started calling The Duchess as a code name ... probably because saying her actual name was too hard for Fujin to swallow) and laid his new plan out calmly, all while daring to look her squarely in the eyes. He couldn't even manage being humble about it.

Fujin exploded. FOOLISH, she'd barked accidentally—her inner Balamb Garden beast taking over for a brief moment. You linked our very serious, multi-government spanning mission to a possible coup against one of our most powerful allies? Are you insane? He waved his hand at her, as if he expected this reaction.

Calm down, it won't happen. He casually pulled up a chair next to Raijin at the table, who's gaze was darting between the two of them nervously. I have more control over The Duchess than we'd ever have over Caraway. This puts us in an even better position—she'll be pining away for me, and I'll get her to give us everything she has on Deling, Caraway, the sorceress, and get us in the inner circle for that dinner.

Well, I'm glad you're so confident. She paced around the room, folding her hands behind her back and growing angrier by the minute. I wonder if you'd be so sure if you had explain all of this to Headmaster Cid.
I don't care. I'll call him. I'd be more than happy to talk to that prick right now. Gimme the phone. He bristled at her tone, but refrained from engaging on an adversarial level too deeply.

How do you think that would make me look? She spun around and glared at him. To let you call and talk to him. What does that say about me, as the commander of this operation?

It says you're not the stupid one who made this mistake. He shrugged and cracked his knuckles, his tone starting to sound more like a question the angrier she got, and surprisingly less confident. It places the blame on me.

No, she'd laughed in disbelief at his simplistic assessment. It says I don't have control of my own operation. It says I'm letting you run me. Cid knows about us thanks to you, and he'll think I'm letting you compromise my judgment.

Well, your judgment is compromised! It was compromised before we even got here. Seifer stood up then, insulted by the accusation that he'd revealed something private about them that he shouldn't have.

How so? She asked through a calm anger—his outburst enraging her to the point where she froze up; his sharp words hinting at the truth of their dynamic on this mission that neither of them wanted to voice. All she could do was glare at him with her fists clenched.

Maybe I should go out for a while, ya know? Raijin, sensing that the conversation was taking a personal turn, stood up and tried to excuse himself.

Yeah, probably not a bad idea. Seifer groaned and rubbed the back of his neck, irritated that Raijin was still there to begin with.

NEGATIVE. Fujin ordered. STAY. SIT DOWN. She'd be damned if Seifer was going to control one more thing.

Fine, have it your way. Seifer scoffed, irritated with what he perceived as a retaliatory lack of respect for privacy—and he was right; she was being intentionally petty. Cid made the system Fuu; he knows how each individual cog works. You think he doesn't understand that you're not thinking clearly? With everything that's going on with you?

Well, you letting it slip that we're together in front of him didn't help our position any. Fujin countered.

What was I supposed to do? Who would've stood up for you? 'Cuz you sure as hell weren't saying anything—you could barely keep your shit together that day. I thought I was doing you a favor.

Seif—Raijin warned, but Seifer cut him off mid-sentence and continued on, leaning coolly against the wall behind him as he readied another callous remark.

Trust me Fuu, of all the things Cid could pick from that could be clouding your judgement, I think me fucking your brains out rates pretty low on the list.

Hey man, that's outta line. Raijin interjected, uncomfortable with the vulgar delivery.

Shut the fuck up Raijin—nobody asked you. Seifer spat, turning his wrath toward their bronze friend now. This has nothing to do with you, no matter how much you want it to.

Now that loaded comment sent a silence over the group—the vaguely public reveal of a very private topic wounding their friend in a deep way. Raijin was instantly embarrassed, and Fujin felt instantly
guilty. Seifer was getting out of hand—he was lashing out at the wrong person, and she was responsible for it.

You're right Raijin. Why don't you go for a walk? Fujin kept her eyes fixed on Seifer as she offered her friend some reprieve from further embarrassment.

Yeah … okay… lemme get outta your hair. The two of them stared each other down as Raijin moved around them to gather a few things. He stopped in front of Fujin before heading to the door. Ya good? Seifer seethed silently at the protective gesture.

I'm good, Raij. I'll see you later. He left with her assurance, and without addressing Seifer.

You sure you're 'good'? We could bring him back in if you don't feel safe. Seifer muttered under his breath.

Let it alone. Fujin countered, groaning at Seifer's continued jealousy—he really was a literal and figurative green-eyed monster. You can't bring that up all the time.

Well shit, can't I say anything anymore? He grumbled as he fished around in his coat pocket, pulling out a brand new pack of cigarettes and a lighter—she didn't realize he was smoking again. He'd stopped quietly last year after she'd observed it was a bad habit. Her disapproving look caught his eye and he groaned again and animatedly shoved the pack back in his pocket. Fuck me—I didn't realize you leading this mission meant you got to control everything I do.

Is that really what you think? That I'm trying to control you? Fujin asked him, bewildered. Seifer shook his head, rubbed his chin, and sighed—his gaze shifting to the floor.

No, I don't. Let's just cool down here. I'm ... saying things I don't mean.

More like accidentally saying things that you really do mean. Fujin asserted, and Seifer sighed again at that.

Listen, didn't mean 'compromised' as an insult ... I'm compromised too. He looked up at her again, his green eyes silently pleading for this fight to be over—for her to just forgive him and get on with it, like she always did. We just had this really great morning ... but, you were still struggling. I promised I would do anything I could to make things better. This was my solution.

How about doing something normal? She exhaled, covering her face and talking through her hands—she needed them there to stop herself from screaming. Don't co-opt my mission.

I thought I was making it easier on you.

I know you don't expect me to believe that, Fujin snapped. And for the record, I don't need you to make things easier. I need you to listen to me. And more importantly, I don't need you here right now. I have to think about what I'm going to tell Cid. Fujin marched to the door and opened it, motioning for him to leave.

C'mon. I was trying to help.

I'll be sure to let Cid know that. Right after I tell him he should've known this would happen anyway because, as you so aptly put it, he knows you've been fucking my brains out and I can't manage a single coherent thought.

I didn't mean it that way. Seifer took a step towards her and reached for her elbow, but she pulled her arm away. The swift movement and the active gesture of her kicking him out made him panic.
You're not … ending this, are you? His eyes flickered to the open door and then to her face again.

Of all the things to say right now. Fujin laughed in disbelief again and shook her head. Just get out, Seifer.

Fujin? He clenched his jaw and waited for an answer, anxiously cracking his knuckles when her previous non-answer didn't assuage his fear. … If you're ending this, there's no way I'm walking out that door without a fight

Of course I'm not. She felt a little guilty for asking him to leave—that panicked look burrowed into the soft spot she had for him. But she steeled her nerves and pushed forward. I just … can't look at you right now.

Seifer bit his cheek and nodded his head a few times before squaring his shoulders and walking towards the open door—following the directive of her outstretched hand. He leaned in close to her as he passed by.

I'm sorry this got outta hand. That's not what I wanted. He whispered against her cheek before placing a brief kiss there. When you're ready to talk, let me know.

And that was how they left it. This morning marked the start of a third day of silence, and the tension had them all walking on eggshells.

Fujin could tell that poor Raijin didn't know what to do with himself when they were at odds like this. He moved on from Seifer's insulting words quickly, just to try to find a way to keep the peace, never even asking for an apology…not even expecting one. He aligned himself with Fujin for the most part, but not so much that it would aggravate Seifer—after all, he couldn't be too sympathetic without risking getting clocked by a golden hand. But Fujin observed that Seifer's nerves seemed pretty frayed—he didn't like her silent treatment very much, and was on his best behavior to make it end as soon as possible. Perhaps Raijin was safe … for the time being.

This morning, just like yesterday and the day before that, Seifer crawled out of bed an hour before he and Raijin usually woke up, and snuck up behind her at the table as she read the local newspaper over coffee. He placed his hand on the crook of her neck timidly and whispered good morning, before kissing the top of her head and her cheek, and then waiting—just for a few seconds—to see if she had anything new to say. He brushed his thumb against her skin in hopes that it would coax words out of her, but she didn't break—her hand was on a pen this morning, writing fresh notes about their mission and about the fine work Raijin was doing. Seifer reached over her to grab her cup for a refill, and sighed as he walked away.

On principal, as she watched him move to fetch coffee from the brewer kept on bathroom counter, Fujin fully planned to let the day continue on just like the past two days had. With Seifer silently vying to get back in her good graces, his face falling a little each time she delegated something to Raijin and each time she rewarded their bronze friend's work with another commendation in his file. It took Seifer's ego down a few pegs, and she was certain the punishment fit the crime.

Fujin proudly flipped the paper over when it was full, ready to continue writing whatever nonsense she could just to get under Seifer's skin a little more. The motion of the turning page created a small gust of air, sending a tiny tornado of dust into the faint rays of morning sunlight that were sneaking past the edges of the shades they'd drawn.

In that moment, Fujin thought of the man she killed and about returning to dust someday. What multitudes did that one tornado contain? How many enemies? How many lovers? Her eyes followed it until it dissipated in the shadows.
And that's when the image of Seifer in the bathroom mirror captured her—the angle she was sitting at *just right* to watch him unnoticed. His hands were twisted backwards, his palms gripping the counter, and his head hung low. He tilted his chin up to look at himself, and his chest heaved with a burdensome sigh before he reached over to grab the coffee cup and refill it, his fingers brushing over the stain her lips had left on the cup's edge. Seifer had *such command* over everything; for so many years, Fujin was sure the sun rose and set on him, or that he may very well be a single point in the universe that pulled in *all the stars*. But there he stood, when he thought no one was watching, examining his own shortcomings and looking sad, worried, and sorry. And for the first time, Fujin realized it was *her* that did that to him—that she was the one who made the center of the universe question himself.

*So what did any of this matter, if the universe was hers? They would all be dust someday, anyway.*

Seifer startled when she appeared in the doorway. She'd been holding out so well ... but she just couldn't bear to see him sad. His eyebrows raised high and then fell again when she looked into his eyes; it was the first time she'd done that since they'd fought.

"Hey," he whispered, glad to see her approach him. He reached for her wrist with one hand and pulled her into the bathroom, as he closed the door behind her with the other. "Are we ... gonna make it through this? I'll say sorry a million times if that's what you want—"

"Stop. Don't say anything else about it." Anything he could possibly say would just rub her the wrong way right now. Seifer thought he did the right thing, and Fujin knew he did the wrong thing—they were at an impasse ... and they were wasting time. "We'll make it through everything."

"I've missed you." He complied with her request to drop the topic and put his hand on her waist. "I don't want to fight with you."

"Then don't fight me." She echoed the words he'd whispered to her in Dollet, as he comforted her on that terrible night that they laid together and struggled to make sense of what was happening between them. She regretted missing out on that that time with him already ... and right now, with everything that laid before them, it felt pointless to keep punishing Seifer on principal when what he'd done *actually made her happy*. She didn't want to waste another minute.

Seifer decoded the silence that followed, and reached behind her to lock the bathroom door. He kissed her, removed her clothes, and lifted her on the counter—grateful to accept the tender amends she allowed him; skin gliding over skin, shedding traces of themselves with the remnants of others who came before them. With the way he kept his eyes on her, Fujin was pretty sure these past couple of days had scared Seifer into thinking he might not get the chance again.
Fujin forgave him so easily.

In no way did Seifer think he was wrong for making the choice he did, but he also knew he wasn't worthy of quick forgiveness. He at least expected a few more days of silence before she allowed him back in to her good graces.

But she appeared in the doorway that morning, her features softened and her eyes looking full of … regret? Pity? He hadn't been able to nail it down, and forgot about wanting to entirely when she let his hands touch her in the way he needed—desperate and grasping to keep her close before she slipped away again. Save for the first time, that stolen moment on the edge of the bathroom counter was probably the best they'd ever had together. There'd been a threat of it not happening again, and the thought of that, even now—almost a month later—gave him chills.

He hadn't liked the feeling of the distance she put between them those few days at all—the silence made time pass slowly, as if her words were the very mechanism that made the seconds tick by. Waiting was something that drove him crazy, and Seifer was pretty sure she knew it. He'd never tell her, but if she'd kept the silent treatment up for another day, he would've offered to head home on the next train to Balamb to get out of her way. Goodbye, automatic SeeD status. Hello, Fujin rooming alone with Raijin—whatever was necessary to keep this thing between them intact. He was lucky Fujin gave in that morning; losing her would be nothing short of catastrophic.

That. That apocalyptic surge that came with just the idea of losing her, was the only thing that made him take Fujin's crazy theories about sorceress lineages into consideration. Not very seriously … but seriously enough to give him pause and entertain lending some merit to it. He did feel the need to be around her constantly. He definitely felt very protective of her. He was still getting a little jealous of Raijin on occasion, though he was doing a fuck of a lot better at keeping it to himself.

And of course, there was also the fact that dramatics like this would normally make Seifer cut and run … it was a little odd that all of this complication hadn't turned him off. Normally he couldn't be bothered with complicated. He needed to be free to live his life; to focus on nothing but honing his skills and becoming the best Balamb Garden had ever seen. Seifer always had this gut feeling, or … more like a premonition, that he was destined for greatness. He used to think SeeD was the vehicle for it. But those premonitions of his were interpreted years ago, through the lens of a young dreamer with nothing but campy old movies about noble adventurers to use as a point of reference.

Suddenly the trappings of that predestined path—training, graduation, SeeD induction, missions—weren't resonating with him much anymore. Was that just his general Garden malaise, or a sign that any sorcery Fujin might have access to was beguiling him? Seifer didn't think the latter was true. He'd already started to sour on SeeD a couple of years ago; Kramer's recent negligence with Fujin was just another irritating item to add to the laundry list of things he found wrong with the Garden system.
In fact, the more he inspected the future that Headmaster Cid and the other administrative cronies had selected for him, the more Seifer realized he was really only a spoke in Garden's wheel. There was nothing special about it; nothing particularly unique—he and Squall Leonhart wouldn't be the last gunblade specialists that Garden raised, and even if they were … so what? *Were they just going to compete with each other all the lives? Was that all they'd ever accomplish? Shit, even Leonhart would be disappointed with that.* It was dizzying and claustrophobic to think about—just him and Squall silently vying for pointless missions, dueling each other for decades.

It was only now, as he caught himself unthinkingly doing shit that risked his place in the Garden system (*in this particular case, risking his express pass into SeeD and not caring in the slightest*) that Seifer realized his interpretation of what the future held was wrong. He felt so off the mark in knowing what his purpose in the world was now. But he got the distinct feeling that he wasn't supposed to be some renowned hero of Balamb Garden after all … maybe Fujin was his *one great thing.*

*And the thought of that? A great life; a future shaped around Fujin?* Well, that made him feel anything but claustrophobic. Fujin gave him *air.* She made him feel *free.*

The only thing that was stifling was her fast acceptance of his half-hearted apology. Seifer was testing the boundaries of this new space they were in, without even realizing he was doing it, and he just discovered that when Fujin gave him an inch in this new space, he could take a mile … and then a mile or two more. *Now that* was an unfortunate thing for him to know, for her sake. Seifer wouldn't *want* to, and wouldn't *mean* to, but he knew in some way he'd take every extra inch he could … and that didn't bode well for a peaceful or uncomplicated partnership.

No matter though. Every good feeling was amplified because there were bad ones to experience, too. He and Fuu may be destined for some fiery face-offs, but the reconciliation certainly felt *pretty fucking good.* It was worth the headaches.

"Seifer, are you awake over there?" A creamy-toned hand belonging to Rinoa waved in front of Seifer's face, pausing to playfully tap the tip of his nose with her index finger. "You look like you're about to fall asleep."

He shook his head, his eyes focusing again to find Rinoa smiling coyly at him from the other side of the small café table. Her dark hair was pulled back in a loose ponytail of some sort, but the purposely placed tendrils framing her face and a fresh coat of makeup betrayed her attempt at a *just-rolled-out-of bed for a casual breakfast with a friend* look.

"Sorry, haven't had enough caffeine yet." Seifer smiled and lifted his mug to his lips. "Breakfast is probably the worst time to meet up with me." Rinoa made a face at that before taking a sip of her own coffee.

"Your eyes are super bloodshot again. You look like you haven't slept in over a week." The statement had the air of a question, but Seifer ignored the lilt in her voice and shrugged.

She was right—Seifer knew he looked like shit. He wasn't sleeping well at all. He'd maybe netted 20 hours total in the past week, which wasn't nearly enough for someone who usually needed a solid eight to function. *But if he wasn't talking to Fujin about why he wasn't sleeping, he sure as hell couldn't mention a word of it to Rinoa.*

"Allergies, probably." He took another sip of his coffee and looked around the already crowded square. "All these open-air markets."

"Maybe it's all the flowers?" Rinoa reasoned, accepting his lie easily as the waiter arriving to deliver
their food offered a new distraction. Rinoa smiled kindly and whispered thanks before turning her attention to Seifer again. "One day a rumor spreads that the sorceress likes peonies, and the next day the city is full of them," she groaned and rolled her eyes. "It's so weird … the things people latch on to."

"Tell me about it. On the way here I walked by a couple of the occult shops and there were already lines out the door. I mean, come on. It's 9 a.m. people." He commiserated genuinely, as being surrounded by these particular obsessed fanatics was starting to grate on him. He hated that the sorceress problem was the first thing he was reminded of when he stepped into the street. Not that he could stop thinking about it lately…

"Speaking of which, I still don't know when you're supposed to get there for the dinner tomorrow night. All the extra security stuff is making things more complicated. Is that okay?" Rinoa sheepishly looked down at her hands. "I know you guys are getting towards the end of your trip, and you probably have a bunch of things planned. You probably want to spend as much time together as you can before you all head back to school, and before you maybe transfer to Galbadia."

"Don't worry about it—it's fine. The dinner's important." Rinoa nodded and sighed, pushing her food around on her plate with her fork.

"Have I told you I'm going to miss you?"

"Yeah. Several times." He resisted the urge to make a face at the repetition—sure he'd been a little flattered initially, but the girl was really stuck on this whole thing about him leaving soon. Even knowing that Seifer was in love with Fujin, Rinoa still couldn't stop herself from caring about him … he was glad his instincts to sever the dependence on General Caraway had played out well. Rinoa's need of his approval made her pretty loose lipped; they'd learned more about the sorceress' time in Deling through her than through anything Caraway shared with them.

"Well, I'm going to miss you. And Raijin … and Fujin, too … even though I'm pretty sure she won't miss me. It's been really nice having you all to talk to this summer."

"Hey, c'mon. We're not going away forever. We'll still be working together on Timber's independence." He was fairly certain that was a lie too, and he glazed over the comment about Fujin altogether. Rinoa was right about that, after all. No need to confirm something they both already knew was true. "Besides, we still have a couple of weeks left here. Don't start counting down the days yet."

"I can't help it." Sadness flashed in Rinoa's eyes as they connected with Seifer's again. "You've been … I mean, you've really changed me." In a quick and unexpected motion, she set down her fork and reached across the table to touch his arm. "I know we haven't known each other for that long. But … talking with you this summer has helped me really see things, you know? I have this clear vision about Timber now, and for once in my life I feel like I can make it happen. I feel like I can take on the world now and that's all because of you."

"Hey, hey, hey, now. You're the one who came up with a plan. I'm just a sounding board." He patted her hand, and then leaned back in his chair to sever the contact. "Don't go giving me all the credit. Especially not if Caraway finds out. Pretty sure he's not going to miss us." Seifer winked, and turned his attention to his own breakfast.

"Seifer." Rinoa's tone grew more serious. "Listen … I know I shouldn't, and I'm not expecting anything to come from it, but I have to tell you before you leave. I'm falling in—"

"You're right. You shouldn't." Seifer interrupted her and looked up from his plate to find Rinoa
staring at him from the other side of the table, her dark eyes wide and wet with the threat of tears.

He'd known this was coming. After all, the point of this whole mission was to keep her interested, and he'd done a good job of it. He'd spent the past month keeping her at arm's length while offering her just enough attention to give her hope he might swing back in her direction. The game forced him and his friends to allow Rinoa to become an unofficial member of the Posse; attending fishing excursions with the Balamb trio, joining them for drinks on the town after dinners at Caraway Mansion, and unwittingly subjecting herself to low-grade espionage all the while.

And even for the sake of the mission, Fujin was growing less than impressed with Rinoa's constant presence by the day; unable to stand the girl's attempts at stereotypical female friendship, and the simple fact that Rinoa had strong, and growing, feelings for Seifer. He had to hand it to her though, Rinoa made some honest (and hilarious) attempts to befriend Fujin. There were a couple of invites to go shopping or to the movies—just the two of them. Fujin would only stare at her, mystified as to why she'd ever ask her to go out and do those things. She shopped by herself, it was more efficient, she'd say. She didn't watch movies with anyone, it wasn't productive (except with Seifer of course, and even that had other goals in mind).

Fujin blocked her advances at every turn, horrified at the idea of being left alone with her. But, Seifer found that she could at least tolerate Rinoa when conducting utilitarian tasks, like teaching her how to fight. It was Seifer's idea to take Rinoa out shopping for a weapon—just for something to do with her that wasn't fucking talking—and he almost regretted it when the first thing she picked up was a projectile-style weapon called a Blaster Edge. That particular family of weapons was in Fujin's wheelhouse, not his, and he knew that there was a pretty good chance Fuu would 'teach' Rinoa right into an early grave.

But Rinoa, confident as ever, seemed to know exactly what she was doing and never considered her own imminent demise. The weapon provided the perfect opportunity to find some common ground with the silver member of the Posse. Fujin hedged at the idea of training her at first, but grumbled at Rinoa's first few attempts at trying to hit a target under Seifer's instruction.

_Hyne, you're doing it all wrong_. Fujin picked up her shruiken begrudgingly, and stood beside her. _You can stand however you want, but you have to find your center of gravity. It'll help keep your balance, and you'll be quicker on your feet._ Rinoa readjusted her body and a small smile snuck onto her face as the lesson continued.

Rinoa certainly had a knack for needling her way in to someone's world—hell, she'd even grown on Seifer a bit. Enough to make him feel a little bad for her right now, as he shut down the declaration she was about to make.

"Do yourself a favor and don't say it." Seifer crossed his arms over his chest, his features softening. "Maybe under different circumstances. If Fujin and I hadn't started something …" His voice trailed off, realizing that it was actually partially true. If he and Fujin hadn't started something, he and Rinoa probably would've at least had a proper summer fling. But it would've stopped the second he packed his suitcase for the return to Balamb. No matter how much fun that might've been, it wasn't really what he wanted.

"I know. It's just that, ever since my mother died …" Rinoa smiled wryly and fiddled with her napkin. "I just believe in telling people how you feel about them, when you feel it."

"That's probably a lot healthier than what I do," Seifer shrugged, and tried to change the topic for her. "I don't usually talk about that stuff; Garden didn't teach us to communicate feelings very well."

"No?" Rinoa asked sarcastically and chuckled quietly. "Not too shocking. They probably don't want
you to feel much at all." She paused, and folded her hands in her lap. Her eyes had cleared up by now, and that charming smile of hers spread across her lips. "So what about with Fujin? Have you told her yet?"

_Of course I have._ The words echoed in his head as he remembered he still needed to enforce the partial lie he'd been maintaining about his relationship with Fujin.

"Not yet. We're not really official … things are still rocky, so …" _Hyne, he hated describing it like that._ "No professions of love just yet. She might punch me." Rinoa laughed at that and nodded agreeably as she took another sip of coffee.

"Well, I don't have to feel too bad about bringing you to this dinner, then. It would be a little awkward if she was actually your girlfriend. I'd have to bring Raijin instead."

"I mean, you can still bring him if you want. I'm pretty sure he'd love that." Seifer resumed eating. "He probably won't get the reaction you're hoping to get out of your father though." Rinoa playfully grimaced at that.

"Seifer Almasy, _how dare you!_ I'm bringing you to this because I want to spend time with you, and because you want to be there for the conversation." Seifer raised an eyebrow and grinned, and Rinoa smiled back, reaching across the table to shove his shoulder gently. "Fine. And maybe to make Caraway a little mad. _He really_ doesn't like you very much. Haven't really figured out why yet … of all the guys I've brought around, you've been the most like him." Rinoa leaned back in her chair and watched him eat. "He sure likes Fujin though—he pulls her aside almost every time you guys come over. Go figure."

"Yeah, go figure." Seifer mumbled under his breath, just low enough for it to go unnoticed among the sounds of the street. He'd _definitely_ noticed Caraway's preoccupation with Fujin—it'd been pissing him off since their dinner in Dollet.

"Hey, whatever keeps him off my back. He actually told me to invite you guys over again. For a late lunch tomorrow, before the dinner. He said he wanted to go over _protocol_ with you. Makes sense, I guess. You haven't been to one of these before and I never pay attention."

"Well that should be fun." Seifer read between the lines—Caraway needed to meet before the dinner took place. Which was strange, given the fact that he hadn't passed any valuable information to them in a couple of weeks. For the most part, he mostly just kept pulling Fujin aside and asking her personal questions about Pandemona and how she was doing. Which Seifer didn't like for a variety of reasons.

"Yeah, I should probably warn you. He's been in a terrible mood ever since he got back from his trip. Which is weird … he usually likes going to the Garden trustee meetings."

"A trustee meeting?" Seifer perked up at that. "Wonder what that's all about. They usually meet when school's in session."

"No clue. Probably just boring old military-like stuff. Restocking ammunition supplies, pushing failing students towards signing up for the Galbadian army. Hyne knows what they talk about."

"Well, I'll run lunch plans by Fuu and Raijin." He picked up a napkin to wipe his hands, deciding not to pry about the meeting right now and rouse suspicion. "I doubt they have anything going on though. We'll be there."

"How noble of you, putting up with Caraway electively and all." Rinoa beamed, happy with the
prospect of seeing more of Seifer in any capacity.

"He might not like me, but I respect rank. If he wants us there, we'll go." Seifer shrugged as he waited for her to finish her meal. It was good she was feeling talkative this morning; if she wasn't forcing him to participate he would've probably passed out right at the table.

"So, if you really aren't worried about the three of you getting much time alone before you leave … then you all wouldn't mind coming to the beach with me tomorrow? You've been promising to go with me all summer." The slight whine in her voice grated on him made him cringe inwardly. "Don't get me wrong, I love training with Fujin but it's called a vacation for a reason. You guys should all relax a little."

"I don't think so …" Seifer hedged, not really liking the idea of bringing Rinoa and Fujin anywhere they'd actually need to converse at, let alone to a location that allowed people to be scantily clad. He could see exactly where that was going.

"You just said Fujin and Raijin didn't have much going on." Rinoa gave him a stern look. "And if they don't have much going on then you certainly don't either. You guys are basically the same person."

"Yeah and answering for all of us: we're not really beach people."

"Please! What does that even mean?" She exclaimed, laughing in disbelief before leaning back in her chair and crossing her arms over her chest sternly. "And how exactly do you expect me to believe that? How many of Raijin's fishing stories have I sat through?" Seifer was about to protest again, but Rinoa arched a dark eyebrow and narrowed her eyes.

"I won't bring you to the dinner unless you all come. I mean it." It was masked by a playful tone, but she definitely wasn't bluffing.

"You wouldn't." Seifer shot back, grinning and quirking an eyebrow in response as he played her game, despite his irritation.

"Oh, I would."

Another interesting fact he learned about Rinoa was that she was very talented at small-scale blackmail. She'd never be the kind of person to use that talent to cause harm to someone else … but she was pretty comfortable leveraging it to get things she wanted.

"Fine, I'll run it by them." Seifer answered, and halfway through the sentence Rinoa squealed with delight. "But don't be surprised if Fujin doesn't come. She doesn't do well in the sunlight, for obvious reasons."

"Oh she'll come." Rinoa nodded and made a casual motion that indicated she didn't really care. She might've had the impression that something was happening between Fujin and Seifer, but she didn't seem to respect that much. Probably because he was intentionally also not portraying himself as entirely respectful of it. "We'll leave whenever she wants." She chuckled again and then stuck her tongue out at him before taking a sip from a glass of water. "I win!"

"Yeah yeah, whatever." Seifer grumbled, closing his eyes to rub at his eyelids; he'd fight her more on this but he was just too fucking tired. "Speaking of leaving, I should probably get going. Sorry to leave you here alone …"

"I know, I know. You have 'things to do.' Whatever that means." Her pale fingers gingerly shuffled through the small paper packets of sugar on the table. "I guess I should be happy you came out at
"I didn't say that." Seifer put his elbows on the table and leaned forward. "But yes, now that you mention it. I'm not really a morning person. I don't wake up early for just anyone."

"I'd say I was flattered, but you didn't really 'wake up' for me either. You were basically sleepwalking through breakfast. Hope I'm not really that boring …"

Seifer did find Rinoa to be a little boring, but the reason he could barely keep his eyes open right now truly wasn't her fault. The sorceress was strong in his mind lately; those nightmares of his were coming back full force. They'd tapered off mid-summer, but over the past couple of weeks he'd been consistently shooting awake in bed covered in a thick sweat—his chest heaving and his eyes darting around the dark hotel room in a panic as he came down from the haze of a restless sleep.

It took him a few moments to realize he wasn't truly in them; to register that the lanterns in the street weren't distant burning stars, and that the cool evening air wasn't the chill of a galaxy and icy talons clawing his skin. He'd usually realize where he was when his eyes found Fujin in the dark; her pale form glowing on the bed just a few feet away from him like a beacon to guide him back to reality. The sight of her soothed him. *He hated to admit it, but in those moments of confusion the nightmares actually scared him a little.*

Seifer wasn't afraid of death—the thought of that wasn't what brought him to a nauseating cold sweat. In that hazy space between wakefulness and sleep, he was mostly just petrified he'd never see her again. He felt utterly alone in the final moments of those nightmares, in that quiet space after the dream where the comforting wind he ran toward was wrenched away from him. *Thanks for the fucking subtle metaphor, subconscious,* he mused one evening as he fought the urge to spring out of bed and wake her.

"Sorry, it's not you," he replied to Rinoa absentmindedly as he thumbed through a few bills in his wallet. "It's allergies and just being busy. Breakfast's on me, for being such bad company. Call you later to confirm everything for tomorrow?"

"Sure, works for me." Rinoa smiled and blushed as Seifer flirtatiously reached across the table to gently pinch her cheek. Shit, he at least needed to give the girl *something*.

"Later Duchess." Seifer turned away from her, winking at her once more for good measure, before making his way back to Deling's main street and the Galbadia Hotel, where Fujin and Raijin were waiting.

*So, Caraway had something to say. Apparently something to say specifically to Fujin, since he was inviting all of them over for lunch.* If he'd wanted to make things easier, the General would've just asked Seifer to come over early by himself. It still got under his skin that Caraway wouldn't even give him the time of day … he was trying his best not to let it bother him that Fuu was the preferred contact.

Seifer was quick to pin that on anything but Caraway's judgment of different skill levels—*Fujin outranked Seifer on paper and the General was just following protocol; Fujin was hot and the old man was probably enjoying salivating over her.* He told himself it wasn't a slight to Fujin's accomplishments at all … but he also fully realized it was pretty blatantly sexist.

It was hard *not* to be blatantly sexist though, given how they'd all been brought up. Hell, the differences in the style of their uniforms said everything pretty plainly. Female SeeD, forced to parade around in impractical short skirts, used their looks when strength failed them—they had to take a whole course about it. Male SeeD were considered by Garden to be stronger and more
capable in a lot of ways, and generally less reliant on social exploitation. They weren't required to take any classes besides the regular curriculum—training, sparring, strengthening.

Was it unfair? Absolutely. But from a purely biological standpoint did it make sense the chips would fall that way? Absolutely, also. It was hard to resist deeply engrained natural instincts, and these sorts of biological imperatives were as old as time. Just in the past year Seifer had heard countless stories of guys in SeeD losing their shit over seeing a woman die on the field. He wondered how those numbers washed out—if there were more female covert ops officers than there were male ones for that reason …

Anyway, he hadn't really thought much about all of that until Fujin was finally in SeeD… and it was just occurring to him that she could potentially be given a mission where she was instructed to use those covert ops skills. They probably needed to have a conversation about stuff like that, at some point.

All the more reason to consider leaving this Garden shit behind.

As he made his way back to the hotel, Seifer couldn't help but think of all these complications that being in SeeD kept bringing up. He wondered if there was really any pay off at all, other than the obvious benefits of a home, having a guaranteed job at a young age, and being set with money for the rest of your life. What did any of that matter if you weren't happy with the things SeeD made you do? The thought of Fujin on a mission, in normal physical danger or on a covert operation experiencing some form of physical subjugation, made him queasy. All the money and job security in the world wasn't worth that.

They had a lot to work out. A lot Seifer hadn't bothered to think about yet because they had so many other things going on that took precedence. But because they'd known each other their whole lives, Seifer found that the newness of this thing between them was wearing off quickly. The excitement was still there—Hyne, she ran through his mind all day—but that feeling of being a little gun-shy when it came to talking about serious things was virtually gone for him now. He genuinely wanted to know how Fujin would handle a mission like that, and if she really saw them staying at Garden all their lives. He wanted to know if she'd back him if he wanted to opt out of SeeD, and her opinion on what they'd do with Raijin when they inevitably started their life together (he'd probably just have to come along with them … Seifer would miss the dope, even though he hated to admit it). Did she see the inevitability of it all, too? He hoped so.

With the line of work they were in right now, they should probably both know what … measures … the other would want taken if things went really south in a fight. Did each member of SeeD have their own medical directives filed once they were inducted? And If they did, had Fujin already signed something without him knowing?

More importantly, why was he thinking about all this shit right now? Honestly, way to make a generally stressful situation worse, Almasy.

As he approached the hotel entrance, his mind wandered to the more pleasant thoughts of the Island Closest to Heaven. He'd never been, but he remembered Fujin's description of it from when she came back from that training mission. He could picture a cottage there; perched just off the edge of a bluff, small and rustic because they'd built it with their own hands. It would be a bit of an eyesore to anyone else but them; loose shingles on the roof, weathered wood clapboards with peeling paint. There was a ladder built to a dock where a hand-hewn boat was moored, a few projects strewn around the lawn because they were too busy enjoying life to finish them, and a chocobo or two of Raijin's tied up in a ramshackle stable near the studio they had to build for him. The rooms in the house were probably full, by that point, and Raijin would've needed a place of his own.
There would be endless sunlight, a calm breeze, and the scent of saltwater. A sturdy fence to keep everyone safe from the monsters he and Fujin kept clearing out from time to time. Would it be a challenge? Sure, it was an island and that made it a struggle all on its own. But it would be their island, their home ... their own family. For once in their lives, they wouldn't just be orphaned. They'd belong, and have something that belonged to them. Not to Garden or to SeeD ... just theirs. Their own version of paradise.

"Ah, Mr. Almasy." As Seifer entered through the door, the clerk at the front desk raised a hand to flag him down. "Good morning."

"Morning." Seifer waved and kept walking at first, not picking up on the body language that he was being asked to stop. He really was tired.

"Sir, your friends wanted me to let you know they were in the dining room, if I saw you." The woman smiled and motioned to the stairwell to his right. "They only headed down 10 or so minutes ago. They should still be there."

"Ah, great." He smiled and nodded in thanks as he turned and made his way downstairs. This really was a nice hotel—much better than that dive in Timber.

He spotted the silver streak of her hair first, at a small table in the back. Poor Fuu stood out like a sore thumb no matter where she went—a curse for her, but a blessing for everyone else. Raijin's back was turned to him, and by the tilt of his head and the slight frown on Fujin's face, Seifer could tell Raijin had already had his coffee and was more chatty than Fujin was prepared for at this early hour.

Seifer snuck up behind them, flicking the back of Raijin's neck as he walked by.

"Ouch! What the—oh. Ya jerk." Seifer dodged a swat from Raijin and smirked as he leaned down to kiss Fujin's cheek.

"Morning." He pulled up a chair beside her, and felt her hand touch his arm in recognition. Seifer grinned at Raijin once he was settled in his seat. "Morning, Raijin."

"Yeah, yeah. Morning." Their bronze friend moved to rub the tender spot.

"You look tired." Fujin observed, squeezing him before her hand glided away.

"She's being nice. Ya look like shit." Raijin smiled triumphantly as he weighed in on the conversation. At least things between the two of them were getting back to normal.

"Didn't sleep well again. The street noises have been bothering me." He grabbed her glass of water and took a sip, not wanting to look at her as he told a white lie.

"Weird—I haven't heard a thing, ya know?" Raijin put his elbows on the table and leaned toward them both.

"Well, you sleep like the dead. No surprises there." Raijin made an agreeable face and dropped the topic. Fujin looked doubtful, but as she silently prioritized the things they needed to talk about in her head, Seifer lying about why he wasn't sleeping well must've registered low on the list.

"How was breakfast?" She asked, resting her chin on her fist and tilting her head to the side a little. There was a bit of a sharp, jealous edge to her voice; she was probably irritated he'd left to go meet Rinoa without waking her ... and Seifer was enjoying the hint of jealousy a little more than he should.
"Fine." He conducted a quick sweep of the room to be sure no one was listening. "No time on the
dinner, yet. It's still on though. Everything's good." Fujin rolled her eyes and pried the water from his
hand.

"It'd be better if we knew when you needed to be there."

"It's not like knowing when it starts has any impact on how things will go." He shrugged, and tried
to put her at ease—she didn't like to leave ends loosely tied, and Seifer could tell that him being
within striking distance of a sorceress, with everything that was going on, was making her nervous.
"It's just a dinner. Don't worry about it."

"Yeah Fuu," Raijin chimed in, kicking her foot playfully under the table. "Don't be so serious. We
don't even hafta fight anyone. Seif's probably not even gonna talk to her—he's just listening."

"'Right." He agreed and placed his hand low on her back, pressing against her firmly. "Pretty
standard. I'll be outta there before you know it." Fujin nodded, her cheeks flushing a little at her
nervousness being read by both of them so well.

"Besides …" Seifer cleared his throat as he readied to tell them both the next bit. *Fujin was going to
hate this. "Rinoa basically wants us to spend the entire day with her tomorrow." Her eyes snapped to
meet his, the corners of her lips twisting to a frown.

"Training?" There was a pleading in her voice, even though she knew better. No way would a girl
like Rinoa would want to risk bruises or getting covered in Geezard blood the morning of a big
event.

"No, sorry. Lunch with Caraway in late in the afternoon, to go over 'protocol' with me for the dinner.
And apparently she just wants to see your smiling face." He reached out to press his thumb to the
corner of her lips that was within reach; she pushed his hand away and he couldn't help but grin—he
even thought her disappointment was adorable. "And she wanted to go to the beach. In the
morning."

"Hey awesome!" Raijin didn't bother reading the room before he spoke.

"How did that happen?" Fujin asked, turning her attention away from him and growing pensive.
"Seems like a weird request."

"She's just freaking out that we're leaving soon. That and it's what people our age are *supposed* to do
during the summer."

"The beach …" Fujin whispered, rubbing her temple for a few moments before her fingers drifted
down to scratch her jaw. She seemed to forget that Seifer and Raijin were there for a moment. He
wasn't sure what he was hoping her reaction to the news would be … but he definitely thought she'd
be angry, not *contemplative."

"What's the matter?" Fujin shook her head at him, silver strands of hair falling in front of her eyes for
a moment. He resisted the urge to brush them from her face—ever since the fight, he was trying to be
more respectful of *boundaries*. They were talking about work, so he was at least *attempting* to keep
it a little more professional.

"Nothing. I'm just glad this is almost over … I'm ready to head back to Garden. Not that seeing Cid
will be much fun."

*Cid …* Seifer made a point to put that out of his mind this past month. He was going to have to make
sure Fujin didn't try to take the fall for the choice he made to promise Rinoa SeeD's help with
Timber's independence. *And taking responsibility for it meant … well, he wasn't entirely sure what it meant.* He knew he wasn't Cid's favorite—hell, he'd been shocked when the Headmaster asked Seifer and his friends to form the Disciplinary Committee. Squall Leonhart was already Cid's golden-boy, no matter how many times he tried to hide it by paying Seifer a compliment. He'd heard the way Cid talked about Squall when he gave potential donors on a tour around Garden. *We have two gunblade specialist here—one of them has the perfect mix of focus and tenacity; we think he's the future of this place. There's no way that was meant to describe Seifer …*

Anyway, without that sort've social protection it was plausible Seifer could be expelled. The choice to leave Garden might be made for him, before he even got a chance to talk to Fujin about it.

"Let's not think about that yet." Seifer tried to brush that topic aside. "We have long list of other DC related stuff to do when we get back to get ready for the year. I'm more worried about all that … less worried about Kramer."

"You already have a list going?" Fujin asked, looking at him once again. Something told Seifer she was dreading having him in charge again.

"Yep. Got a couple going." He winked at her, alluding to the not-so-safe for public consumption list he'd been joking with her about since they'd started dating. "We're gonna be busy."

"Why you guys bringing up this 'list' all the time? Am I missing something?" Raijin's question caught Seifer off-guard, but as always Fujin was quick on her feet.

"Enemies." She answered immediately, her cheeks only reddening for a moment as she swallowed the coffee she was taking a sip of. "We've been making a list of people who've crossed us. Planning on getting back at them somehow this year." Seifer laughed out loud at her creative excuse and put his elbows up on the table.

"Anyone you wanna add Raij?"

"Hyne, Xu. She's probably on there already though." Seifer and Fujin nodded, both agreeing with the fact that Xu would make the list and the lie that Xu was already on it.

"Say, Fuu—you wanna go check the drop location with me?" Seifer changed the subject again—this time to save poor Fujin from embarrassment. "If Caraway wants to meet, maybe there's something he's been trying to tell us. We haven't been in a few days."

"Sure. Let's finish up, and then we'll go for a walk." Fujin concurred, and she and Raijin both turned their attention back to their food. Seifer listened quietly as Raijin started to divulge the details of a hookup gone wrong at a local bar a few nights ago between bites. For just a moment, things felt normal between them all again. If he did get expelled from Garden, maybe they'd leave with him. Maybe they could all get a start on the next phase of their lives a little earlier than planned.

Seifer figured he should probably start doing some research on how to build a house, or crafting an entire boat out of tree. You could sit back and let something happen to you, or you could look at what the future had in store, decide if you wanted what it offered, and do something about it if you didn't.

*Seifer the carpenter. Seifer the family man.* He could get used to the idea of that.
Derelict

_Rattled_. That was the best word to describe how she felt this past month. The wind _rattled_ her; the information about Edea Kramer _rattled_ her; that blowout with Seifer _rattled_ her. _The omnipresence of Rinoa Heartilly more than rattled her_. Fujin was shaken, to say the very least. The world was just a degree left of center, and in spite of her best efforts to stabilize herself, she couldn't manage a secure foothold.

Leaning back in her chair, she crossed one bare pale leg over the other and tilted her head to the sky with closed eyes, dragging in a long breath that expanded her lungs to full measure. She held the air in, glad to have the slightest control over _something_ in her life, even if it was only her own breathing.

Despite what they'd lead Rinoa to believe, this wasn't actually a vacation and the Posse hadn't come to Deling prepared for trips to the beach. Bereft of an umbrella for shade, Fujin made due with a pair of sunglasses from a touristy gas station attached to the rental car place. Seifer, in an act of chivalry, picked them up to save her from the embarrassment of running into the clerk who'd caught them in the act in the parking garage.

She learned to never trust a man with such a nuanced task when Seifer returned proudly with a goofy, oversized pair. _What? They're funny. C'mere_, he chortled, defending the choice as he slid them onto her face. _They look cute. AND we match_. He slipped an identical pair out of his pocket and slid them onto the bridge of his aristocratic nose as a grin stretched across his lips. They looked great on him—_most everything did—but Fujin was skeptical of their adorableness. She was sure people would assume she was impersonating a Bite Bug. _Don't be ridiculous_, he made a face and slung his arms around her as she protested, _my vain little Bug_.

It was nice to have this side of him back, no matter how fleeting it might be. Ever since that blowout they had, Seifer was more like his old self; jovial, goofy—that side of him that no one knew existed except for Fujin and Raijin. _Of course_, she could tell he was still counting Fujin's willingness to forgive him as a win, and that his good behavior was mostly a direct result of feeling like he'd already gotten away with murder—why push his luck?

_Why indeed…_

Seifer usually loved to push everything to the edge, and everyone to their last nerve—even her. But somehow that fight seemed to burrow deep into the untamable part of him; cracking that confident, indignant, righteous shell that Fujin thought wouldn't break for anyone. _And yet …_ he was treading lightly and speaking softly—no questioning her leadership, or asserting his ever pervasive dominance. He was treating her respectfully, like an equal, and was pretending that it felt normal to him, too. It wasn't without effort—especially whenever the wind came back with a force that threatened to knock her to her knees and he flew into a controlling, protective panic—_but at least he was trying_.

Despite the respite from Seifer's moodiness and the burden it lifted, Fujin still couldn't manage to _relax_. When the fight with Seifer resolved so did the distraction of her anger, and in its wake she realized that her last epic struggle with the wind left her body and mind altered—as if she'd given up a share of herself to her fellow sorceress-GF inhabitant. Everything in her world felt once-removed, distant and disjointed. Each decision she made felt just a beat too slow, like it was being relayed through another point in her consciousness—_stopping off to inform Pandemona, or the sorceress, or whatever it might be that was residing inside of her_.

Even reclining in her chair proved burdensome; her arms and legs felt beyond the reach of her
synapses as she attempted at a languid lean that wound up being more rigid than casual. She placed her arms behind her head, wriggled in the chair to tilt back farther, and tried to loosen up a bit, but it only made her feel more awkward.

Could she call it an out of body experience? A shared body experience? A chimerism? Coming up with a description hadn't been a necessity, since she wasn't ready to tell Seifer about it just yet. But with the force seeming to grow stronger by the day—the energy on the precipice of bursting as it prepared for unknown release—Fujin thought it might be time to find the words. Before that day in the library she was sure this thing inside her, that was some amalgamation of Pandemona, her mother, and the ancient magic of sorceresses past, wouldn't hurt her. But Hyne had it felt like death coming back from that day. The loudening whir of the breeze in her ears as each day passed made her leerier of the pain that was to come.

It was eerie to feel this way, and even eerier to find herself at a Galbadian beach with Seifer and Raijin that looked very similar to the nightmare she'd had last month (minus the presence of a military occupation and the foreboding gray sky). She relived that memory of that terror briefly when Seifer mentioned this little trip, but pushed it to the far recesses of her mind when the thought of his hands ringing her neck resurfaced. She couldn't think about that right now—she already felt heavy with the burden of reality; no need to add the unearthly macabre to the mix.

Retracting from the uncomfortable lean, she crossed her pale arms over her stomach, frowning as she took in the contrast of white flesh against the black fabric of the swimsuit she bought late last night. It was the only thing she could find after putting the shopping off all day. It was a one-piece, and unfortunately high cut on the bottom with a scooped neckline—basic, modest, and immodest simultaneously. When she found it she was too irritated with the experience to care, and too exhausted from her body's day of rebelling that she didn't even bother to try it on. She could've used a size up, and she was thankful she hadn't opted for one of the more daring, brightly colored two-piece options to choose from. That hadn't even been a close call—those were meant for a woman who was a little bolder in body than Fujin.

Rinoa, for example, was flouncing around in that very sort of outfit—two small sections of cloth, strapless, colorful, with her abundant glowing skin already sun-kissed as she rolled around in the waves with Seifer and Raijin. It killed her to admit it, but even Fujin thought the girl looked flawless. Especially when she emerged from the water in slick perfection like a damn mermaid. If a wave caught Fujin like that, she'd pop back up to the surface looking like a drowned mess with seaweed in her hair. Some people were born lucky, while the rest of the world just had to muddle through, she supposed.

Seifer was born the luckiest, and did it ever kill her when she sought out his lean profile in the expanse of the ocean, and found him standing stark against the backdrop of the sun with Rinoa glittering next to him. They looked like they belonged together.

Any passerby could make sense of seeing Seifer—a perfect specimen, taught and growing visibly more golden—standing next to an ethereal nymph like Rinoa. It was surely more scandalous to place Fujin's own near translucence at his side. 'What is he doing with her?' she was sure people wondered. Seifer and Rinoa being together made sense, while Seifer loving Fujin defied the theory of natural selection.

All the more reason to believe his heart was influenced by a force other than love. That little issue had been plaguing her since he accidentally revealed the secret of her sorceress heritage, and it was only exasperated by this restless wind within her.

Fujin's frown deepened as she thought of the excursion to Caraway's drop location yesterday, which
made the threat of a sorceress takeover of Seifer's emotions feel a little too real for her comfort. The
trip was originally a ruse by Seifer to sequester her for a few minutes—the Deling Gateway had
become his refuge from Raijin, to work out any misplaced frustration in a much more gratifying
manner. Fujin more than willfully allowed it—that mouth of his was impossible to resist, even
though her body hadn't been complying with his advances. It had been that way for a couple of
weeks now; the deeper the unsettled feeling burrowed, the less she connected to him—to anything—
she felt. She was both present and not, satisfied and left wanting, and felt both whole and incomplete
—nothing struck a balance. After a few clearly one-sided excursions, Seifer finally spoke up:

*I feel kinda bad.* He kissed her neck and pulled away from her, fastening his belt as he leaned against
the wall, his chest heaving. *Seems like this' been all about me lately.*

*What makes you say that?* Fujin shrugged, playing dumb as she adjusted her bra and leaned next to
him. She felt his eyes on her, but she didn't turn to look at him. Instead, she stared straight ahead and
tried to catch her own breath.

*The obvious.* He paused to give her space to respond, but she couldn't find the words—she thought
she'd been hiding it well and wasn't prepared to explain. *Is it the location? I know it's not very
glamorous. You could've said something. I would've killed a few Marlboros and gotten us a hotel
room.*

*No.* Fujin responded immediately, tilting her face towards him to find a pair of unsure green eyes
staring at her. *Safe to say I'm not the glamorous type.* His lips pulled into a wry smile as he
sheepishly looked away.

*I know. It's just that you usually ... have a better time. I dunno, is it something I'm doing? 'Cuz if I'm
doing something wrong ...*

*Don't be ridiculous.* She leaned into him and slid her hand over his stomach. *What would you even
do if I said yes to that?*

*Crawl into a hole and die, maybe.* She felt his lips on the top of her head, a smile of relief on them at
the confirmation that he wasn't the issue. *Seriously though, is it the wind? The beach thing
tomorrow? Rinoa in general, maybe? Because that's been going okay too, I thought.*

For Seifer, everything had to have an explanation—*especially this.* It's not as if he wasn't right to a
degree—Fujin just wasn't ready to talk about any of it yet.

*It's not any one thing.* His hand slid over hers, the hesitance of it paired with self-doubt making her
heart quiver. *I'm just stressed out in general.*

*Okay ...* He kissed her temple, unsatisfied with the answer, and bent to the floor to fetch the shirt he'd
practically torn off her earlier. He handed it to her and sighed. *Not gonna lie—hurts the ego a bit.*

*You could stand to be taken down a peg or two.* Fujin smirked and moved to get dressed as Seifer
stepped away from the wall and started gathering his own clothes.

*Say ... uh ...* he cleared his throat as Fujin's head popped through the fabric, just in time to find him
standing in front of her, pulling his own shirt on. *Did they ... teach you to give head like that in your
covert ops class?*

*Seifer!* She froze, the shirt draped loosely around her neck as she processed his left-field bluntness.

*Hey, they don't make me take it—I have no clue what goes on.*
Well, they don't teach us technique. She continued dressing, if only to hide her burgeoning blush. Everything I know I've learned with you. The possessive part of Seifer sparked and he bit back a smile, but he still wasn't quite content with the answer.

Well, even still … if there's something you learned that you want *me* to try … I mean, you know I'm down for most anyth—

I'm not sure what you think a covert ops class is … Fujin cut him off and did her best to appear exasperated. On the inside, she was mortified he'd noticed. He smiled as her cheeks turned a bright shade of red.

Alright, calm down. I didn't mean to embarrass you. I just wanted to put it out there. In case there was something you wanted that I'm not doing.

Seifer, you're perfect. Fujin replied sincerely, pressing her hand against his chest briefly and causing him to experience a rare moment of bashfulness himself. You do everything perfectly.

Can I ask you another question? Different topic.

Could I even stop you if I wanted to? She turned her back to him and sighed as she searched the floor for her coat.

Do you have any medical stuff I should know about? She was met by his hands lifting her jacket to her shoulders before she could pivot to answer him.

What? Fujin shrugged the coat into place and slid her left arm into one of the woolen blue sleeves that he held out for her ever so slightly. Seifer brushed dust off the fabric at her back, and her fingers worked upward to fasten a row of buttons; the act of dressing and undressing as a pair naturally morphing into an effortless dance. Already skilled as fighters in predicting movements of the body, they'd also been friends in battle for years—Seifer knew she put her coat on left arm first because he helped her into it after countless close calls on the field. He'd always attend to her first—left-side, left-arm, minding and mending injuries—as she clutched her weapon in her right hand.

She turned around when he was finished brushing her off to find him taking a step backward, awkwardly sniffing and scratching his chin in a way that betrayed any attempt he was making at being casual.

You know, just … stuff I should know. He bent down to pick his own coat up from the concrete floor, shaking it a bit to relieve it of dust. Like … uh … instructions.

Medical instructions?

Yeah … if something ever goes wrong. Hang on, you missed one. He disapproved of her handiwork and advanced toward her, pushing her hands aside as he undid the row of freshly fastened buttons. He smirked as he tugged on the collar of her coat to straighten it back out, and resumed the buttoning chore with his own adept fingers. Hell, I guess I was at least good enough that you can't get your coat back on straight.

Your weird question threw me off. Which within this context, Fujin motioned between the two of them in their various states of undress, borders on insulting. So maybe just get to the point?

Finished with his buttoning work, Seifer sighed and reached up to smooth out her mussed hair.

Have you signed anything with SeeD about medical decisions? Just in case you get hurt and they can't … His gaze darted away from her, feeling insecure about his obvious need to ask.
Can't what? Fujin's eyebrow raised in a skeptical lift. He ran a thumb over her earlobe and leaned in to kiss her cheek, the massiveness of his body causing her to back against up against the same wall he'd had her pressed to a few before.

If you get hurt and you can't make choices for yourself, I want to be the one who makes them for you. Not Garden.

Who asks for that? Fujin laughed awkwardly, the unexpected heaviness of the request making her feel off-balance and self-conscious right along with him.

I'm not joking. He ran hands ran down her neck and along the length of her arms. I've been thinking about it, with you in SeeD, and this other stuff that's going on.

I haven't signed anything. I wasn't supposed to be going on any missions so we didn't get into any of that. Fujin ran the few meetings she'd had with Cid through her head, catching relief and worry simultaneously flash on Seifer's face—relief that something wasn't already in place that he wasn't a part of, and worry that there was nothing in place at the same time. I think we're all property of Balamb Garden unless we make changes. If we can make changes.

Ask Kadowaki. Seifer insisted, squeezing her hands. I don't trust the higher-ups at Garden right now. Not sure I trust her either, but it's not like we have a choice.

Fujin wanted to warn him just how serious calling the shots on someone's life was. Not to mention the fact that deciding those sorts of things usually belonged to a husband or a wife ... not to the partner of a still young relationship.

Don't think. Just do it, okay? He leaned in to capture her lips in an attempt to distract her from any naysaying thoughts. Seifer was right; he was so good with his touch that he left her mind blank whenever he got close. She'd never tell him—he'd never stop bragging.

I'll take Raijin too, if that makes you feel better about it. He stated earnestly, knowing that he'd subdued her.

No, I'll take Raijin. You'll just unplug him, even if he was supposed to make it.

I would never do that ... but maybe he should be your responsibility, just to be safe. He paused, his eyebrows drawing together as he studied her face. So ... how 'bout it? You wanna call the shots for me too?

This was a chasm they hadn't crossed even in friendship, and even if they had talked about it the meaning would be different. How time had changed things—a year ago they were still resisting each other. This moment was surreal for Fujin, who'd dreamt of Seifer staring at her with those yearning eyes for ages. And now here he was with his palm pressed against her cheek and his other hand grasping her waist, pulling her into something deeper. It was easy to forget that all this might be influenced by a greater power, with him touching her face and asking her to hold his life in her hands ... how could Fujin, of all people, even think to resist?

Of course, she whispered. You don't even need to ask.

It was a commitment—one of the most solemn kind for two warriors; allowing someone else permission to make such a mortal decision for them, when their entire world was built around fighting to live. It was the first real stepping stone towards a more solid proclamation between them. Fujin didn't have any worries that this thing between them was just another one of Seifer's flings anymore anyway, but if she had been worried ... the smile that found its way to his lips after she
spoke those words would've obliterated them. He kissed her again and backed away—tugging her along with him.

*Great, so what's left now? Should we just find a priest maybe?* He winked at her and chuckled as she struggled to respond.

*You're full of it today. How about we just check the drop like we planned?*

*Oh right, that's what we came here to do.* Seifer snapped his fingers, fresh with sarcasm, as he walked over to the Gateway's control panel, turning to look at her as he bent over to run his fingers under the console. *Then to the church?*

*Good thing I know you well enough to know you're joking.* Fujin crossed her arms over her chest as he stood back up, empty handed.

*Wow, so cocky. Gotta say, it looks good on you for a change.* He smiled slyly at her over his shoulder as he stuffed his hands into the pockets of his coat and took a few strides towards the ladder leading to the exit. *Maybe you don't know me as well as you think you do, though.*

The statement was delivered with a thin tone of levity, but the hesitating glance he flashed over his shoulder made Fujin stop in her tracks. She did know Seifer well—*better than anyone*—which was exactly why that comment made her nervous. Seifer Almasy, blatantly bringing up that kind of permanence? Sorcery had to be at work.

*Alright, alright—pick your jaw up off the floor, Sanada. Good to know where you're at.* He laughed heartily as he reached the ladder. *C'mon, let's go. Nothing here but cobwebs. Unless you wanna stay a while longer? I'm pretty sure I could rock your world if you let me. Just give me a couple minutes to regroup, here.*

*Now that* was the Seifer she knew.

*Maybe you don't know yourself as well as you think you do.* Fujin retorted, breezing past him. *Besides, we have to get back and go over our plans for tomorrow. We apparently have a beach day to get ready for.*

*Is that a challenge?* He muttered, low and raspy, as he tugged her back into the depths of the room and took a few more minutes to prove exactly how well he knew the both of them. He'd at least been right about that …

Seifer half-joking about marriage shouldn't have unsettled her that much. Hyne, the only typically girlish thing about Fujin was that she'd spent countless hours daydreaming about that boy saying those things to her. But for some reason, the reality of it didn't feel how she imagined it would. Doubt was never present in the daydream … a sorceress manipulating him was never part of the equation.

A high-pitched squeal from Rinoa rang out in the distance. Fujin's eyes shot open just in time to watch the girl grabbing for Seifer as Raijin wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her into a wave. Seifer threw his head back and laughed as the pair of them splashed and struggled in the foam.

Feeling her gaze on him, Seifer pivoted to the shoreline and raised a hand to shield his eyes from the sun. He waved at her and beamed when she waved back to confirm his suspicion that she was watching. *He loved being right.*

With a quick check over his shoulder, he abandoned Raijin and his catch of the day in the water and made his way through the currents toward the beach. Even now, after Fujin's hands had roamed over
him and memorized every curvature of his muscle, the sight of him was just as arresting as it used to
be—before she was allowed to touch him or even take the sight of him in without speculation; it was
still hard to believe that he was hers.

"Hey," his sandy hand gripped her raised knee in a gentle shake when he reached her, leaving a few
shell-white grains resting on her skin when it lifted. He checked over his shoulder again on Raijin
and Rinoa roughhousing in the waves and leaned in to give her a salty kiss while no one was
watching. "You gonna come in, or are you just gonna sit here?"

"Definitely just going to sit." She pulled her legs up to her chest and wrapped her arms around her
knees, subconsciously shielding herself from view. No matter how much of her he'd already seen,
Fujin felt vulnerable being fully illuminated anywhere near Rinoa the water nymph.

"Really?" He squinted, disappointed, digging through the bag next to her for his own sunglasses. His
hand emerged victorious moments later and he smiled as he slipped the glasses onto his face,
wriggling his eyebrows at her in amusement at their mirrored fashion. Fujin tightened her arms and
pulled her knees closer, choosing not to reply.

"You know …" He leaned back on the towel he'd laid out earlier in the day and hooked his hand
under the armrest of her chair to grasp the underside of her thigh. "Would it be so bad to just let
yourself enjoy the afternoon? Even with her here. She's not all bad."

"Oh really? Which parts of her do you think are good?" Fujin grimaced.

"Is my little Bug jealous?" His lips curved into a crooked smile, which looked both more adorable
and more devious when paired with his dark shades. "Don't worry, I prefer all your parts." His hand
slid higher to tickle her ribs.

"I'm not jealous." She scoffed and tried to push his fingers away, but she wasn't any match for him—
the onslaught continued until she doubled over in a fit of unavoidable laughter. "Stop it!"

"Not until you admit it." Seifer sat upright and applied a second hand. "Admit it. You want me all to
yourself, don't you?"

"Fine! You're right—just stop," Fujin gasped as she tried to hold his hands still. "You're killing me!"

"Hyne, I love you." He said in a breathy exhale, and stopped his hands as Fujin turned to look at
him; his wide smile fading to something more gentle. "I love you so much it fucking hurts
sometimes."

Saying she loved him back seemed trite in the moment, so her hand flew to his cheek instead with a
knowing touch.

"GUYS!" Raijin's voice echoed over the water, interrupting the moment they were having. Fujin's
hand fell away quickly, while Seifer didn't bother moving his hands away from her with any haste.
"How about a game of chicken? Rinoa thinks we can take ya down!"

"I didn't say that!" Rinoa splashed Raijin before her eyes wistfully rested on Fujin and Seifer together
on shore—no doubt she'd seen them locked together like that, and as someone who'd watched Seifer
from afar in the same way, Fujin felt a little sorry for her.

"C'mon, we're only young once." Seifer insisted as he stood up and brushed the sand from his legs
before outstretching his hand to her. "May as well make the most of it while we can. Plus, those
shitheads have been annoying me all morning; a condoned near-drowning sounds pretty fucking
good right about now."
"Fine," Fujin grumbled as he pulled her to her feet, smirking as she tugged at her swimsuit to gain better coverage. He wisely kept his comments to himself.

"One sec. I don't wanna lose this in the water—it almost came off earlier." His fingers tugged at the old necklace around his neck and lifted it over his head. Fujin wasn't sure she'd ever seen his collarbone bare before, and was more aware of it now that she spent so much time with that chain dangling above her, the warm metal sounding out a muted tone as it slid against her skin with each of Seifer's movements.

"I can put your ring on here too if you want," Seifer nodded toward her hand, as he undid the clasp of the necklace and then offered her his palm.

The picture of Seifer's palm outstretched above Galbadian sand conjured a vision; a memory of that unsettling fever dream she'd had when her friends were in Timber tracking down Rinoa. Of a trip to the beach and a near drowning, followed by Seifer's hands holding her mother's ring and then encircling her neck. Of his eyes—*his eyes and that horrifying golden glow*—as she clawed at him while he squeezed the life out of her.

"Fuu?" He bent down and waved a hand in front of her face. "Planet to Fujin—you want me to take that from you or not?"

"Yeah, s-sure." Fujin agreed quickly and with a forced casualness as she tried to shake the eerie feeling that this had all happened before and that fragments of her nightmare were becoming reality before her very eyes. She stuttered before snapping into action, her fingers hurriedly pulling at the slim silver band. "Thanks."

She placed it in his hand and the sunlight touched the blue stones, lighting his calloused skin with small streaks of a somber-hue. The image of a boy in Seifer's likeness holding the ring out to her flashed in her mind, and she blinked in quick succession to make it disappear. Seifer rolled the ring to his fingers deftly and held it up to slide it over the chain. He paused, turning the metal over in his grip and inspecting it closely.

"'Tossed by the waves but never sunk.'" He examined the ring a moment more, reading the inscription aloud before adding it to the chain for safekeeping. "I wonder what that meant to her?"

"Me too," Fujin whispered distantly, as he crouched down to tuck the necklace in a bag near her chair, his movements entirely familiar and void of anything resembling the possessed monster in that nightmare. *But it was too much of a coincidence, wasn't it? Maybe it was a sign, or maybe she was just losing it. The lines of fact and fiction were so blurred, it was impossible to tell.*

"C'mon, let's go take these two down." Seifer smiled as he stood up, throwing his arm around her shoulders in a rare moment of imperceptiveness. Apparently he'd grown tired of playing distant for Rinoa's sake, and Fujin didn't mind in the slightest. Their role in this damn mess was almost over, and once it wrapped up they could get back to normal, or they could at least solve what was going on with her. They could find a new normal as a Posse now that Seifer and Fujin were a pair within the trio, and just get back to *living*. Fujin was looking forward to whatever future was on the other side of this—fragments of this summer had been the best of her life, and once all of this solved … she was hopeful that perfection was on the horizon.

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The trio parted ways with Rinoa when they arrived back in Deling. They were sun-burnt and waterlogged and desperately in need of showers and spiffing up before lunch at Caraway mansion, which Fujin wasn't looking forward to. The only thing worse than one Caraway was *two* Caraways—the elder being more of a problem due to his incessant questions. Fujin was unnerved by the General's
cleverness—she lagged two steps behind him in any conversation, and found herself expertly backed into a corner any time they interacted. Caraway knew it too, and took unspoken pleasure in besting her. In some ways—a lot of ways—he reminded her of Seifer …

All that aside, she mostly wasn't looking forward to it because she still wasn't feeling well—worse even, than earlier this morning. The wind bellowed loudly in her head all the way back to Deling, and the current in her body radiated—pulsing and buzzing throughout her the closer they came to the city line. The interloping spirit holding court inside of her apparently thought they cut their beach day a little short and was feeling indignant about it. It protested beneath Fujin's own skin in a new way she hadn't experienced before. Did it scare her? Sure. But it also wasn't anything like the other times where it burst out of her and manifested in a physical form. Fujin chose not to look a gift horse in the mouth and did her best to ignore it.

Her best wasn't good enough to fool Seifer, though. He'd been keeping a skeptical watch of her on the drive back to Deling and the walk to the hotel, recognizing that glossed over look in her eyes that meant her mind was occupied.

"You okay?" He looped an arm around her waist and pulled her to a halt as Raijin rounded the corner heading toward Main Street.

"Yeah, it's the wind. I think she wanted to keep swimming" She tried to lighten the mood with a joke just as the wind surged—she touched her forehead, shrugging and closing her eyes for a moment. "It's just making me a little dizzy."

"Dizzy?" He gazed down at her with concern. No matter how much she downplayed it when the wind cropped up, Seifer always treated it like the world was ending. "Let's get you back to the room then. Maybe you can rest before we go back out."

"Sure, that sounds good." Fujin fell back into pace with him, his hand slowly rising to rest between her shoulder blades. She couldn't muster the strength to tell him the added support wasn't necessary … but she also wasn't sure that was truthful this time around.

The conversation and her distracted state almost made her miss the barricade placed at the end of the street to block incoming traffic. As they turned onto Deling's main drag they reunited with Raijin, frozen in his tracks and craning for a glimpse over the throngs of bodies lining the sidewalks and filling out the section of closed road.

"A motorcade again, in front of the hotel." He said as they stood beside him, his voice growing louder to rise above the murmur of the crowd. "A lot of security too, ya know?"

"Galbadian military or local police?" Seifer asked as they stopped beside Raijin, trying to get a look for himself.

"Not sure … Galbadian, maybe?"

"Either way, separate security." Seifer concurred after taking a moment to survey the scene. "What the hell is she so afraid of that she has to come here with her own security detail?"

"S'a good question." Raijin resumed walking toward the hotel, and Seifer pressed Fujin's back, urging her to follow suit.

"Hard to believe she has much to be scared of. She's …" But Fujin couldn't hear the rest—Seifer's voice trailed off into nothingness.

Fujin, more than a full foot below her friends' line of sight, didn't need to wait for a description for
clarity—she already understood. Edea Kramer, the sorceress, was in their midst again in preparation for the presidential dinner at Caraway mansion. Seifer and Raijin didn't need to bother telling her because Fujin could feel her there, standing as if the two of them were the only bodies in that square.

The shift was subtle at first—a second-nature recognition of a presence that felt far away but familiar. She didn't notice the heaviness of the air—of gravity—dissipate as Seifer's reply to Raijin faded from her mind, and the atoms around her thinned—the edges of her vision fanning out to darkness.

There were voices around her but they were distant as echoes in a boundless chasm, resonating for a millennium before they reached her ears. And yet … even without a sense of direction or the ability to see anything aside from a dimly lit haze that was fading fast, she was certain she felt a warmth next to her … it was obvious what that was. She could always feel him.

Who are you? A voice, untethered like the others but inextricably linked to Fujin's mind, spoke to her through the black. There should be no one else in my time.

I don't want to say. Fujin's mind spoke back honestly, terror creeping into her at being found in the dark. And I don't know, anyway.

No bother. I'll find out soon. The voice reasoned, and Fujin felt the current coursing through her surge and expand. You're composed strangely—so many layers to sift through … one, two, three. Her companion in this abyss counted aloud.

I don't understand. Fujin wanted to resist but she wasn't sure how—she didn't seem to have a physical self at the moment and Garden had never taught her how to fight when disembodied. The world was still working on getting communications systems up and running—safe to say technology hadn't quite caught up to this yet.

Humor … how human of you. The voice laughed lowly, sharing Fujin's thoughts. And Garden, you say? Well isn't this a treat. But you can't be the chosen one. It's not what I was expecting. You must be someone else then … something else … hmmm …

Fujin felt gripped and permeated; pushed and pulled and clawed as the entity sized her up—it was every feeling in the known world occurring all at once. Love, fear, sadness, agony—all leveled on her in a fragment of time.

One, two, three … the voice repeated again in a chime-like chant as the energy swirled around her. One, two, three … one, two, three … one, two, three … one, two, three … The chant morphed to a hushed and hurried whisper as the clawing continued, and Fujin screamed as it coursed through her so deeply that it howled through her bones.

One, two, three, one, two, three, one, two, three, one, two, three, one, two, three, one, two, three, one, two, three, one, two, three, one, two, three, one, two, three, one, two, three, one, two, three, one, two, three … WHO ARE YOU!?

The voice, frustrated, shrieked into the nothingness and bore further into her; accessing a deeper level that made Fujin cry out in pain—blood-curdling, horrific—a sound she didn't even know she could make. Is this death? Fujin sobbed Am I dying?

Oh, I'd like to kill you, the voice answered earnestly. I'm trying to find your soul. But something's hiding it—be a dear and help me? One, two, three, one, two, three, one, two, three, one, two, three, one, two, three, one, two, three, one, two, three, one, two, three, one, two, three …

The voice came to an abrupt stop, but the painful evaluation continued.

A girl … a Garden … and this boy. Do I know him? Give me a name. The voice let out a low hum, both appreciative and ambivalent at the same time. He's here, you know … fighting for you. He's
scared, I can tell. A sweet, handsome young thing, isn't he? Name him, name him, name him… The voice implored, the words bouncing against nothing and echoing back to the other voices still chiming from lifetimes ago.

Fujin knew the name, but the demand was deeply offensive thrown into space like that—to be repeated over and over again in the far reaches of time. As if she'd ever betray him in that way. Something in this hollow space shifted and allowed a part of Fujin to snap—to fight force with force and push back against the onslaught.

*How are you resisting? How are you three, and not even just two? WHAT ARE YOU?!* The voice shrieked once, and Fujin was full to the brim with burning agony. *WHAT ARE YOU, WHAT ARE YOU, WHAT ARE YOU?*

White hot, Fujin felt a burst of a new energy release from deep within her, and the darkness was slowly overtaken and forced away by a flicking bright light.

*No, how are you doing this?* The voice marveled, as Fujin felt the clawing talons retract. *How is this possible? WHO ARE YOU?* The voice cried out one final time, and then was gone—vanishing into the abyss.

Stunned, she searched for the way home but couldn't find it. Somewhere in the shadows she'd found wings, and felt cradled by a warmth that was him. But she didn't dare call out to him in the dark—*what if the sorceress was still listening?*

*Is this death?* Fujin whispered, and it echoed back to her a thousand times as she went adrift.
Raijin couldn't stop thinking about that chemistry class the three of them took together a few years back—or, was it a couple of years back, maybe? Ya know, he couldn't really be sure. The timeline was always a little fuzzy for him because they were together so often. There was a time before the Posse that didn't matter, the time they spent together, and then there'd be whatever time came after the Posse. Hopefully, that wasn't going to happen any time soon.

He might not be able to remember exactly when in their collective history that class happened, but he could sure as hell remember the feeling it left him with—the realizations he came to at that time; the things he noticed before either of his friends detected the seismic shift happening in their world. It was the same year that Seifer sprung up like a weed—even rivaling Raijin's height and mass—and captured the hearts of all the girls at Garden with that smug self-assuredness and that shit-eating grin of his that they called "charming." Call him a skeptic, but Raijin didn't see it. Seifer was the same old Seifer as he always was: a little bit worse if Raijin was being honest, on account of all the unsolicited attention he was getting from the entire women's dorm wing.

It wasn't that long ago that Raijin was the lothario of their little group, but the loss of the title didn't bother him so much—he kissed a girl before Seifer, was the first one to have a steady girlfriend, was the first one out of the two of them to get laid (he had no clue where Fujin factored in to that, and Hyne he never wanted to know for obvious reasons). Let Seifer have his moment in the sun—all the moments in the sun for the rest of their lives, for all Raijin cared. At that point, he was only interested in one girl at Balamb Garden, anyway.

But … she also happened to be the only one capable of making him jealous of Seifer. The only one who sometimes, in the rare moments that Raijin allowed his mind to wander to darker places, made him capable of resenting a friend he loved so much.

It was never Fujin he was mad at. Hyne, he wasn't sure he was capable of being mad at her, ya know? Not even when she was impatient with him, not even when she delivered a dreaded stiff kick to the shin with her boot, and not even when she was foolish enough to fall head-over-heels for their golden friend's antics. It wasn't her fault. Past all the eyepatch, shouting, and toughness bullshit she was just a regular girl.

Raijin had a hard time even being mad at Seifer too, initially. Seif was just being himself—a little cockier, a little bolder, a little more overt in his flirtations. Frankly, Raijin kinda thought the extra attention Seifer started paying to Fujin was just another way his golden friend was sorting out the power shift between the two of them—the struggle for dominance that Raijin wasn't even participating in but that Seifer felt needed to take place.

For a while Raijin was okay with the dynamic—Seifer being his usual self, Fujin watching his every move, and Raijin watching her watch him, wishing so desperately that she'd come back to reality and see that he was what was best for her. But it never happened that way, and then that class they took together … Raijin could still remember the exact moment it became a fact in his world with distinct clarity that Seifer wasn't just being a dick; that he'd been watching Fujin too.
Raijin could never figure out why in Hyne's name Garden let them all get into the same class to begin with, considering they usually seemed to make a point of keeping them split up. Maybe there was a glitch in the system, or maybe they'd just hired a new registrar admin who didn't know the student dynamics very well. Whatever way it happened, Garden sure as shit knew they'd made a mistake after, ya know?

The three of them pretty much treated the whole thing like a hangout session with some chemicals thrown in. In retrospect, they probably should've taken it more seriously, because they'd know how to synthesize more things in the field. As it was, the trio could barely whip up a simple potion on the fly. Coulda, shoulda, woulda—there wasn't much to be done about it now …

Anyway, there was this one day in class that happened to catch their attention: a lesson focusing on countering elemental magic with real-world items, in the off-chance that you ran out of spells or you weren't junctioned. Seif was into it because he hated the idea of junctioning, preferring natural strength and ability over any enhancements. 'Only a wuss would need to rely on GFs to get the job done,' he'd always say proudly as he slashed Hyperion in the air after a kill. Raijin always wondered if Seifer'd ever fought anyone who'd junctioned before in battle, but he never asked the question and left well enough alone. Personally, he couldn't wait to get his hands on one until this Pandemona character showed up in Fujin's world and made all their lives crazy.

Since Seif was enthralled by the topic, Fujin was enamored with it too, and by proxy so was Raijin—the usual order of things. There the classroom sat, fully attentive for once, as the professor instructed each lab table to set up a small gas burner at their stations. Raijin and Seifer sat back and let Fujin do the work, as usual; her pale fingers assembling the parts and igniting the burner with precision, only stopping to humor Seifer and murmur in acknowledgment at his suggestions on how to do it better. If Raijin had done that, she would've given him a stiff kick to the shin. But for Seifer, she tolerated it—allowed him to suggest that he knew better even though she was a million times smarter than the both of them combined. It wasn't his place to say anything … they had their own dynamic; who was he to interfere?

The small flames at each desk flickered as their teacher kicked off the lecture with a tale about a traveler crossing the Centra salt flats along the Great Salt Lake. A down-and-out man who was looking to get to the unreachable city of Esthar—which had been newly walled off after the war—and get a fresh start. The journey was perilous, their instructor told them; the man traveled with nothing except a simple staff for a weapon and the shirt on his back. Can you imagine the challenges this man faced, in an area with so many unknown, strong monsters after the war? he asked emphatically, gesturing with his hands excitedly upon the realization that these combat brats were actually paying attention to science.

The voyage went fine until the man stumbled on a new monster he'd never seen before—a dragon, bright red with a small pointed head and evil, slanted, dark eyes. A Ruby Dragon, the instructor clarified, and almost the entire class gasped audibly—with the exception of Seifer, who yawned animatedly and leaned back in his chair. This dragon apparently had a bone to pick with the man just for walkin' through his territory, which sounded about right to Raijin; a lot of those larger beasts weren't very smart and were mostly just territorial—when they felt backed into a corner they'd attack with a ferociousness unlike any of these students had ever seen.

Which is exactly what this dragon did—torched the man with a Firaga spell. The unfortunate thing was that the weather was just right that day, with a strong wind blowing across the arid landscape that fed the flames and engulfed the man in an inferno. The dragon, assuming the man was toast, flew on back to its nearby nest and left the intruder for dead.
Now this man was no ordinary man, their instructor kept his eye on Seifer, who was pretending not to be interested. He was a scientist, who'd grown disgusted with the field during the war and decided to live a simpler life. Being a scientist, he instinctually knew a thing or two about the things that might help put out a fire like that. And as luck would have it, something that would help him was available in droves on that barren plain, right there near the dried-up lake. Does anyone have a clue what that would be?

The class sat silent, with a few students turning to each other and asking for the answer in whispers. Raijin and Seifer both turned to Fujin, expecting her to raise her hand, but she didn't. Her crimson eye narrowed as she looked down at the desk and searched her mind for the answer. The instructor clicked his tongue with a disappointed tisk tisk, and walked behind his desk to reach for a shelf underneath it, and dramatically returned with a white box in his hand.

Salt. He stated plainly, and the murmuring among the students continued. The man jumped into a mound of salt mined from a nearby deposit because he knew that salt put a barrier between the fire and the oxygen it needed to feed the flame. It essentially extinguished the flame.

Are you telling me that I can survive a Ruby Dragon attack with a little table salt? Seifer piped up from his chair, rich with sarcasm, betraying his disinterested act.

Glad you're listening for once, Almasy. And listen very carefully when I tell you this: no, it's not likely you'll survive a Ruby Dragon attack with a box of table salt. The class laughed as the professor set the box in front of Seifer and motioned for him to pour some in a bowl at his station and pass the box to the next lab table. But, don't you think it's amazing that this man used the scientific knowledge of chemical processes to try to save himself?

Probably would've been better if he'd just killed it. Seifer quipped, and Fujin and Raijin shook their heads in agreement. Did he live? Are you about to tell us this man was you, and it was what drove you to do what you're most passionate about—teaching chemistry? Raijin chuckled along with the rest of the class when the instructor slapped Seifer gently on the back of the head.

No, it wasn't me. It was my uncle though, and I suppose I did find the story to be pretty cool.

MADE IT? Fujin asked Seifer's question again, while he rubbed the back of his head and grimaced.

He did. The instructor nodded, stepping to the front of the classroom and folding his hands behind his back. But don't take my word for it. See for yourselves. Let's test the theory, and then we'll talk about the chemical compositions that make it possible. Turn your burners down low. We're not really interested in lighting a person on fire...there's not enough salt in a single box to put you out.

Raijin complied with the request this time, his bronze hand reaching out to turn the dial to reduce the flame to a low burn—its new shape resembling a tiny blue-tipped crown. The teacher walked towards the back of the class and instructed their fellow pupils on how to best extinguish the flame, and the second he was gone Seifer leaned toward his friends.

Hey, screw this guy. Fujin, use one of those Arctic Wind's we picked up and let's see how big we can make this thing. Seifer rubbed his hands together and rolled his sleeves up.

BAD IDEA. OBVIOUS, AND NEVER USED ARCTIC WIND BEFORE. She looked around the classroom, implying there was no one else to blame it on, and pointed a pale finger at Seifer. THIN ICE ALREADY.

Seriously bad idea, Raijin agreed, as he reached for the bowl of salt and slid it in between him and Fujin. They're ready to kick you out of this class as it is, ya know? And ya need to pass chemistry to
Hey, he wanted us to test 'theories' so let's test the other one—did the wind really light that guy up? Seifer wrapped an arm around the back of Fujin's chair and canted forward. Don't be such chickens, you two. If it makes you feel better, I'll do it.

Don't give it to him Fuu. Raijin warned, and Seifer made a face.

Lighten up Raijin. The blonde member of their trio held out his hand in expectation of the potion, and Fujin rolled her eyes. C'mon Fuu, lemme see it. When she didn't move, that expectant hand crossed over her stomach and reached for a bag hanging at her side, intent on finding the bottle himself.

That was the moment—when Fujin's nickname rolled off Seifer's lips smooth like honey and his hand ran over her stomach, that the two of them froze and looked at each other. A shared spark ignited, a string of tension plucked and reverberating. It threw them all into awkwardness. Seifer retracted immediately, clearing his throat and, lacing his fingers together in a tight grip on the tabletop, and turning his face away from them. Raijin didn't comment, and Fujin didn't either—her face turning bright pink spoke volumes.

H-HERE. She reached to her side, sounding breathless and flustered, as she pulled the bottle from her bag and slid it across the table.

YOURS.

Raijin's heart sank. Sure, he knew what she meant—the potion was Seifer's, and so was the responsibility of what happened when he used it. But when Seifer bashfully turned back towards them to scoop it up and coughed out a timid Thanks as he worked to loosen the cork, Raijin realized that Seifer was blushing, too.

Yours. The stilted interaction gave the word double-meaning for Raijin, and apparently for Seifer too, who seemed pretty agreeable to the idea of that as he continued to clumsily struggle with the bottle.

Finally, Seifer pressed a calloused thumb firmly to the cork and loosened it with a pop that reverberated through the classroom, and a thick cloud of winter-white wind billowed into the air.

Shit—hit the deck! He yelped, and Raijin's training kicked in so fast he couldn't remember jumping to the floor. There was a loud bang and heat—an explosion—followed by the shocked scream of their classmates and the smell of smoke in the air. When the noise subsided, he twisted from his belly to lean back on his elbows and checked for his friends to his left and found Seifer flattening Fujin to the floor.

OFF. SUFFOCATING. Fujin gasped and coughed as Seifer leaned away from her.

Gee, you're welcome. He waved the smoke away with a hand that wasn't involved in supporting his body weight. What, should I just let you get your face blown off next time? Way to thank a guy. When his waving cleared the smoke away, Raijin caught a look of relief in Seifer's eyes that Fujin's face was, in fact, still intact.

WAS MOVING. She replied combatively and leaned up on her own elbows. FAULT YOURS.

Seifer smiled—not his classic smarmy smirk but a genuine smile, amused and awed with how adorable an indignant Fujin could be—and Raijin's heart broke a thousand times over. That was the day Raijin decided he needed to tell Fujin how he felt before she really was Seifer's, and it was dishonorable to speak of it. That was also the day he knew it wouldn't matter anyway. Seifer had never looked at anyone else that way before...
What in Hyne's name! The instructor fanned away a thick cloud of smoke just as the sprinkler system activated and poured water down on their still flaming lab table. The three of them looked upward to the ceiling, past the instructor's face, where a giant burn mark still smoldered.

Shiiiiiiiiii. Seifer marveled, hoisting himself from shielding Fujin and resting above her on his knees.

Almasy, their teacher growled his name lowly, and the other students—entirely unharmed and incredibly thrilled by the drama—murmured lowly at the spectacle. That's the last straw. You're out of this class! Get yourself to Cid's office immediately. If you don't get expel—

WAS ME. Fujin piped up, scrambling out from under Seifer to her feet, quickly grabbing the scorched bottle from the equally charred desk—wincing as the hot glass burned her hand. ARCTIC WIND. ACCIDENT.

Do you *really* expect me to believe that? He spoke through gritted teeth. Kazeno, do you have anything to say?

INNOCENT. Fujin spat, motioning to Raijin. EYEBROWS BURNED OFF, CLEARLY UNAWARE. Raijin reached up to touch his face and groaned when he realized she was right. Apparently, he wasn't quick enough. Of course, no one had bothered to jump on him and keep him out of harm's way.

Get. Out. Both of you. The teacher pointed to the door with a quivering hand, commanding Fujin and Seifer to leave. Let Cid sort this out, I've had enough.

With Raijin's lack of eyebrows apparently providing a solid alibi, Fujin and Seifer skulked off to the Headmaster's office together for punishment. He didn't see them again until much later in the day, where they were sequestered in a low-traffic area of the cafeteria to sit in silence as they ate their dinner, where they would be shuffled back to detention immediately after. Raijin wanted to walk over and say hello, or falsely admit his own wrongdoing so he could at least sit in silence with them—they were a Posse, and they endured everything together … even punishment.

Raijin took a seat at an empty table instead and watched them from afar—as a pair—for the first time in his life. Both were staring at their plates under the watchful eye of a Garden master, who turned away for a brief moment to say hello to a fellow faculty member. Seifer took the opportunity to slip Fujin a note of some sort, and she read it and smiled. With bold casualness, their golden friend took the opportunity to rest the toe of his boot on hers.

Suspicious of the silence, the sentry spun back around just as they resumed their previous blank stares. But Seifer's boot stayed put, tapping Fujin's foot lightly every so often as it sought more comfortable purchase. The gesture affected Fujin—by all accounts, it looked as if her heart had stopped. Not knowing he had an audience, Seifer raised his eyebrows and grew pensive as he considered her reaction, and then the corner of his mouth lifted into a pleased, crooked smile as he scooped up a mouthful of his dinner.

That look on Seifer's face. It was supposed to be Raijin's first ...

Raijin was swallowed up by a profound sense of loneliness and finished his food in solitude as he fought to keep his eyes off of them. His prospects were surely doomed that day—and deep down, he'd always known they would be.

By the grace of some higher power, Cid let them all back into that same chemistry class. They were split up to different lab tables at far corners of the room as a solution to manage them better, and the entire structure of lab partners for the class had to be reworked because of it. Raijin was paired with
the girl who interned in the library, and Seifer was paired with a pretty girl named Lana, who was obsessed with him and didn't make it secret. Their golden friend wasn't interested in her for a while, but the ease of attainability was too much for him to resist—they flirted relentlessly for the rest of the semester.

Fujin was matched up with Zell Dincht (and man did she make a stink about it) and was sour every time they walked into that room—*for so many reasons, that Raijin understood but didn't speak of because deep down he still hoped to Hyne he was wrong.* After all, he still planned on telling Fujin … he just needed to wait for his eyebrows to grow back.

"Ahem," Raijin pivoted in his chair in search of the owner of the proper cough behind him, being careful not to get his feet tangled in the wires and tubes nearby.

"Oh, hey." He rubbed his eyes glumly, disappointed to find Xu perched in the doorway even though she'd been nothing but helpful these past few days.

"Sorry to interrupt. I was just …" Her voice trailed off as Raijin turned away from her and leaned back in the too-small chair, yawning. "Any news?"

"Tell Cid there's no change. I'm sure he'll know before we do anyway, ya know?" He was curt, and he meant to be—Raijin was usually nice to everyone, but it was hard to be friendly with someone you didn't like very much under stressful circumstances. Xu chose not to respond to the attitude, but she heard her timidly step further into the room. She cleared her throat again.

"How are you holding up Raijin? I'm asking as me—not on behalf of Garden." Raijin ran his hand over his face and shrugged, feeling a little guilty for being short with her only seconds ago; his emotions were all over the place right now.

"We're holding, I guess." He looked to the hospital bed at Fujin's still body, shrouded under a mess of breathing tubes and blankets. "As best as we can."

"We?" She looked around the room, noting that he was the only visitor there. He offered her a tired smile.

"Ah, habit, I guess." He shrugged his shoulders.

"Is he still …?" Raijin nodded but stayed silent as he placed a hand over Fujin's. The combination of complete stillness and warmth gave him a chill.

"I could round up a few higher-level SeeD, see if there's any way—"

"No," Raijin snapped around and shook his head. "I think he'll kill you—all of you. His damn limit break keeps replenishing or something. Just … let him alone. Hyne knows things are bad enough, no need to add murder of SeeD instructors to the list, ya know?"

"They've had to replenish the monsters in the Training Center five times since you all got back." Xu stood at Raijin's side and gazed down at Fujin, shaking her head. "We can barely keep them alive long enough to train the younger students."

"Those kids shouldn't be in there with him anyway." Raijin looked up at her, earnestly warning her of Seifer's instability right now. "Send 'em to the Fire Cavern to fight Bombs … or put more T-Rexaurs in there to keep him a little busier in the back of the center." He squeezed Fujin's hand and paused. "That doesn't mean you should run out of everything anytime soon either—no clue what he'll do if there's nothing to massacre."
"Noted." Xu nodded and clasped Raijin's shoulder. "We'll keep a steady inventory then."

"I tried to stop him, but he's …"

"I know." Xu squeezed his shoulder, understanding that Raijin couldn't say a word against Seifer, even if he wanted to. "But Raijin, we need to do something. Cid's request."

"Just ask Cid to be patient, alright?" Raijin implored, his eyes watering a little at the supportive touch from anyone, the feeling of Fujin's limp hand in his own, and the reasons why Seifer was going insane and killing every single thing he saw. "They're together, ya know? He …" Raijin sniffled, and let go of Fujin's hand again, leaning back in his chair and shaking Xu's grip off his shoulder. No need to cry right now, he needed to be the strong one. "It's just hard."

"I heard something about that—them, together." Xu sighed as she stepped away from him again. "Go figure. Seifer and Fujin. I never saw that one coming."

"I did," Raijin gazed down at Fujin, reaching out to tug one of her blankets more snugly around her. "I've always known." Silence filled the room again as Raijin thought of his two friends in trouble after that chemistry class, and how happy and surprised Seifer looked when he shocked Fujin into complete stillness. Raijin was sure that Seifer was wishing her heart hadn't stopped this time.

"Raijin, at some point we're also going to have to address the issue of the death toll." Xu awkwardly interjected the official command she'd been sent to deliver, finding no tactful way to introduce it. "Eyewitness accounts point to Seifer … but we still need your account of things. We're going to protect you—both of you." Xu emphasized the last bit, to let him know that Seifer was included in the immunity. "Cid just needs the facts."

"Shit," Raijin groaned and bent over to rest his elbows on his knees, placing his head in his hands. "Can't you all just wait for things to get a little better here? I'm a little busy, ya know."

"Galbadia won't wait. Vinzer Deling wants answers, and unfortunately, he wants them now. He's the president, so it's not like we have much wiggle room."

"Cid probably knows everything already." Raijin scoffed, keeping his face hidden until the tears in his eyes dried. "The sorceress is his wife."

"His estranged wife," Xu corrected him. She was sympathetic, but Raijin knew she wouldn't let him get away with maligning their commander. "They aren't in communication anymore."

"Convenient, ya know?" He groaned again, sitting upright when his emotions were sufficiently buried. "Look, I've told ya everything I remember. I don't have anything else to say."

Raijin actually had plenty that he could say, but with Fujin unconscious and Seifer basically turning into a malfunctioning murder machine, he didn't want to be the only one giving a coherent statement and have it come back to bite them all in the ass later. He'd been resisting the questions at every turn ever since Balamb sent an emergency evacuation squad to fetch them on the Galbadian plains: why were you all there in the first place? What happened to Fujin? Why did the sorceress dispatch security to secure her? Did Seifer kill those men?

Raijin sort've had the answers: They were there because Cid asked them to be. Fujin collapsed before their eyes outta the blue and screamed bloody murder before gurgling and convulsing in a series of fits. The sorceress sent a swarm of her security guards ramming through the crowd to capture Fujin—no, Raijin didn't know why. He just instinctually scooped Fujin up rushed to their hotel room with Seifer in tow so they could report her condition to Garden and request immediate
evacuation. And then ... Seifer grabbed Hyperion ...

Raijin shuddered at the thought.

One second, they were just enjoying a fucking beach day, and the next thing he knew everything went to shit.

They fled the city on foot towards the Tomb of the Unknown King to meet an extraction team from Balamb. Seifer had blood on his hands and left some on Fujin too when he ripped her from Raijin’s arms and cradled her against his chest to check her vitals. That's when they realized that she'd stopped breathing. In a blind rage, Seifer laid her down on the ground and started compressions on her chest.

Don't you fucking die on me now! He shouted—unhinged, desperate. Get a fucking Phoenix Down —give me something! He shouted at Raijin then, who fumbled through the only bag they'd grabbed and solemnly whispered back.

We didn't grab the right bag. This is the one from the beach.

Seifer's eyes grew wide in horror, and he quickened his pace as Fujin's pale skin grew duller—the color in her lips fading to a morbid shade of blue.

Don't you dare. Seifer whispered, over and over again with the compressions as he coached himself to stay on a steady rhythm. Don't you dare, don't you dare, don't you DARE!

But Fujin didn't stir—she didn't blink, didn't breathe—she didn't anything. Seifer was the only thing standing between her and death's door— forcing her heart to push blood through her veins. It dawned on Raijin at that moment that Fujin might not make it, and he felt a bizarre sense of calm resignation. She was slipping away ... and everything was over.

Don't just stand there! Seifer shouted at Raijin again, who was frozen and slack-jawed with his hand in the useless bag of supplies. Go get something dammit!

My staff—I didn't ... I was carrying her; I couldn't grab it. Seifer spat a thousand curses before he spoke again.

Get down here and keep her blood moving, and I'll go get something. And if she dies while I'm gone ... Seifer looked upward, his eyes wild with anger. Raijin could only blink and marvel at his friend's primal transition as he snapped out of his distant state. I'll fucking kill you where you stand.

They switched places, with Raijin afraid for two lives now as Seifer stalked off and slaughtered every monster he could find until a Phoenix Down dropped. He returned with haste and lifted Fujin's head to his lap, administered the potion, and muttered a string of curses when it didn't seem to take. He pulled out a hi-potion next and looked a little relieved when it seemed to bring a little of her color back.

Move, he ordered, and Raijin slipped out of his way, instinctually turning to the water to watch for Balamb's transport ship, which he spied speeding toward them in the distance.

They're almost here Seif—I see them.

Meet them at the shore. Tell them she's not breathing—tell 'em I don't know how long it's been. He sounded exhausted but wouldn't allow himself to stop. Tell them she needs oxygen—just fucking go, Raijin! Run!
So Raijin ran to the shore and waited, leaving an unhinged Seifer behind with Fujin, who would be lucky to come out of this without a broken sternum … if she lived at all. He was pretty sure that thought made him cry, and he was pretty sure he was crying when SeeD arrived on the shore. If he was, they paid no mind, and rushed past him in a blur with a stretcher. Someone led him toward the ship, but he threw a hand out against the hard metal to stop the journey, emptying his stomach into the ocean before he stepped onto the vessel. *He was glad Seifer hadn't been there to see that.*

Seifer collapsed on the cargo deck when Fujin was finally securely strapped to a gurney on board. He panted, unable to catch his breath, as he watched their comrades in arms shock Fujin's heart, and closed his eyes in relief at the beeping sound of her pulse. A newly minted instructor leaned down timidly to hand him an oxygen mask, but Seifer pushed it away and tried to stand.

_Fuck … off. Is she—_

*Here*, Raijin reached out to take the mask and forced it onto Seifer's face as he pushed him back down. *Don't be a distraction. They're busy.* Seifer complied and fell flat on the floor, sucking in deep breaths as he recovered.

_Command center to Balamb ecav. team, come in evac.* The radio crackled over the chaos, and someone on board responded.

_Roger, evac. here. We're on the way home._

_Affirmative team—we have your location on the radar._ The voice paused. _We uh … we were just hailed by Galbadia with an APB for three individuals involved in the death of six men. Two males, one female—she had silver hair._ The crew on the ship turned to look at Seifer and Raijin, and then their eyes darted to Fujin—her silver hair streaked with blood from Seifer's hands. All the same, they didn't stop their lifesaving work. It was only then that Raijin realized one of the members of the crew on board was Dr. Kadowaki.

_Tell them we'll keep an eye out, Xu._ Kadowaki stated plainly as she loomed over Fujin's body. _And don't tell them anything else._ Full speed to Balamb and get medical transport for our arrival—tell them to be discreet.

"Okay, Raijin," Xu's voice interrupted his thoughts—a welcome interruption, since he couldn't get the image of Fujin dying and Seifer killing those men out of his mind. "We'll see if we can stall. Right now, we're just dealing with rumors, but we're positive the staff at the hotel knew you were with Garden. It's only a matter of time before this comes back to us. We just want to be prepared … getting Seifer calmed down is a part of that."

"I know," he waved her off, grumbling and hating that she was right. "I'll take care of it."

After a few unsure seconds, Xu exited the room without a goodbye. Raijin closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair again. All he could picture was Seifer going wild and killing everything in his path. *The last thing Raijin wanted was to be on the wrong end of Hyperion right now.*

But Fujin wouldn't let Seifer run himself into the ground like this or run the risk of him being subdued by SeeD, and Raijin supposed he couldn't let him do that either. *Frankly, Seifer deserved being worked over by SeeD. He wasn't handling this very maturely—s'pretty shitty to not even come to see her, no matter how upset he was._ But they were a Posse; they looked out for each other, helped each other, and still loved each other when one of them was being a giant fucking prick.

He squeezed Fujin's hand, leaned in to kiss her forehead, and watched the machines she was attached to for signs of recognition that he was there. But there was nothing. Not a stirring, not an
uptick in brain activity—*nothing at all.*

"Alright, Fuu. I'll be back." Raijin patted her hair and stood up slowly—his back aching from not moving in what felt like a lifetime. "I'll go get your guy."

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*There had to be a reason. An identifiable flaw—an exact misstep.*

*They should've moved more quickly, or maybe he could've administered compressions faster.*

*He should've realized she wasn't breathing. That was the first thing they were taught to check—why didn't he check?*

*Should they have just stayed in Deling? Let the sorceress take her, or hand her over to Galbadian forces, and sort it out later?*

The events looped in his mind, and he analyzed them mechanically like he was completing a fucking mission review—his brain involuntarily simulated the alternate scenarios, identifying a thousand things he could've done differently. But no matter what, he always came to the same gut-wrenching conclusion: that he'd fucked up somehow, and that *Fujin was probably going to die … or worse …*

*How could he live without her?* Seifer's breath hitched in his throat. *Nope, nope, nope. He didn't get to feel sorry for himself about it.*

He lanced another unsuspecting monster to stave off a breakdown, wiping the blood that spattered on his face with the back of his hand. Seifer wasn't even sure how long he'd been in the Training Center—all he knew was that he needed to keep fighting; needed to channel this terrible energy into something more productive than self-pity.

*No fucking way was he going to sit in the infirmary and weep like Raijin. How did that help anything? No—he was going to get stronger, faster, and the next time something like this happened he was going to fix it. He'd be able to save her—save anyone—and the next time he saw that sorceress ... he was going to fucking kill her.*

Seifer stumbled, dizzy from sleeplessness and bodily exhausted. Some of his muscles were locked, some felt limp. His legs wobbled like gelatin and he was probably in pain, but he couldn't feel it … *wait, had he just killed a T-Rexaur? He hadn't even noticed.* He placed an ungloved hand on the nearby wall and hunched over to steady himself, but rose up in anger mere seconds later, slashing wildly at nothing but the still air. His legs gave out underneath him, and he fell to the ground gracelessly.

He was pretty sure he'd been in there for three days straight, but he couldn't be certain. He was using the younger students cycling through the Training Center as a barometer, and they'd been through a few times since he'd been back at Balamb *losing his shit.* From what he could remember, the rule was that they could only train every-other-day when they were that young… but it'd been so long since he'd been in their shoes, he couldn't really remember. The artificial lighting made it all the more confusing. His breakdown was fluid, timeless; punctuated by kids moseying through and some anonymous person delivering food whenever he was passed out, like he was some damned rabid animal that required both care and caution. Whoever it was, they weren't wrong—he'd had a Berzerk spell cast on him once, and this felt pretty damn similar.

Seifer rolled onto his back and tried to stand up, but his knees buckled again, and he fell backward. Balling his hand into a fist, he unceremoniously slammed the ground over and over again. He needed to keep moving because when he stopped all he saw was Fujin collapsing in Deling—her face
contorting and her arms seizing up and twisting into rigid and unnatural shapes. He saw her blue lips and felt the desolation of a world without her in it.

Get up get up get up.

Then there was the business of Hyperon’s first blood—six effortless, smooth slices that made his stomach churn but that also left him buzzing. It didn't feel wrong, but he knew that it should. He thought of Fujin returning from that awful mission in Centra where she killed a man, and how she disintegrated when she saw him. Maybe it just hadn't hit him yet, or maybe looking at an enemy through the lens of protecting something of his own made it easier. Maybe it would hit him when he talked about it with her …

… if they ever talked again.

All that talk about being some sort've medical proxy for her just a few short days ago, and Seifer hadn't even been to see her in the infirmary yet. He couldn't. Raijin rushed off with the evacuation team towards the infirmary the second they hit Garden's parking garage, but Seifer's feet just couldn't follow. He wanted to but ... he wasn't capable of just sitting there and watching her die. He'd feel helpless, and never in his life did he want to feel helpless around her. So, he didn't go. And he wasn't fucking going. He wasn't admitting that this was happening.

He grasped either side of his head in a tight grip and bellowed, red-faced and sputtering, as he tried to rock himself to his feet. But his body still wouldn't cooperate, and he began to fall backward again.

The warmth of a strong grip wrapped around his forearm and Seifer reached defensively for his weapon, finding nothing but empty space in Hyperion's place, and a rush of anger that the intruder must've kicked it aside. He lay supine, disarmed and already defeated. Maybe it was his turn to die today. He didn't mind so much, if Fujin was brain-dead and their lives were forever changed. Somehow this was all his fault.

"It's just me, ya know." Raijin's voice rolled from his lips quietly, as he hefted Seifer upright. "Hyne, I come in peace."

Seifer propped an arm over his knee and tried to catch his breath, eyeing Raijin as his bronze friend scanned their surroundings in shock.

"Ho-ly Hyne …" Raijin's voice cracked as he observed the carnage before he turned back to inspect Seifer for signs of damage. "You done here?"

"No." Seifer shook his head and held out his hand. "Help me up. I've gotta keep—"

"You've gotta go see her," Raijin commanded and reached for his friend's hand, but Seifer swatted him away in disgust.

"Fuck you Raijin—I'm staying here." Seifer sneered as glared at Raijin through narrowed eyes.

"C'mon man—don't be difficult." Raijin ran his hand over his face, rubbing the crust of sleeplessness away from the corners of his eyes. "Just come with me, or they're going to send a team in here for you. You're scaring the shit outta people."

"Then let them come." Seifer flipped his hand out in disregard. "Just help me up first."

"I have half a mind to lay you out," Raijin grumbled, and placing a hand on his hip as he glared at Seifer. "Don't make this worse than it already is man. She needs—"
"Don't you tell me anything about what you think she needs." Seifer spat as he tried to push himself off the ground. "And if you're not gonna help me, then leave me alone."

"Seif man, don't do this right now. I'm in no mood to—"

"Don't do what?" He had no control over the vitriol in his voice—it seeped out thickly, pointedly—meant to harm; whatever he needed to do to get Raijin out of there and get back to burying these feelings trying to burst through his skin. "Figured you'd like being in there by yourself. Pretending to be the hero." Raijin glared, and his face grew red; the fingers not at his hip curling and twitching at the hateful seething in Seifer's voice.

"Just go back in there," Seifer pressed on, recognizing the signs of someone getting ready to give up on him all too well. "And sit. And bawl. And just fucking relish it. It's as close as you're ever gonna get."

Raijin only stared for a moment, the color flushing from his cheeks and his lips drawing thin and tight. Seifer saw the muscles in his arms—fresh with energy, limber and unused—twitching with the beginning stages of an action he recognized. He knew what was coming, and he had no way to brace himself for it.

A bronze hand connected with the sharp line of Seifer's jaw in an unmistakably full-force punch that sent him reeling to his back again, leaving him with the taste of bitter copper filling his mouth.

Apparently, that comment was a fucking mistake. Maybe Raijin would be the one to kill Seifer today...

Adrenaline was the only reasonable explanation for Seifer rocking himself to his feet in a low haunch, allowing him to hurtle forward at Raijin's midsection. But he was spent and could only inflict a few well-placed body shots before he felt weak again. Raijin chose not to hit back, and instead looped his arms under Seifer's to lock them behind his shoulder blades and render him immobile.

"You're an asshole, ya know that!" Raijin shouted, exasperated and dismayed and exhausted, too. "Ya make everything about you. She's layin' there and you can't even go and see her?"

"You don't know anything about it," Seifer growled, still angered by the accusation that he was being selfish, even though he already knew he was. Of course this shouldn't be about his own guilt—of course it shouldn't…but how could he face her?

"Oh, believe me. I know." Raijin scoffed and tightened his grip. "I was there too. I was there just as much as you were. Ya don't think I wish I'd noticed somethin' was wrong or done somethin' different? If I'd grabbed my staff or the right bag …" Seifer was sure he detected a warble in his friend's voice, but Raijin masked it like a good soldier would, and continued. "I feel responsible too, but I'm still showin' up. And you … shit, I never took you for a Hyne-damn coward Seif, I gotta say."

"Fuck you—I'm not a coward!" Seifer growled and futilely bucked in Raijin's hold in an attempt to escape.

"Right," Raijin scoffed and tightened his grip. "Well, you seem pretty scared to me. And for someone who's supposed to be in love with Fuu … or whatever it is you think you are … you're not doing a very good job showing it right now."

He hadn't heard her name out loud, or even allowed himself to think it these past few days. He turned it over in his mind as the criticism broke through the veneer of blind rage that Raijin seemed to
be cracking. The words brushed against that softness lying deep in him that only Fujin had access to. *Fujin, who he loved and he might lose.*

"I do love her, Raijin," Seifer whispered as his hands rung his friend's forearms. "I have never …" He sucked in air and his eyes stung—*shit, it was happening; he was falling apart.* "I've never been more scared in my fucking life."

As he glared at the ground through misting eyes, Seifer saw the shadow of Raijin's profile bowing and heaving with a sigh. He could feel their bronze friend's hands flexing behind his back as he struggled to find sympathy for the member of the Posse he couldn't stomach right now.

"It's alright, Seif. She's gonna be alright." Raijin spoke calmly, as Seifer tried to push Raijin away out of instinct and not a true desire to get away.

"You don't *know,*" Seifer spat back as he continued to struggle.

"I know Fujin." Raijin reasoned, and tightened his grip again. "She'd never go out like this. She's a fighter." Seifer, too tired to resist any longer, let go of Raijin's arms and let his hands fall to his sides. "I get that this is hard but … this isn't okay, man. Ya know she'd never leave your side if that were you."

"But I can't help her." Seifer shook his head and threw off his own balance, and he gripped Raijin's vest to steady himself. "I couldn't help her."

*I failed her.*

"No one could've." Raijin released his hold on his friend, keeping one arm looped behind his back as he dragged Seifer upward. "This was beyond our control."

"She said she wasn't feeling right. She said—"

"She's been sayin' that all summer." Raijin shook his head and looked down at the ground. "Save yourself the trouble man, I've run all these things through my head too. Shit, even I wanted to blame you, but I can't." He patted Seifer's shoulder and chuckled lowly. "Sorry for punchin' ya."

"No … I deserved it."

"Ya did. Gotta say, it felt good." Raijin agreed as he led Seifer out of the training center. "Let's get moving. If you sit with her, I can go sleep—I've been up for days and it's not like I'm the one …" Seifer could hear Raijin swallow down his exhaustion and grief. "She'd want you there, man. Maybe it'll help."

Raijin didn't go into the room with him when they reached the infirmary. Kadowaki, who'd checked vitals and kept watch while Raijin was away, met them at the door and gave them an update—consisting of no updates; *still not breathing on her own, brain activity minimal; still no good news.* The two of them went to chat for a minute about 'next steps,' leaving Seifer alone to face her.

*Was it silly to wonder what he was going to say—what his excuse for everything was going to be—even though she probably couldn't hear him? He'd always felt like Fujin could read his mind, and so the fear seemed reasonable. Hyne, he was being a coward. He hated it when Raijin was right.* Seifer gripped the door handle and pushed into the room with one purposeful shove.

Fujin laid before him on a bed that looked too large under her feather-light frame. She was covered in cords and wires—an IV drip, a catheter, electrodes pasted to her in various places … and a horrifying tube stuck down her throat, forcing the rise and fall of her chest. And Seifer felt …. mad at
first; anger at whatever fallible god in their universe designed Fujin to be so fragile. She looked like a shadow of herself—a ghost stuck between this world and the next.

Anger. So much anger. He took a step forward with a trembling hand and grasped her foot through the soft blankets. When he touched her, and she didn't move to meet it … that's when the anguish rolled in.

His eyes watered as he moved to plop in the chair beside her, embarrassed by the tears even though he knew nobody was watching. He sniffled and wiped them away, only to find them replaced by fresh drops on his cheeks. This was the fucking problem with love … when it went wrong, it hurt like hell.

What should he say, when the girl who could usually read his mind might not be able to hear him ever again? Did it matter at all what he said? Seifer leaned in to kiss her cheek gingerly, his chest aching as he took in the familiar scent of her skin and decided that it most definitely did matter.

"I'm sorry it took me so long to get here. I was … being an ass again. Raijin punched me if it makes you feel any better." He imagined her disapproving look, followed by her knowing chuckle. "I'm here now… I love you …" The machines beeped, and he ran his eyes over her immobile form, unsatisfied with the distance between them. He lowered the arm of the hospital bed and scooted the chair closer, kissing her cheek again before resting his head at an uncomfortable angle just above her shoulder. Surprisingly, being close to her made him feel better—the buzzing left behind by the killing of those men and the decimation of the training center was replaced by a dull, melodic him. Seifer blinked away tears, surprised, and wiped his nose.

"I know. I'm sorry. I know you're out there somewhere, Fuu. I … I can feel it." He whispered, meaning every word as he gripped her arm. "Wherever you are … be safe."
This is a dark ocean, Fujin mused as she drifted, buoyed by a silt-black current. She'd decided it was an ocean through the process of elimination. She was weightless, and since the human body couldn't survive in space, logic bore out that it must be water. Perhaps this was the deep belly of the world …

She'd been floating for quite some time though, and if it were water logic also insisted that she surely would have drowned by now. But water and space were at least things she found familiar—comforting through their identifiable qualities.

The alternative was nothingness, and that would also mean that she was probably dead. Presently, all the explanations were not ideal.

Fujin didn't feel dead. Though, admittedly, she also had no clue what being dead felt like. She hoped to Hyne it wasn't this … she'd go mad if she drifted forever.

The idea of forever made her feel lonesome and feeling lonesome made her afraid that she was alone, and being alone reminded her of when she was a little girl and she was afraid of the dark.

This is a dark ocean, Fujin mused as she drifted, buoyed by a silt-black current.

Wait—no.

Her mind had looped again, and something inside of her, outside, or around her—was she even a thing anymore?—stung at the interruption. The pain indicated the presence of a barrier, and a barrier meant there were limits. Nothingness couldn't have a limit, but the bottom of the world—the bedrock of the ocean—just might.

This is a dark ocean—no. No, no, no! Fujin screamed. How many times had she done this already?

"You're such a restless creature." A voice stirred, and Fujin could saw shades of violet and pink, wrapped in tendrils of breeze. But … could she see a sound?

"Pandemona," Fujin whispered, her suspicion abating as the anxiety and loneliness subsided. "Why were you hiding from me? I'm … I'm so afraid.

"You're too weak, child. You need to rest, but you won't stop fighting. It's the same every time, I'm afraid." The Guardian scooped her up and held her still. "She couldn't watch you suffer. I tried to tell her he'd end it soon."

"Who?" Fujin, exhausted, wondered only briefly who was worried and would bring about an end. There was so much space for questions, and all the answers seemed meaningless when there was nothing to measure them against.

"Your mother," Pandemona purred as it cradled her. "And the one you call Seifer. He's telling you to be safe. But you should be telling him that, I think."

"Seifer," a pleasant heat coursed through her at the mention of his name, followed by a bone-deep chill. "Tell me he's not here."

"With us? No, impossible. But with you … yes." Pandemona mused as she shuddered from the cold. "It's always the same … it's such a shame you all don't understand."
"Will I see him again?" Fujin was afraid of the answer, but she felt Pandemona's smile.

"You will. Again, and again, and again."

"My mother?" Fujin asked hesitantly, believing the Guardian. "Is she here?"

"Yes and no," Pandemona sighed. "She's with me, and I'm with you. Sometimes she tries to reach you directly, but since it almost killed you … well, she can't come back again until its time. I'm sorry."

"That was you. Both of you, in the library." Fujin mused, and then grimaced. "But not in the street?"

"No, not in the street." The wind around Pandemona swirled in angry clips. "That was the wicked sorceress."

"What does she want?" Fujin felt her soul tingle at the remembrance of those icy talons and being chased into the black.

"What the sorceress always wants. To come back again, and again, and again. It's such a terrible thing … " Pandemona's exasperation was palpable. "But it can be terribly beautiful at times, too."

"Pandemona … is this the end?" Fujin whispered, not understanding what the guardian meant about wicked sorceresses and returning over and over, and not particularly wanting to. "If this is the end can you say goodbye to them for me, somehow? To Raijin … and Seifer …" She couldn't feel the tears on her face, but Fujin understood that she was crying now.

"Oh, my child. I've frightened you." The guardian cooed regretfully and wiped her tears away. "You're not in danger now. We're protecting you—keeping you secret, keeping you safe. It won't hurt if you don't struggle. There will be enough pain in the waking world, in the days to come. Rest while you can."

"The waking world …" Mention of her life and the yearning to return to it drove Fujin to instinctually search for a door back to consciousness, and she winced as her body stung again.

"No, you can't go back without it," Pandemona warned and held her tightly. "Be patient and stop struggling. Your mother is crying again, and all this wailing … I can't stand the sound anymore."

"Is she in pain? Cid Kramer said …" Fujin whispered, reaching for Pandemona's face as she tried to feel her mother's anguish.

"Always," Like a grateful pet, Pandemona leaned into Fujin's touch. "But don't feel guilty. I warn her, and it is always her choice. She understands."

"Always her choice? Do you mean again, and again, and again?" Fujin questioned, seeking an answer to everything. Pandemona bristled and shook her head.

"Now's not the time for that." Fujin was freed from the guardian's grasp and set adrift once again. "You'll have too many questions, and he's bringing the ring back soon. You won't need us to hide you anymore."

"The ring …" She tried to slide her pale fingers against one another to confirm the metal was missing, but in their stead, she only felt a low electric hum. "My mother's ring."

"Odine's ring," Pandemona confirmed and gave Fujin a careful shove that set her back in motion. "It will mask our powers when you return from this place. Wear it always. Never tell anyone. Not even
him … I know you won't."

"I don't understand you." Fujin reached for Pandemona desperately but found that the guardian wasn't reaching back. "Please! Please don't let me go! Don't leave me here!"

"Don't be afraid, Fujin." Pandemona comforted her as the creature's voice grew distant. "They're waiting for you on the other side. We'll see each other again soon enough."

"Wait, tell her I love her!" Fujin screamed into the abyss. "Tell her that I love her and that I'm sorry I can't free her. Please!"

"She knows …" Pandemona's voice dissipated in the whispering wind. "She always knows."

Again, and again, and again, Fujin repeated as she let Pandemona release her, not wanting to feel that sting again. She drifted, limitless, and waited to be found in the dark.

He swore he saw her blink, and for just a moment he allowed himself to hope. His heart was buoyed, and that dull energy that burned low from waiting sparked alive; he jolted upward and touched her hand, her face, and croaked her name into the stillness of the room.

"Fujin?" His thumb stroked the fragile skin under her eye in hopes it would elicit a response. "Fuu, are you awake?"

But she didn't open her eyes, and Seifer ached with hope's departure. She was still as ever, and he was alone as ever. It was just shy of seven days now, and not a single thing had changed.

He dragged his thumb along that tender patch of skin a moment longer, wondering how it could've grown so dark in such a short span of time. Dark circles came from being tired, but Fujin couldn't be tired because she'd sure as hell done a lot of sleeping…

Seifer refused to call it anything else.

He'd heard Kadowaki throw around a few terms: minimally conscious, coma, vegetative state. There may have been a few more, but he told her to shut the fuck up and get out of the room before she could list any more off. Normally, the brave doctor K wouldn't have budged, but Seifer suspected that the way his hand gripped and flexed on the handle of Hyperion was keeping her, and anyone else who insisted he should start preparing himself for the worst, from saying too much. Fear was his best ally, sometimes.

Raijin, a little less timidly than Seifer was used to (landing that punch on Seifer's jaw had made him a little braver, apparently), piped up at some point to remind him that it was Kadowaki who ultimately saved Fujin's life, and that he should try to be a little more gracious towards her. Naturally, Seifer told Raijin to fuck off too—where was his loyalty? He was part of the Posse, and he needed to remember that. While he was at it, he also needed to promptly crawl out of Kadowaki's ass.

Raijin sulked, and Seifer begrudgingly backpedaled, knowing he had no right to be critical; he'd sucked at this at the outset—Raijin was the one who held everything together. He offered a vague explanation moments later for being touchy. He was just raw-nerved and trying his best not to dice anyone else in two—he didn't mean to snap.

From then on, Raijin took consults with Kadowaki outside of the patient's room and only bothered Seifer when he needed to. Over the past couple of days, he'd heard his name come out of the doctor's mouth (or was it Xu's?) sharply a few times, and Raijin replying, exasperated: I dunno what you guys want from me. Ya wanted him out of the training center, so I got him out of the training center.
He stopped killin' things. He's bein' quiet—this is the best I could do.

Poor Raijin. Always the one left to make the excuses and the apologies. If Seifer had a spare feeling to give, he'd tell Raijin he was sorry for putting him through this … but he didn't have a spare anything at the moment. He was giving everything he had to Fujin … and it still wasn't enough to bring her back.

While it proved easy to keep Kadowaki's opinions out of earshot, the repeated requests from the Headmaster for a meeting about "the Deling incident" were a little more challenging to dodge. Especially given the fact that Xu—the harbinger of bleak news and bad tidings—was relentless and didn't care one way or another about Seifer's emotional state. In the past seven days, she'd bullied her way into the room twice to relay the Headmaster's directive. On Xu's first try, seeing Fujin was fresh for Seifer and he was little bleary and despondent, which allowed Raijin time to answer with a hurried, Yeah yeah, ya know we get it. We'll check in soon, and usher the Headmaster's lemming out of the room.

But Raijin was out getting food the second time Xu stepped foot into the infirmary, where she authoritatively insisted that Seifer immediately go to the Headmaster's office or be expelled. Seifer wished he could say he considered the request, but the truth was that his body glided out of that chair, deathly quiet, on its own accord. He crossed the room in a flash, his reflexes pressing Xu against the wall with one hand loosely at her throat and Hyperion gripped in the other.

I don't care what Cid wants. Seifer growled lowly. Her hand flew to his forearm in an attempt to pull herself free, but he only tightened his grip. He gritted his teeth and growled again, his brow furrowing and his nose wrinkling as his face twitched with anger. With just a flick of the wrist, her life could be over … and there wasn't much keeping Seifer from crossing the threshold of reason into chaos.

They stood locked like that for a few minutes. Xu's body was motionless as she channeled her training to stay calm, but the panic and fear in her eyes betrayed her. At first, it gave Seifer satisfaction to know he had the upper hand, reminding him of how he felt when he killed those men: the rush of adrenaline that came with it, and the knowledge that he was more than formidable—he was a perfect killing machine. What could anyone do if he did kill Xu? He'd taken out a whole team of private security on his own—no magic, no junctions, no potions or supplements. Just Hyperion and his own two hands.

As he held Xu against the wall and the pressure of her swallowing pushed against his palm, a wave of nausea overtook him; it was … unsettling … almost terrifying, to realize he had that much power in him, and that he could so cavalierly consider the flick of a wrist.

Don't come back again. Seifer muttered distantly as he released his grip and snapped his hand out to open the door, shoving Xu into the hallway with force before closing the door quickly behind her. He didn't want to be a monster … he only wanted Fujin to wake up.

Four days had passed since then. Four days of silence, four days of wordless visits from Dr. Kadowaki to conduct a few check-ups. Four days of nothing.

He bit his bottom lip as he watched Fujin's face just a moment longer before pulling away reluctantly, causing the plastic fabric of the chair to creak under the weight of his body. He was losing count of how many times he'd jolted upright in the same repetitive motion. Raijin was probably right; he should get up for a while and get his mind right—shower, shave, catch some sleep somewhere more comfortable than this damn creaking chair. But he'd already let her down at the start of this … he should be there when she woke up.
Instead of a shower, he sent Raijin off for a few supplies—a washcloth, toothbrush and toothpaste, a fresh change of clothes. *Deodorant too,* Raijin had added to the list as he wrinkled his nose and waved his hand in front of his face. *You've been brewin' since last week.*

When the door opened behind him, signaling Raijin's return, a waft of the musk he'd developed reminded Seifer that he hadn't really cleaned up much since they left Deling. He'd quickly scrubbed his hands before he came to see Fujin—*on account of the dried blood layered on his skin that belonged to both man and beast*—and splashed some water on his face every now and then, but that was about it—fairly telling, for someone who was usually pretty hygienic and took a lot of pride in his appearance (Fuu and Raijin called it vanity, but Seifer preferred to call it *maintenance*). It'd be good to get cleaned up, even it was just in the tiny bathroom sink in the infirmary, and feel like a person again.

"Thanks Raij," He exhaled, as he arched his back to work out a kink and readied to stand. "I appreciate it."

"Sorry, not Raijin, I'm afraid."

The voice brushed against Seifer's raw nerves and made him bristle. He gripped Hyperion, his brain fighting the impulse of every trained muscle in his arm that wanted to lift that cool metal from the ground and run it through Cid Kramer's doughy body. Seifer craned his neck, unable to stop his eyes from measuring out how many paces it'd take to get *close enough.*

"Get out," Seifer whispered, his fingers flexing on Hyperon's handle.

"I know you're in pain Seifer, but this is still my Garden, and—"

"*And some leader you are,*" Seifer turned in his chair, fighting the urge to lunge. "Sending a sick girl out to do your dirty work."

"Sending a SeeD out to do her *job.*" Cid didn't approach, knowing Seifer, and the wild eyes of someone in pain, well enough to understand he should stay out of reach. "Fujin knew there were risks. You all know that."

"'Risks' like being injured in a fight—that's what we're ready for. Having her mind ripped apart by a sorceress?" Seifer twisted in his chair to face the Headmaster. "I tell you what, Kramer. I'll cut your pretty wife's head off the next time I see her, and then we'll talk about knowing the 'risks' of this line of work." A rare sneer flashed on Cid's face.

"Mind your tongue, cadet," Cid warned as he boldly took a step closer to prove he wasn't bluffing. "There's a team of A-level SeeD forces on the other side of this door. You're an excellent fighter—one of the best I've ever seen, I'd wager. But you can't take them all on. They're ready to come in here at any sign of trouble. Even if you cut me down, they'll only revive me. All that trouble for nothing."

"How are you so certain I couldn't finish the job?"

"Well, I'm not. I suppose nothing's a certainty," Cid shrugged, seeming unfazed.

"You made a mistake coming in here then, old man," Seifer spat and stood up abruptly from his chair, his velocity sending it screeching backward. The noise prompted one of the aforementioned A-level SeeD to snap the door open, a gun at the ready.
"So that's really what you want, eh? Revenge?" The Headmaster raised a hand, directing the gunned man to hold. "Feel free to run me through then, but it'll be a waste. You'll never get a chance to see your friends again. And then, of course, there's Fujin … I'd reconsider if I were you."

"Sonofabitch," Seifer seethed, clenching his teeth so hard that his jaw ached. "I've always known you were spineless; cowering behind the strength of better men. You have no understanding of what we do, and you have no idea what I'm capable of."

"You're right. I'll never understand the life of a SeeD the way my students do—I've never claimed to. But I know what you're capable of Seifer … make no mistake about that." Cid leaned back against the wall and kept his eyes locked on Seifer's. "I made incredible sacrifices to create this place. Incredible sacrifices so that you, and all the others like you, could wind up here. And as much as it would kill me … I can take everything away from you in an instant." Cid's held two fingers out, ready to dictate Seifer's choice to the gunslinger on the other side of the door. "Choose carefully."

No matter how much raw power he'd realized, Seifer also understood the basic reality of things. He'd able to move with deft quickness and splice the unarmed Cid Kramer in two—no problems there. But the aftermath of that … he wouldn't be able to come back from it. There was nothing Seifer hated more than feeling like he was backed into a corner, but the options were limited and time—as always—wasn't on his side. His hand shook as his fingers pried apart and dropped Hyperion to the floor. The vitriolic comments on the tip of his tongue burned his throat as he swallowed them down.

"Good. Now … have a seat." The headmaster moved to sit in a chair on the far side of the room, reassuringly signaling his armed protector back into the hallway. Seifer, fuming, had no choice but to take a few steps backward and fall into the chair at Fujin's side. For her—and only her—he needed to restrain himself as best he could.

He leaned onto his knees, pressing his face into his hands—his eyes feeling wide and hot and on the verge of bursting—he wasn't sure he'd ever been this angry before and it was fucking exhausting. He sucked in a hard breath through his nose and stayed bent low. He could feel Cid's gaze on him as they sat in silence—no doubt keeping a careful watch on the pace of the cadet's breathing and body language to assess when he should speak next.

"How is she?" Cid asked politely, even though he would've been briefed on her status before entering the room. "I peeked in a few nights ago while you were asleep. She looks a little better, I think."

"Don't talk about her," Seifer warned, sitting upright and finding Cid's eyes on him, the older man's gaze softened but still stern.

"Well … then how are you holding up, after what happened to those men in Deling?"

"How I'm holding up?" Seifer scoffed and canted forward in his chair. "Let's not dance around this. You want to know what happened in Deling so you can save Garden's ass."

"Yes. I need to have a clearer picture of what happened." Cid shrugged and kept his gaze locked with Seifer's. "I was just trying to be polite."

"Not much to tell. They were pursuing us," Seifer stretched out his laced fingers, his thumbs jutting outward flippantly to signify that he didn't care. "It was us or them."

"And you think they were coming for Fujin?" Cid raised an eyebrow, skepticism flashing on his face.
"I don't think, I know." The fact that Cid seemed perplexed that his sorceress wife would want to intercept whatever the fuck was in Fujin's head made Seifer uneasy. Cid not knowing much about this entire mess made the prospect of a quick resolution pretty fucking bleak. "Who else would she be after?"

"No one. I'm just trying to make sense of it." Cid pressed his temple. "Speaking of making sense of things ... I've seen photographs of the bodies, Seifer—it was a massacre. We'd be in a much better position if you'd just injured them; we've taught you how to—"

"I couldn't control it." Seifer interrupted, his jaw tensing up at the remembrance of the anger that surged through him that day. "I didn't realize my own strength, maybe."

"We need to work on that, then." Cid clicked his tongue, only half-accepting the excuse. "Though I suppose it might work out better in the end. Since no one survived and there are no security cameras in that old hotel, and with his connections there any way ... General Caraway thinks he can cover your team's tracks—possibly divert the blame to terrorist groups in Timber who've been looking to topple the Galbadian administration. It's probably the only time civil unrest has been a boon to anyone at Garden."

Seifer decided to keep the fact that Caraway's daughter was in one of those very resistance groups to himself for now. He wasn't entirely sure how much Caraway knew about Rinoa's adventures in subverting the Galbadian government, but chances were he'd be reluctant to shift the blame if he knew.

"So, that's what you came to say? That there isn't an international manhunt for me right now? That's disappointing." Seifer smirked but it fell flat—as if the faces of those men didn't haunt him when he closed his eyes.

"Not yet," Cid rolled up the cuffs of his shirt, appearing far too comfortable for Seifer's liking. "Caraway needs to know if anyone else in Deling knew you three were with SeeD."

"The attendant at the car rental place; we used our SeeD discount there." Seifer murmured as a beep from one of the machines hooked up to Fujin distracted him.

"Well, that's fairly common. They probably won't remember you," Cid reasoned. Seifer heard the man moving, his chair creaking as his body pressed into the stiff backrest.

"Well ..." Seifer scratched his nose with his thumb before turning back to Cid. "We were kinda memorable. He may have caught Fujin and me ... enjoying some extracurricular activities."

"For Hynesake," Cid groaned and pressed his fingers to his forehead—apparently this little interaction was giving the headmaster a headache. "Okay. Anyone else?"

"That I can remember, no." Seifer shrugged, realizing that the anger had exhausted him and that it, along with his energy, was fading. "Just that guy, the people at the hotel, and Rinoa. But Fujin was there without us for a few days. She went to a library there—the main public library in the city, I think."

"No clue if she'd mentioned SeeD?" Cid asked, his eyes falling on Fujin.

"I don't know. But it makes a convenient cover—being a student, conducting that kind of research. I think Fuu would've used it." Seifer deduced as her nickname fell from his lips accidentally. He usually liked to keep evidence of the Posse's closeness secret to help protect their image, but he'd been doing a poor job of that lately.
"That's exactly why I wanted to put the three of you together," Cid surveyed the room before connecting his eyes with Seifer again. "That bond you have—that loyalty and understanding of strategies—I thought it might help you in the field. I suppose … I suppose I've failed you all a little." He sighed and connected his eyes with Seifer's again. "But that doesn't mean you're all blameless. Hearing that you and Fujin were careless with covering your tracks is—"

"That was my doing," Seifer interjected, running his hand over his face to cover up the fib; he wasn't sure he was on top of his game with white lies right now. "Obviously, that was all my doing." He'd surmised that he was already royally fucked—no need for them to both get in trouble. "So, expel me or do whatever it is you came here to do. I'm sick of talking."

Cid stood up again, placing a hand on his back and wincing in pain as he extracted himself from the chair and moved to stand at the foot of Fujin's bed. Seifer had forgotten just how old Cid was getting. Time, he supposed, wasn't a friend to the headmaster either.

"I'm not going to expel you, Seifer. I think that would be a little cruel, considering the circumstances," He pivoted to Seifer and stuffed his hands in his pockets. "I have to ask you and Raijin to return to your post in Deling and complete the mission, though. You've left too many loose ends. Caraway needs to meet with you discreetly and discuss next steps in keeping us out of the fray. Something also needs to be done about Rinoa Heartilly. She's been calling Garden incessantly. Aside from that, the sorceress is still in town and—"

"'Return to my post?'" Seifer's repeated as his eyes grew wide. "You've gotta be outta your mind, old man."

"The three of you accepted a mission," Cid placed a hand on the metal railing at Fujin's side. "Fujin would want you to complete it."

"You have no idea what she'd want," Seifer growled a low warning, and Cid's hand slowly retreated as quickly as it appeared.

"Raijin's already agreed." The headmaster interjected in an attempt to appeal both to Seifer's sense of loyalty and jealousy. "He doesn't want this to be all for nothing."

"All for nothing. Seifer rolled the phrase around in his head as he worked to bury the rage at Cid's audacity to suggest he abandon his friend. Clearly, the headmaster didn't have a grasp on the relationship that the three of them had. To Seifer, Fujin, and Raijin, the three of them were the center of the universe—the rest of the world came second. As long as they had each other, they could get through everything, and with one of their lives in the balance, they obviously circled the wagons. Nothing else mattered but protecting each other, and Raijin would never outright agree to leave without Seifer condoning it first.

The headmaster's stated objectives were standard, and admittedly needed to be done, and yet … Cid seemed to want Seifer, specifically, to return to Deling so badly that he was clearly lying about why. If Fujin wasn't lying a foot away from him, minimally conscious, Seifer would've invested more time in figuring out why. But as it stood, he was tired, filthy, already pissed off, and was about to alter his future drastically. Dissection of Cid's needless untruth would have to wait for another day.

"Then let Raijin go alone. He can handle it."

"Seifer, I have to insist …" Cid's voice drifted off as Seifer's eyes locked with his once again. "I can't honor the parameters of the mission and allow you into SeeD if you don't go back."

"Well, I guess I'm not going to be in SeeD any time soon," Seifer shrugged, and defiantly settled into
his chair. "Because I'm staying right here."

Raijin, who at this point could win a medal with his impeccable timing, shoved the door open in a hurry, weighed down by all the items Seifer had requested.

"I'm telling you, I can keep him calm," he reasoned with one of the gunmen on the other side of the door in a panic. "There's no need for all this, ya know? He, Seifer!" Raijin shouted past the guards and the sound of a light struggle ensued. "Seifer, are you alright?!"

"It's fine, let him through." Cid waved Raijin in, and he fumbled into the entryway, glaring back at the men who attempted to manhandle him.

"What the hell!?" He continued his glaring, this time at Cid, as he dropped the bags he was carrying to the floor. "I told you guys to stay outta here and that I'd deal with it. Some nerve you've got."

"It's fine, Raijin." Seifer decided to stop his friend from getting too worked up; no need for all of them to be in trouble. "Cid was just telling me that he needs you to go back to Deling."

"Me?" Raijin's face twisted in confusion. "Alone? And leave you guys here?"

"It's fine," Seifer repeated, reassuring their friend and ignoring Cid's presence altogether. "I want you to go. If you wrap things up, Fujin's first mission is a success and you're in SeeD with her."

"But … what about you?" Raijin blinked, his glare dulling to a sympathetic gaze. "You won't be with us—"

"I'm good here." Seifer cut him off and jerked his head. "Go with Cid, he can give you details."

"Is that your final decision?" Cid, who'd edged his way towards the door, piped up from the far side of the room.

"I don't even know why you bothered asking me to begin with," Seifer grumbled. "You don't know nearly as much as you think you do." Cid ignored the insult, tired of being baited, and walked out the door.

"Come along Raijin—it's a quick deployment I'm afraid. I'll brief you on the walk to the garage."

"Okay …" Raijin, disappointed and torn, hung back. "Just … give me a second." He strode to the head of Fujin's bed and quickly touched her cheek. "Come on back any time, Fuusama. The sooner the better." He turned to Seifer and clapped his friend's shoulder with a steady bronze hand.

"I don't understand what this is all about, ya know. But I'll go. I'll do whatever ya need me to do." Seifer nodded in thanks, as Raijin strode towards the door. "Anything I should know?"

"Just … be safe. If someone asks you to do something crazy, don't do it. Stay away from the sorceress. I don't want something like this happening to you." The two men exchanged a knowing glance at Seifer's admission that he couldn't bear losing Raijin, too. "Come right back to Garden when your work is done … and if you see Rinoa, tell her we're sorry for abandoning her, and that I'll call her myself at some point." He felt a little badly for considering Rinoa's hurt feelings at all right now.

"Alright, boss. I'll be seeing you." Raijin turned to walk away but backpedaled towards Seifer quickly as he reached into his vest pocket. When his hand reemerged, the familiar chain of Seifer's necklace returned with it.
"This was in that bag of stuff from the beach." The mention of that bag made both of them queasy with regret. Raijin hurriedly handed it off to Seifer. "Figured you'd want it back. Oh, Fujin's ring is on there, too."

"Thanks," Seifer rolled the chain in his hand. "I forgot I wasn't wearing it." He worked to unclasp the chain and released the sapphire ring into the palm of his hand.

"Welcome," Raijin stuttered as he made his way towards the door again. "Hey, Seif?"

Seifer was busy lifting Fujin's hand and sliding the ring onto her finger, and wasn't prepared to turn and find his friend staring at him with shiny, wet eyes.

"I'd never want something like this to happen to you, either. I just thought, with everything goin' on between us … " Raijin said with a faint voice as his hand fumbled with the door handle. "You're my best friend. Ain't nothin' going to change that."

"Same." Seifer smiled weakly as Raijin abruptly walked out the door before getting too emotional, and left Fujin and Seifer alone while he went out to become a SeeD. It was the first time Raijin had gone off to do anything of any magnitude by himself, and Seifer wished he'd had it in him to make it more momentous for him. But he was so angry, so emotionally drained, and so incredibly tired. He wished these chairs were more comfortable… if only he could just …

And with that, Seifer drifted off to sleep.

She registered the feeling in her throat as an ache before she realized she was choking. Her body revolted, jerking upward repetitively into the dark. But to her right she felt a tangible warmth, and despite the fear of finding nothing but black when she did it, Fujin opened her eyes.

Instead of darkness, everything was bright. The faint light blinded her, but the evidence of it refracting on white walls made her tear up—it was the first light she'd seen in what seemed like a lifetime.

*She was finally home … but she was choking; was she still in danger?*

Rushed hands enveloped her face as she gagged, and a frantic voice belonging to a body obscured by the light called out for help. They muttered curses and screamed, and Fujin shook with fear.

A light above her flashed on, and through the blur of her watering eyes, Seifer came into his view, red-faced and shouting, his fingers pressing into her cheeks. Fujin wretched, and sobbed and tried with all her strength to reach for him, but someone pushed him aside. She began to put up a fight, but the soothing, familiar voice put her at ease.

*Dr. Kadowaki …*

"Hnnnnahhhhhhhnn, Fujhnnnn hnnmthing tube." The doctor pressed her shoulder and explained. Fujin gargled and lurched upward again.

"Fujin, you're alright. I have to remove your breathing tube … Seifer's here." Kadowaki pressed her down again and spoke loudly and clearly, motioning for Seifer to stand at her side. Fujin wretched again but settled under Seifer's hand as he helped Kadowaki keep her still.

There was terrible movement; a deep pulling burn—both too slow and too fast—followed by the relief of a dull ache. Fujin gasped, breathing air in the light. With the panic abating, she felt the velvety sheets against her skin, and the feeling of weight—the pull of gravity drawing her
downward. And warm hands … *Seifer's hands*, on her cheeks again. She inhaled sharply through her nose in a subconscious attempt to keep the tension from her throat.

"Fuu, say something. *Anything.*" Seifer frantically ran his hands through her hair as Kadowaki zipped around the room in a blur, checking Fujin's vitals and replenishing an IV drip.

"You … you *stink,*" she croaked, her voice raspy and low. He laughed—though through her own hazy vision he looked like he could almost be crying—and leaned down to press his lips to her forehead. He whispered something in her ear, but through all the noise in the room she couldn't make it out.

"I don't want to fall asleep," Fujin rasped again as her eyes grew heavy. "*Please don't let me fall asleep again.*"

Through thin slits of light, Fujin saw Seifer look pleadingly to the doctor. Kadowaki grabbed Fujin's hand and leaned into her line of sight.

"It's alright Fujin—*you're okay now.* Seifer and I've got you. Just relax, and fall asleep—you'll be up again soon enough."

There was no reason to distrust Dr. Kadowaki, so Fujin allowed her eyes to close again as the doctor placed Fujin's hand in Seifer's and patted him on the back. Fujin slipped into darkness once more, but the feeling of the mattress beneath her, and Seifer's hand holding hers, made her feel tethered.

"I felt you," she mumbled groggily in Seifer's general direction. "You were warmth; a sun I couldn't find."

Seifer started to speak; something about feeling her too, something about being careful not to talk too much, something about being thankful. But Fujin missed most of it—she was already on the cusp of a restful sleep.
Interlude: God's Marbles

Many years ago, on the coast of the Centra continent …

It'd been almost a year since he'd planted his feet on this shore. Over three hundred sunrises and waning moons pulled at the sand in his absence. He could tell the grass on the dunes had fought to hang on, but the whipping nautical winds off the southern seas won out, leaving scores of blades bent in half and dangling off the crest of grainy banks—some of which were beginning to resemble waves themselves now.

The land around the stone cottage had been eroding for years, but it was more jarring when Cid saw it so infrequently. How could things change so much in just a year? The bank the children used to build sand castles on—the one he would watch them from through the kitchen window as he prepared lunch while Edea played make-believe with them—was almost completely gone now. If the water continued its trajectory, the very foundation beneath their old home would give out some day … not in his lifetime, or in Edea's … so he supposed it didn't really matter.

It's not as if they'd have anyone to leave it to…

Cid and Edea always wanted children of their own, when they were young and naive and had big hearts that loved without limits. They would lie together in bed and dream up tiny people in their likenesses—bright-eyed and dark-haired—with names and personalities and futures. They lived so many lifetimes on those nights, their imaginations running wild with the possibilities of what life would hold, only stopping dreaming long enough to make love—a divine means to build a world of their own. Edea was even pregnant once, very briefly, a long time ago—a couple of years before the war broke out. They'd been trying for a while already and were becoming slightly more resigned to the fact that time was chipping away at the years they had to realistically construct a large family. They would've been happy with even just one bight-eyed, dark-haired Kramer.

But obviously, that hadn't panned out.

After that loss, they never spent another night staring up at the ceiling wondering. He wasn't entirely sure what conclusions Edea drew from it all, but the fact that her dreams became much smaller—talked about reasonably over breakfast to avoid mudding them up with passion and fantasy—was telling enough. Edea's dreams became rooted in reality and daily happenings, and much more material and tangible—I'd love to go on a vacation to Trabia someday, or wouldn't it be lovely to have a boat? Never again a mention of the futures of the young or passing down a seaside legacy for generations to come. Cid, for his part, learned a valuable lesson from the experience: that no matter how limitless their love was, life itself had limits.

And so, a few more years came and went, and in the middle of them all a sorceress war broke out. Even though the entire world was embattled, their little lighthouse on the Centra coast was barely affected, save for an increased population of monsters and the impending sense of ever-present danger that came with global conflict about a sorceress. But security could be bought, and they had enough money to stay out of the fray.

Cid was born a pauper, whose parents were begotten by parents who were even poorer. But Edea was from somemeans—the adopted daughter of a well-off and hermetic Deling eccentric, who passed away when Edea was only five. Upon her death, Edea inherited a fortune and the powers of a sorceress … though initially she only told Cid about the monetary inheritance. Not that it would've made much of a difference back then anyway—he would've found her even more enchanting.
Edea's small fortune paired with Cid's savings from his early years spent teaching at an Estharian prep school gave them more than enough money to live out their lives comfortably and hire out perimeter patrols to handle the monster problem exacerbated by the war … though talent grew scarcer as the war heightened and able-bodied fighters dwindled.

She didn't tell Cid about her powers until the war was more than half over, after growing anxious when the fight drew close to them—no more than 50 miles away. He'd found her collapsed at the floor near the kitchen counter one morning, sobbing and shivering as the radio blared the day's news and death tolls, irrationally afraid she'd be found out by the soldiers and killed or worse, be discovered by the sorceress. She confessed that she was afraid her powers meant they could never have children; *had any sorceresses ever had children of their own?* Edea wailed. *None that she could recall.*

Like a good husband, Cid sank beside her on the floor and collected her in his arms, telling her everything was *fine*; that she was safe with him in their hideaway by the sea, and that nothing was to blame but nature and the gods for their childlessness. But he knew deep down in his bones that she was *right*—that they'd *never* have the life they dreamed of now. *He never expected it to turn out like this for them though …*

Mere days later, two wounded Galbadian soldier stumbled on Cid and Edea's safe haven, fresh from a battle. With them, they brought ten children of varying ages—one a very young baby girl, who couldn't be more than a month old. Sorceress Adel's sympathizers had sacked a village full of resistance fighters, killing all of the men and women … and many of the children, save the ones who made it to the stone cottage's doorstep.

One soldier was mortally wounded and died gripping Cid's hand hours after he arrived, while Edea comforted the shocked babes dropped at their doorstep. The other soldier thanked them hurriedly, handed Cid his fallen comrades ID tags, and rushed back out the door.

*Cid, what are we going to do with them all? We don't even know their names …* Edea whispered absentely, shocked and frightened and clearly overwhelmed, as she cradled the baby girl that had been placed in her arms.

*Well …* he rubbed at the ID tag in his hand, his thumb pressing to remove a film of dried blood. *When the older ones get over their shock, maybe they can help us out. In the meantime,* he squinted to read the metal tag. *Let's name this one Xu, after the man who gave his life to save hers.*

*And so it all began.* Children started coming to the stone cottage in droves from the far-flung corners of the continent, and some even from the far reaches of the globe. Quistis, Irvine, Selphie, Zell, Raijin, Fujin … Ellone, Squall, and Seifer. *All of them.* And then came Edea's encounter with Ultimecia—the sorceress of the future—outside the stone cottage, and the prophecies, and the visions, and the possession …

*If he'd known then what he knew now …* Cid was certain he would've turned those soldiers and all ten of those first children away. *If he'd only known …* he may have been able to spare them both the heartache. Maybe it would've been someone else's burden to bear, or maybe this would've never happened at all. If they'd never started SeeD, would future generations be destined to doom all because there was no one there to fight this great sorceress of the future? Wouldn't it have been better to be happier in their younger years, and just let the world fall to shit when they were old and gray? Wouldn't it be better if they'd never known Squall Leonhart and Seifer Almasy?

But Edea loved those boys—*she loved all of those children*—as if they were her own, and felt now more than ever that she needed to protect them. She was *haunted* by the eerie specter of a fully-
grown Squall showing up with the dying Ultimcia at the stone cottage's doorstep, telling her of the sorceress of the future's plan to rule the world, and of the creation of SeeD to stop her. And with the glimpses of the future that Ultimcia's powers allowed her ... Edea forced Cid's hand and shaped their entire lives around her fear that the visions would become reality.

Squall was to be the savior, and Seifer the villain. Sworn enemies. Edea had seen enough to know that she'd make it out of the fray alive, but the pain she saw those boys endure … she wanted to change everything. She elected to sequester herself on the White SeeD ship with Ellone while Cid ran Balamb Garden and made sure the boys were trained to keep themselves alive. Edea entrusted him to train them equally, separate them to extinguish any rivalries—all with the hopes that some effort would change the course of the future.

And she never asked Cid how he felt about any of it. Which was probably for the best. Over these past few years, Cid often wished that he could even go back to when Squall and Seifer were just lads, saddle them with the weight of stones, and drop them both from the sandy dunes into the ocean below. The image of their screaming faces sinking in the waves flashed in his mind every time he stood on these shores.

"Already here?" A melodic voice echoed in the wind behind him. "I usually beat you." Cid smiled and turned to face his wife.

"My schedule's been busier with the expansion; I need to be hyper-punctual these days." She walked closer, grasping his face in her hands before leaning in to kiss him.

"Don't tell me anything about it." Silent tears slid down her cheeks, as Cid hurriedly gripped her in a tight hug. "How I've missed you."

"Edea," Cid whispered as he inhaled the scent of her hair, his own eyes growing watery. "I was afraid you wouldn't come. I'm … not sure what I would've done if you didn't show up."

"It's not all that bad yet," she pressed closer to him in a desperate grip. "It's getting worse … but I'm still here, for now." His hand ran through the strands of her jet-black hair.

"Are you doing okay?" Cid, panicked, pulled back and looked into her eyes, happy not to find that haunting golden glow they had when Ultimcia's powers were at their peak. "Are you keeping safe?"

"I'm fine," she smiled at him and pressed her hand to his chest. "I'm not in harm's way. It's everyone else I'm worried about. I … I had to send Ellone away a few months ago." The corners of her lips turned downward into a frown.

"I know." Cid nodded and covered her hand with his own. "She's—" Fear flashed on Edea's face as she pulled away from him in a hurry and covered her ears.

"Don't tell me! For Hyne's sake, don't!"

"Edea, shhhhh, it's alright," Cid gripped her forearms and pulled her close again. "I was just going to tell you that she's safe. She's happy, healthy, and doing very well. She wanted me to give you her love."

"I don't deserve her love," Edea shook her head but fell into Cid's embrace all the same. "I saw the most horrible things, Cid. The most horrible things."

"Don't," Cid rubbed her back. "You deserve all the world, for everything you've endured. For everything we've sacrificed." He stopped himself from continuing—Edea preferred to think of their
decision to lead separate lives as *atonement* for what was still to come—if it were still to come.

"How are the children?" She sniffled, pulling away from him again.

"They're doing *wonderful.*" Cid smiled as he brushed the hair from her eyes. "It took quite a while, but Selphie has finally settled in. She's still pretty spirited—that hasn't changed."

"I suspect not," Edea smiled through her tears. "Irvine?"

"Doing very well training in Galbadia." Cid answered as he laced his fingers together with hers and tugged her to follow him along the path towards the lighthouse. "He's not working with GFs, so he still remembers this place, and you. I haven't talked to him directly of course," he explained as he waited for her to gather up her skirt in her free hand to avoid the water. "But I've read his file. He's a bright boy. A bit of a practical joker, apparently."

"Not surprising," she chuckled as she let Cid lead her.

"Zell's adoptive family is still treating him very well—we've offered them a monetary incentive to let him come train and live at Balamb. Quistis is—"

"Tell me she's learned to enjoy being a child." Edea looped her arm in Cid's as they approached the lighthouse. "Always so serious, that girl."

"Oh, of course not—the opposite, in fact," Cid chuckled and shook his head. "I think she's going to outpace even the older students."

"And how is my darling Xu?"

"Accomplished; disciplined—still a headmaster's perfect pupil." Cid beamed proudly, his heart forever softened at the thought of Xu—the first child he and Edea were allowed to love from infancy. "But I have to remind her to lighten up so often. She and Quistis wound up being very alike, in a lot of ways."

"Well, they apparently came from the same town," Edea mused, darting to Cid's right side so she could walk in the water—the surf nipped at her ankles, and kissed the sole of his shoe. "Maybe they're related, in some way. Wouldn't that be sweet?"

"It wouldn't surprise me," he shrugged. Edea froze for a moment, turning to face the ocean.

"And how … how are they?" He knew that she'd been itching to ask but was holding herself back for fear of knowing.

"*They're doing just fine.* Squall is still stoic as ever; I don't think we ever assumed that he would change much though."

"I know he doesn't remember Ellone, but I think he misses her—deep down." Edea kept her eyes locked on the waves. "I wish they could grow up knowing each other. She still asks about him … or … well, asked about him, when I was with her."

"Someday they will. Maybe. Hopefully." She nodded at Cid's placating as her eyes began to water again.

"Ugh, I'm sorry," she wiped her cheek. "How's his training going?"

"The gunblade is a finicky weapon," Cid leaned in to kiss her temple as they walked along the sand.
"But he's excelling at it—you were right about that. Clearly, he was born to wield it."

"Good. I'm glad I was at least right about that. Better that he can protect himself, I think." Cid could tell she was running the prophetic visions through her mind, simultaneously happy and dismayed that Squall was the skilled gunblader that Ultimecia feared. "And … Seifer?" Cid cleared his throat and tugged Edea towards the lighthouse again.

"A handful," he sighed and Edea chuckled. "Defiant. Snarky. I swear I don't go a week without his name sliding across my desk in some report."

"Reports all the way from Trabia? That bad?" Cid nodded, forgetting that the lie he'd told her about Seifer Almasy implied that he wouldn't have frequent hands-on contact with the child.

"Yes, that bad. Fujin and Raijin seem to bolster his confidence well enough; he's the worst behaving student the Garden system has ever seen." Edea chuckled at that and pulled Cid closer.

"It's funny how their little personalities are still sticking." They stopped in front of the lighthouse door, and Edea teetered back and forth on her damp feet as she contemplated asking another question. "Is he still training with a staff?"

"Oh yes," Cid replied coolly as he leaned against the cold stone of the tower and drew Edea against him. "And Trabia has the best instructors for that. He couldn't be in better hands."

"I think about them every day. I hope …" Edea sighed as she leaned into Cid. "I just hope we're doing the right thing. I hope this stops everything."

Cid only nodded and placed his hand against Edea's cheek, cradling her head against him as they stood on the jagged shoreline and watched the waves come in. What could he say to her that would sound believable? He'd been lying for years now about Seifer's enrollment at Balamb, and part of the success of that lie was saying very little about the boy.

When Cid initially told Edea that he was ushering Seifer off to Trabia—far away from Squall Leonhart and Ultimecia's visions of the future—he naively didn't expect it to interfere much when he updated her on the children's daily lives. But now he often thought of that decision like a marble shot slowly into a circle of other glassy marbles gathered together. Once the first impact was made, the next marble would ricochet, and then the next, and the next, and the next, and the next. Soon, everything in the circle was moving to adjust to that single marble's trajectory—that one choice he made to shoot into the ring forcing his hand on thousands of other choices.

Edea was in the dark—she'd wanted to alter the fabric of their destiny, and as far as she knew they were. With the way it was foretold, Edea-of-the-present would make it out of all of this unscathed; Ultimecia would eventually seek out better, younger, purchase—but that's where the visions ended. She didn't get to see the fate of the children—of Quistis, Selphie, Zell, and Irvine … of Ellone, Squall, and Seifer. But she saw what would happen to them up until that point … the pain they'd endure, their fear of Time Compression … and mostly what Seifer would become, and what would happen between the two of them along the way. She unilaterally decided that she needed to save them from that pain, that she and Cid would stop at nothing to accomplish it.

But …

While Edea wanted to try and alter the future, Cid wanted nothing more than for it to get here sooner. Sure, he was fond of the children. He had wonderful memories of them, and they filled a chasm in Cid and Edea's hearts at a time when they needed it most. But Edea was his most important, most cherished love. All of the descriptors for happiness were indecipherable words in a
foreign tongue until she came into his life—he'd only known their meaning translated through her. Through her laugh, her smile, and those violet eyes of hers that made him weak all these decades later—that still made him weak even now when he only saw her once a year—at her request, to protect him, the children, and Garden from Ultimcia's inevitability.

*Just a single night with her.* He looked forward to that night each day, every day, all the yearlong.

When placing Edea on a scale to measure worth, everything else in the world came up light—and weighed even lighter on his conscience. *But Cid couldn't tell her that.* She'd be disappointed he didn't put *them* first—that he couldn't imagine himself a father to those children. *They weren't his flesh and blood, and he just couldn't make himself love them as much as he loved her.*

The choice came to him easily. He shot that marble into the ring and sent the rest of the world flailing towards its fate … *and he'd shoot it again, and again, and again.* Let the orbs land where they were intended to land; let the world careen towards its destined great war; let the children fend for themselves; and let Edea emerge unharmed and return to his arms. *If that's the way the future was written, then who was he—the lowly Cid Kramer, born from nothing but a dynasty of paupers—to alter history?*

He stationed Squall and Seifer at Balamb Garden unbeknownst to his wife. At first, Cid tried to temper his interference but quickly found himself curating the interactions between the two boys with an invisible hand in hopes that his divine intervention would lead them to their rightful fates: the shadow that would haunt the nightmares of generations to come, and the savior of the world.

He performed small acts of encouragement along the way: discreetly distributing a copy of *The Sorceress' Knight* into Seifer's orbit, and approving Squall on the roster for higher level classes to keep the boys in close proximity. He vacillated with his preference for them, unsure of who to allocate more resources. *Who should develop more brute strength, and who more skill with paramagic? Who should have a gunblade first—who should be trained to fear its power, and who should embrace it?*

From what he could understand of Edea's telling of things to come, Seifer would be Edea's immediate physical protector while she was possessed by Ultimcia …. but Squall would eventually save her soul. Achieving that outcome made Cid walk a fine line, and of course, the boys' personalities proved to be roadblocks on occasion. Squall naturally sought out solitude and independence, so Cid decided to encourage it to a degree. But, he also understood that he'd have to force Squall into a more social role at some point. He'd tried to foist the friendship of Zell and Quistis on the boy several times, but the brunette cipher alluded the overtures. He supposed it was okay—for now. Squall was growing strong and intelligent on his own; why not let those traits shine?

Rearing Seifer proved to be a little more complex. Not only were his own feelings on the boy mixed, but Cid found the child to be hot-headed, unpredictable, hard to read, and downright unmanageable at times—it was difficult to know if he was steering things in the right direction. But from the way Edea had described the days to come, it was essential that Seifer be consumed by ego if this ordeal was going to play out the way that Cid wanted it to, and the boy was growing confident to a fault thanks to being *worshiped* by his friends.

Even knowing that Fujin and Raijin were essential to Seifer's development as a dark knight, Edea still insisted he not be separated from them like all the others. *Send them to Trabia too, please,* she'd implored as she tearfully came to terms with the permanent separation of her children from each other and herself, *he loves them so in that world and I can't bear take that away from him.* Cid could at least be honest with her about that. The three of them were currently together at Balamb and were a troublesome handful. He'd had actually just recently been racking his brain for an incentive to keep
them a little more in line … perhaps putting them in charge of an extracurricular committee of sorts … he’d have to think on that more.

Regardless, the equity of the Seifer and Squall's training was a tricky balance to strike. Cid did his best not to worry about it too much. He'd never claimed to be as wise as a theoretical physicist, but if all this had already happened once before and he was unwavering in his choices now, then it was safe to assume he'd been through this already on another plane in time and made the right choices then, too. Whatever led to him and Edea getting their life back was the right choice …

… Even if it led to the death of Seifer Almasy, and maybe even all the children from the orphanage.

"Cid," Edea inhaled his scent and it made him smile to know she was grateful to be with him … and reminded him that if she'd known that he hadn't followed her wishes, she'd never want to speak with him again. "Did you ever wind up agreeing to do that terrible thing for Colonel Caraway?"

"Ah, you mean the Lieutenant General," Cid corrected her.

"Another promotion?" She extracted herself from his arms and leaned against the tower next to him. "He's moving up quickly."

"There's talk of him being named General soon."

"So, I'm assuming you did it, then." Edea grimaced.

"The man has money, Edea. I can't get into the weeds on it with you, but he's been heavily interested in our expansion efforts—before I even agreed to take his mission, he put me in touch with some Galbadian officials that … well, frankly I don't have the clout that you had in society. I need the networking." He shrugged and couldn't bring himself to meet her gaze. "With how quickly he's rising, it's good to have him owe me a favor."

She stepped away from him without warning to stand deeper in the water; after all of these years, he could tell just by glimpsing a fraction of her profile that she was disappointed.

"He was only an old drunk, who murdered the man's wife and left his daughter without a mother." Cid tried to justify by pulling at Edea's maternal heartstrings.

"How much did it cost Fury Caraway to the man murdered?" Edea asked. "When has an eye-for-an-eye ever made someone happy?"

"I didn't ask him for money," Cid admitted, opting not to advance to intercept her. "Like I said … I think having him indebted to Garden makes him more useful. And I know you hate to hear about these things … so let's just not talk about it."

"I don't know how many more of these conversations I can take. This is turning into something despicable. I can't —"

"Edea, please." Cid raised his voice ever-so-slightly, and she glanced over her shoulder in surprise. "You don't understand what running all of this without you is like. NORG's been leveraging his financing and he's been insufferable." He ran his hand over his face before placing his hands on his hips, the mention of NORG making him remember that he owed the Shumi a call about the renovations to Garden's sub-level being complete—another task added to a long list of administrative muck. "The resources come with a price tag when no one understands why I'm—why we're doing this; nothing is for free. It's not as if I can pitch the truth, here."

"Then you need to make a better effort—find donors interested in making the world a better place."
Missions that focus on life, not death."

"Those are few and far between and they don't always pay the bills, Edea."

"Maybe you're not approaching the right people. Maybe—"

"Enough! What's done is done." Edea turned to face him, her face blanching at his outburst. It was rare for Cid to lose his cool. Only Edea could make him so unstable … and only Edea could make him regret it immediately.

"Sorry—I'm a little frazzled. It was a long trip." He pressed his lips together and raked a hand through his hair. "I'm doing the best I can. I'm doing everything I can."

"I know you are."

"Then can't I just have my night with you?" He reached for her, and she stepped into his grip reluctantly. "Let's not spoil it with all this talk … let me handle Garden." She touched his cheek, her eyes sorrowful as she acknowledged the burden her powers placed on him.

"Alright, my love. Alright." She craned to place a chaste kiss on his cheek. "Let's have our night."

Edea smoothed his tie with a flat palm and left her hand pressed to his chest for a few seconds before pulling him back towards the cottage in silence—no words passed between them as they allowed the sound of the crashing waves and the crickets singing in the dunes to fill their ears.

Only the thought of Edea—sweet, violet-eyed Edea, with her raven hair and that enchanting smile that captured his soul the day he met her—could allow him rationalize murder. When the days of dispatching mercenaries were at their darkest, Cid sometimes wondered if she'd bewitched him; made him her knight—protecting her at all costs—without either of them even realizing it.
There was a world she knew before this. It was uncomplicated and boxed in by simple goals and dreams that were just as small as everyone else's: graduation, confessing to Seifer how she'd felt all these years, helping him become the greatest SeeD the Garden system had ever seen... maybe even running Garden together, someday.

Fujin set those goals because that's just what people did: strive for the next big thing. The next step. The next phase. There was always something to work towards on the horizon because life was laid out in a very linear fashion and all evidence pointed to that firmly: you were born, you aged and accomplished things, and then kept moving from one thing to the next, and the next, and the next. Life was fleeting, and so you did what you could, while you could, and filled your years with meaning ... hopefully with enough meaning that others might remember you when you were gone.

That inevitable truth—that collective struggle—was the one thing that all people had in common. It was the one thing that made her and her friends, who often felt misunderstood and out-of-place among their peers, not so different from the rest of the world, after all. It was a calling that stretched even beyond man and spoke to the base instincts of beasts, insects, and organisms invisible to the eye. It was the single driving force of everything that ever occurred, from the first daybreak on the planet to this very day as that same primordial sunlight broke through the clouds and filtered in through the half-drawn shades in the infirmary, where Fujin sat in wait.

But the world looked vastly different to her after the incident in Deling and her time spent in that dark void. The physical world she occupied now felt like the core of something bigger; something that sprawled out infinitely. Much like all things living, Fujin's greatest fear and reason for everything she did was cheating death. But now... going back to that unknown void where the familiar concept of an end might not even exist was the most horrifying thing she could imagine. Was her current reality just a space where they all waited to arrive at that void, or was she never supposed to wind up there to begin with?

Forgetting it was impossible, and articulating it equally so. Fujin half-heartley tried to describe what happened to Seifer and Kadowaki as best she could, but the words didn't seem to exist. She was alone in her fear ... and it set her apart from all of the world that she knew. Or at least, the world that she thought she knew.

Kadowaki's hands were on her flesh, with one aged and papery palm pressing to her shoulder as the other held a cold stethoscope to her back. As the doctor commanded Fujin to take deep breaths, the pressure released from her lungs caused a breeze, and sent a flurry of dust scattering into the sunlight.

What multitudes, Fujin thought to herself, looking back on the day that she forgave Seifer for overrunning her mission in Deling. It caused an argument between them; a theft of moments they could never earn back. It occurred to her then that someday he would be dust, and she would be that dust, and so would all the world she knew. So she forgave him, because time marched forward and they'd never get it back again. But was that true, she wondered, as Kadowaki prepared to draw a vile of blood. Was that really the end?
The doctor was speaking—detailing what she was about to do and what it was for—but Fujin couldn't bring herself to listen. The needle slipping into her vein surprised her, but she didn't jump or jerk in reaction. Her gaze shifted from the dust to the vile, and she intently watched it fill slowly with the crimson fluid. The loss of blood, even in a controlled setting, used to give her anxiety. But she already felt uprooted and uneasy. Her head was foggy, and her mind was tired. What parts of her were real, and what made them that way. What did all of this mean?

"Fujin?" Kadowaki questioned, as she gingerly placed a bandage on Fujin's arm. "Did you hear me?"

"S-sorry, no" Fujin stuttered as she shook her head and returned to the world of the living. "I was daydreaming, I guess."

"Probably daydreaming about never coming back in here," Kadowaki smiled as she returned to her small stool beside the patient table and began to scrawl down notes on her clipboard in a fluid shorthand. "I'll be checking up on you less after today, I promise. As I was saying, pending any abnormalities in these blood tests, I can give you a clean bill of health."

"That's great," Fujin replied with genuine relief. Without Kadowaki's approval, she couldn't get back to training, and that was the only thing standing between Seifer and a solid night's sleep … though she wasn't sure he was genuinely craving sleep in the slightest. "When do you think I can be back on duty?"

"Very soon. Sooner than I'd like. But the start of the semester is next week and I'm sure they'll want you instructing in the field," Kadowaki stopped writing and peered at Fujin over the rim of her glasses. "I was wondering … are you having fewer nightmares?"

"They're getting better … or, at least the same, I guess." Fujin moved her thumbs in a circle in her lap. Her palms were sweaty, for some reason, even though she was comfortable with the doctor. She didn't like being psychoanalyzed by anyone, even if they'd saved her life.

"Anything you're concerned about?" The doctor peered over the top of her glasses. "No … well, for lack of a better term, side effects?"

_Side effects. That was a mild description—'no sorceresses or GF's trying to send your consciousness to another moment on the space-time continuum again?' would've been more accurate._

"No." Fujin shook her head, wincing as the muscles in her neck flexed and pulled. She might be getting a clean bill of health today, but her body was still recovering. The physical ramifications of what happened were similar to when she'd been hijacked by the sorceress and Pandemona in the Deling library, but multiplied to a thousand times that intensity. Not to mention the fact that the bruises on her chest from Seifer and Raijin's life-saving compressions were still healing. "I haven't even heard the wind since I woke up."

"Are you being honest with me?" Kadowaki queried with a stern gentleness that only the kind-hearted doctor could achieve. "Because I gave Seifer a good tongue-lashing for letting you get to the state you were in, only to find out you were keeping the severity of all this from him, too."

Kadowaki exhaled as she continued making notes. "I still owe him an apology for that, I suppose."

"There hasn't been anything since that day," she whispered and looked down at her hands, ashamed of the sneaking indignant feeling that it really wasn't anyone else's damn business. Even if she had lasting side effects, she wouldn't lie about them. She'd do anything to get a weapon back in her hand and feel safe again. It might bolster her deflated confidence, _and might even give Seifer some reprieve…_
But she was telling the truth—there hadn't been any sign of her subconscious friends since the events that day in Deling, and some part of her knew she wouldn't hear from them again any time soon. She wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing just yet—she was mostly just preoccupied with making sure she never wound up in the dark again. The memory of the desolation of that world swept over and arrested her, leaving an unsettling feeling of vulnerability behind in its wake.

"Alright …" Kadowaki skeptically accepted Fujin's promise and set the clipboard down in her lap. "Like I said. Your vitals all check out. A remarkable recovery, after what you'd been through. Your potassium and sodium levels were so low. Most people would never survive that, let alone survive it without some level of brain damage. You're very lucky, Fujin."

"Did you get a chance to look into any of that?" Fujin ignored the application of luck to recent events as she tugged her white t-shirt back into place. The absence of her blue coat made her feel naked, and she grimaced at the thought of not having it back any time soon. It'd been left behind in the scuffle at the hotel in Deling. Caraway's clean-up team recovered it, along with her chakram, and both were handed over to Raijin when he returned to the city to tidy up the mess. On a recent phone call he'd explicitly promised to have a courier bring them to Balamb, but in usual Raijin fashion he kept 'forgetting' to do it. Some small part of her wondered if he and Seifer were in cahoots and trying to keep her off the field a bit longer.

"I searched a few journals and contacted some colleagues in Galbadia, but I came up short. It'd make for a great study, if I were still in my publishing years and this wasn't such a sensitive situation." Kadowaki pushed backward on her wheeled stool to allow Fujin space to stand. "If Odine's research on Guardian Forces and memory loss is accurate, then from a medical perspective it could be a viable explanation for what happened to you. But a lot of Garden students and active SeeD junction multiple Guardian Forces. I think I'd see more cases of electrolyte deficiencies."

"All GFs have different stats. Different attributes," Fujin countered as she tugged at the shirt's hem, finding it too short, and too revealing, and too wrong. She was used to wearing a uniform—her own version of armor—around everyone besides her friends. No matter how nice the doctor was, Fujin was feeling increasingly exposed in Kadowaki's office. "When we junction GFs, our allocation of paramagic enhances our skills … What if it works the same way if a sorceress is junctioned to a GF …" She gazed into the distance, remembering Pandemona's words and the feeling of being overcome by a force she couldn't compete with—of her consciousness being effortlessly handled as she struggled in vain to find a way home.

"True …" Kadowaki agreed as she tapped the clipboard in her lap with her fingernails and ruminated on Fujin's theory. "If an average Guardian Force consumes those chemicals and erodes memories over time … then it's plausible that Pandemona, junctioning a sorceress and using its powers at full-force, could burn through them at a faster rate and have a severe impact on brain function."

Fujin nodded, her pragmatic nature momentarily soothed by any semblance of medical rationale to explain what happened to her. But the comfort was short-lived as she remembered that the chemical processes behind the incident were just a symptom of a much more complicated, otherworldly problem: that she had some sort of uncontrollable force inside of her, with no clear mission other than hiding from another even more volatile force. There were no medications that could help her; no studies; no cure-alls. Fujin was utterly alone in her knowledge of the world beyond this one, with nothing but a shred of sanity standing between her, the onslaught of the wind, and the dark.

"Let's have you come in for a weekly electrolyte panel for a bit, just to keep an eye on things," Kadowaki's voice interrupted her thoughts with a kind offer that attempted to give Fujin the illusion of some control over things, even though they both understood there was nothing the doctor could do for her. "Tuesdays would work. My physician's assistant will be on the rotation, so even if I'm busy
she can help you."

"Sure … I'll check in with you after I get my schedule." The hesitation in her voice and the pregnant pause that followed struck a chord with Kadowaki, who cleared her throat and leaned back in her chair, gazing at Fujin with concern in her eyes.

"Are you sure you don't want to see the psychiatrist again? Seifer swung by this morning for an appointment and said that—" Fujin frowned and cut the doctor off.

"Respectfully Dr. K, no one else's opinion should factor into this," she tried to be forceful, but the power in her voice tapered off at the idea of Seifer scuttling down to the infirmary in secret to divulge details of these past couple of weeks. *If the situation were reversed, he would've called an action like that treasonous.* But Fujin couldn't afford to be mad at Seifer right now, even if she wanted to be. As always with Seifer, she found even the gravest of transgressions forgivable.

"And I'd never let the unqualified opinion of a loved one impact a treatment plan for any patient of mine." Kadowaki held up one cautionary hand, palm first, to settle her. "He didn't get into specifics, but I can tell he's worried. Knowing everything you've been through … well, I didn't see the harm in asking how you're handling everything."

"I'm handling it." Fujin replied flatly in an attempt to sound more convincing. "No offense Dr. Kadowaki, but I've already been cleared by psych. All I need is you to sign off on my physical health. And since you already said I'm in good shape…"

The statement didn't come out as strong as Fujin intended because *all of her strength had left her.* So much of the impenetrable mental toughmness she possessed was centered in her clear sense-of-self; the unwavering knowledge of who she was, why she was in the world, and what her goals were. But the recent events had rocked her like that storm had rocked that dingy she and Seifer took out into the open ocean all those years ago. Except unlike that day, where she questioned briefly whether or not she'd live, the darkness left Fujin questioning *life itself.* It was as if the veil to another realm had been lifted, and she was the only other person in their world who'd seen it … unless Sorceress Edea had seen it, too.

Much like that day in the storm when they were children, though, Fujin was looking to Seifer for strength, and relying on Seifer for that particular thing was complicated right now given the issues they'd faced over the summer with her new role in SeeD. She'd resisted it when she first woke up, and tried to convince herself that she could muddle through all this by herself.

But … the truth was that the only thing that brought her comfort over these past couple of weeks was him—*every single part of him she could touch.* He'd somehow been her beacon in that horrible dark place, and so in this tangible reality Fujin couldn't help but think that Seifer and the heat of his skin and the taste of his lips could provide a similar panacea and save her from the darkest corners of her forever changed mind, *never allowing her to go back to that awful place again.*

A few days into her recovery, Seifer was readying to leave the infirmary and allow them both a good night's sleep for the first time since she'd been admitted. She'd been in the process of trying to convince him to help Raijin wrap things up in Deling, and simultaneously meet Cid's requirements for passing the SeeD exam. As the conversation progressed, she realized the thought of his departure left her nauseous:

*Seifer, I'm fine. Really. Cid will still pass you if you go now. I'll talk to him.* Fujin pleaded with him. She was still exhausted and foggy headed and feeling panicked that she couldn't focus on *anything* around her.
What the hell? His eyebrows drew together in feigned annoyance. Do you not want me here or something? Way to thank a guy for saving your life.

Don't you take anything seriously? she replied with a tinge of misplaced irritation. I don't want you to choose just sitting here with me over getting into SeeD. Kadowaki's watching me. I'll be alright.

Oh, is she? Seifer mockingly looked around the room. I'm pretty sure she went to lunch yesterday and never came back. Worst doctor ever, he grumbled and leaned back in the chair, propping his feet up on the foot of her bed. Besides, 'Posse first, everything else second.' He recited their group's mantra with a hint of sarcasm.

But you going to Deling is putting us first. It puts us all together, in the end. The moment the words fell from her lips her stomach lurched, and she wasn't sure why.

We're always together already; s'not like we'll let SeeD status will change things much. Seifer shrugged before leaning over and snagging the copy of 'Occult Fan' he'd left in the room to keep her occupied while he fetched breakfast that morning.

Pretty sure you laid into me at the start of the summer because of SeeD. Fujin quirked an eyebrow and slowly craned to pluck the magazine from his hands to force him back into the conversation.

That was because you lied to me. And about pent up ... frustrations. He smirked and moved his now bereft hands to cross his arms behind his head. Now that the itch has been scratched, I'm alright with it.

Charming. She attempted to kick his boots off the bed with a weak foot, and he shot her a wink when it failed. Silence fell over them as Fujin's grimace brought Seifer to realize she didn't think he was being funny. After a few quiet moments, he spoke again.

This whole situation scared the shit outta me, too, he admitted, begrudgingly acknowledging that he'd possessed fear; a rarity for Seifer. I also kinda went off the deep end while you were out. If Raijin hadn't stopped me, this coulda turned out completely different. He settled deeper into his chair and gazed up at the ceiling, his eyes blinking in quick succession to wipe a memory from his mind.

I heard something about all that. Fujin tried not to let her countenance shift and alert him to her worry. Whether Seifer was referencing the stint in the training center where he cleared out a semester's worth of Grats, or single-handedly leveling that entire private security team in Deling, she wasn't sure. Raijin relayed both incidents to her that morning when he'd called to welcome her back to the world of the living. The bronze member of the trio sniffled through unmentioned tears accompanying his excitement that Fujin was alive, and anxiety about Seifer's mental state.

What'd he tell you? Seifer frowned and his eyes darted to her face.

Just a high-level overview. She dipped into their militaristic lexicon to make him more comfortable. I didn't get a full report.

Tch, yeah right. He mumbled and twisted towards the window, allowing the sunlight to touch his face. Well, you don't need to waste your energy worrying about any of that. Raijin's tying up our loose ends in Deling, and I've talked with Cid ... I'm all set here. Though she knew he wouldn't mention it directly, she knew 'here' referenced not being expelled from Garden for going off the aforementioned deep end. Speaking of Cid, when he was trying to get me to head back to Deling he told me that Raijin agreed to go back already ... without even checking in with me.

What? Fujin's eyes narrowed.
I knew, Seifer mused and bit his cheek, slipping back into his own mind for a moment as he recalled the conversation he'd had with Cid.

Huh... Fujin readjusted her pillow and leaned back onto the bed. As she shimmied to find comfort, Seifer abandoned his relaxed lean and darted forward to press a button at her side to adjust the incline of the backrest for her. Thanks, she murmured as her chest filled with a warmth that reached her cheeks. She finished settling down before gazing back up at him. Why would Cid lie about something like that?

Fucked if I know, Seifer shrugged. But the fact that he's still hounding me to go back makes me think he wanted me there, specifically, for some reason. Like he had something else planned before all this shit happened to you.

A conspiracy theory? Fujin mused and resisted closing her eyes. That's not usually your style.

Listen, when something smells like bullshit, there's a pretty good chance it is. And Kramer's got 'shit' written all over him. The corner of her mouth pulled up in a smirk at Seifer's unrestrained truth-telling—one of his best and worst qualities. She heard him bend forward, his voice adjusting to a sweeter timbre.

And speaking of 'shit,' we can talk about this shit later. Kadowaki says you can leave tomorrow morning, but she probably won't let you go with bags like that under your eyes. His thumb touched her cheek and ran along what she assumed was a dark circle just under her lower eyelid. How 'bout I let you get some sleep?

No! Her hand snapped out and gripped his in an involuntary reflex as the anxiety burrowed deep within her flowed out in a panicked voice. Despite the fact that she'd been insisting he go to Deling and save his career, the simple truth was that she'd break if he left her-she was afraid to close her eyes without him there … Don't go.

He grinned at the fact that her admission meant he was the winner of the argument about Deling, but the smile faded quickly. I wasn't gonna say anything ... but ... you can let yourself sleep, Fuu. You know that, right? He adjusted his grip to squeeze her hand, and bit his cheek for a moment before speaking again, unsure if she'd welcome the acknowledgement.

You're surrounded by an entire army of mercenaries. Nothing can touch you here. There was no word she trusted more than his; all her life she'd measured everything against it. But the odd thing about this new deep-seated fear was that it spoke to something irrational within her that wouldn't succumb to her steadfast pragmatism. She believed Seifer—of course she did—but she couldn't bring herself to believe Seifer. And so she remained silent at the thought of being left alone in the dark again.

Uh ... you know, I could actually use some shut-eye myself. Seifer read between the lines and decided to let it be, nodding to the slim amount of space on the other side of her. Got room for me over there?

S-sure .. Fujin stuttered but kept a cool façade as Seifer took control and simultaneously tried to preserve her pride in the sweetest way imaginable, without even realizing that he’d done it. Dumbstruck by the gentle tact and the ease it gave her to relinquish, she slid over and curled up in a fetal position, and he shuffled to the far side of the bed and laid down beside her, minding the IV drip as he draped an arm across her and one leg over her own to gain better balance on the too-small mattress.

It'll get better. When I started having those crazy dreams last year, I couldn't sleep at all. And now
after that fight in Deling … his breath hitched as he glared over the topic. I know it's not the same, but I just want you to know that I get it. Just … try to sleep. He tightened his grip and drew her closer. We'll keep the light on.

Maybe it was because she was tired. Maybe it was that she was still wearing a threadbare hospital gown, and felt raw and helpless. Maybe it was the fact that she'd essentially failed her first SeeD mission and felt unworthy of the honor. Or maybe it was how Seifer—who demanded unrelenting strength and resilience from his friends—was relaxing his standards and allowing her to feel fear, self-pity, and shame. On top of that, he was offering her comfort; after all of her big talk this summer about SeeD and the fits about him disobeying her … he still wanted to take the burden of her and this shitty affliction on.

Whatever the catalyst, Seifer's ability to bear the burden of all this allowed her to break. She twisted in his arms and buried her face in his chest.

I'm sorry, she whispered as her eyes began to water. About SeeD, about losing control of the mission. For thinking I could lead, for putting you and Raijin in danger in Deling, and for what you had to do. For all of this, her eyes darted around the hospital room and her chest ached at the realization that if she'd just listened to him and toed the line, they might not even be here right now. She'd be sorry for anything he wanted, as long as he let her follow him again. You wouldn't have let any of this happen.

Stop that, Seifer commanded sternly. You're tired and you don't know what you're saying. None of this is your fault.

No, you don't understand. I was wrong to think I could do this apart from you, she pulled away from him, intent on looking him in the eye and demonstrating how earnest she was. His hand moved to her cheek and he tried to silence her again, but she continued on frantically. I can't do this on my own. You're always the one who leads us. You're the one who got us out of the storm. You're the light that led me back. I take back everything I said about SeeD and Raijin and Deling. Don't leave.

Seifer started to insist he wasn't planning on going anywhere, but she instigated a deep kiss to silence him. The last thing she wanted was for him to give her false encouragement and tell her she was wrong when they both knew the truth—Seifer was meant to lead, and she was meant to follow. Better to stop his lips now than suffer through the pain of placating. Their natural order had been upset, and she almost died because of it … and Seifer and Raijin could've died because of it.

It was the quickest way she could think of to cede control to him, and the best way to feel alive again. She could tell by the way that he'd cradle her cheek in his hand that he was assessing her sudden voracity and wondering if giving in to it could be considered taking advantage. He voiced a handful of concerns half-heartedly; the door was unlockable, the IV in her arm could pull, she needed rest. But her lips were insistent, and her hands roamed low on his stomach to pull at the buckle of his belt. She wanted him to lie close—to lead her and keep the darkness away. She traded ego readily for good purchase in his light, and despite a few lowly whispered raspy protests, Seifer—missing her touch and unable to turn away any call to lead—was more than happy to illuminate her.

It was a trade she'd made before with him, in different scenarios throughout their lives—the renouncing of autonomy just so he could feel like he was at the center of everything and responsible for her. And it was a trade she made again and again in the days that followed, frantically and desperately … and she didn't care in the slightest. As irrational as she knew it was, she felt like she needed to offer him that reason to stay close, after everything she'd put them all through, no matter how much he promised he wasn't going anywhere.

Whatever Seifer implied to Kadowaki about her current state of mind might be right. Even still
—even if it were true that she couldn't fall asleep without him and might not be entirely okay—that didn't mean that Dr. Kadowaki had the right to know about it ... or anything else about how she'd been handling things these past couple of weeks.

She supposed that some might not consider how she was dealing with all of this as the healthiest cure, but Fujin really didn't give a fuck what anyone but Seifer thought, any way. She was more concerned about why Seifer went to Kadowaki in the first place, considering how Fujin had been occupying his time. She wondered if he was feeling smothered, or not enjoying it all as much as he seemed to be. Either way, it left her even more self conscious than she was before.

"Okay," Kadowaki sighed again and hoisted herself from her chair. "I'll have Xu inform Cid that you're cleared. If I had my way I'd keep you off the rosters a while longer. But, all the boxes have been checked so … welcome back to active duty, I suppose."

"That's really it?" Fujin slid from the patient table, her legs aching as her feet abruptly met the tile floor. "I thought I'd get a little more resistance from you." Kadowaki opened the door and motioned for Fujin to exit.

"I've been told by people above my pay grade to go easy on you, so I'm going easy on you."
Kadowaki's brow furrowed as Fujin breezed past her. "But don't go thinking I like it."

"Noted." Fujin nodded and extended her hand. "Thanks, Doc. For everything." Kadowaki smiled and gripped Fujin's hand with both of hers.

"I'm here if you need me." The two of them walked towards the infirmary's exit. "Even if it's just to —oh, Xu." Kadowaki looked beyond Fujin into the waiting room. "Sorry, I didn't realize I had anyone else scheduled."

"I'm not on the schedule." Fujin spun around to find Xu standing at attention a short distance from the Infirmary's entrance. "I knew the evaluation was happening, so I thought I'd just wait and save you the trouble of getting in touch." Fujin's skepticism must've been showing, as Xu felt compelled to explain further. "Cid wants to see you as well, Fujin. Two birds, one stone."

"ONE BIRD." She pointed a finger at herself, and then two at Xu. "TWO STONES."

"Yes, I suppose it could be read that way. A test and a meeting ...two 'stones.'" Xu cleared her throat, bored with the small talk already. "Speaking of that, what's the report?"

"Ready for duty. I'll enter it into the system now." Kadowaki moved to sit at her computer and raised her eyebrow in suspicion. "Which would've notified you, you know."

"Yes, I do. But like I said, two birds—"

"LET'S GO." Fujin groaned and approached Xu, waving in thanks to Kadowaki as they exited. "DEBRIEFING?"

"I'm not sure," Xu responded truthfully, as they made the short walk from the infirmary to the stairwell; the woman's high-heeled boots clicking loudly on the tiles and her starched and perfectly pressed uniform rustling. It was commonly known around Garden that the headmaster's presence was always preceded by the click-clack-click-clack, click-clack-click-clack of Xu's gait. Everywhere Cid went, or wherever his influence reached, Xu surely arrived at the point first to cross the t's and dot the i's. She was the youngest SeeD in Garden's high-level administration, her tenacity and attention to detail earning her an express spot right after graduation.

Cid's favoritism had a hand in her meteoric rise too, and because of that some less tasteful rumors
about the headmaster and his protégé floated around Garden over the past few years. But, Fujin
didn't entertain them. Just because Xu was a woman of power—*albeit an irritating one*—didn't mean
she'd slept her way to the top. Besides ... Cid Kramer *apparently* had a wife.

"He's been away on business at Galbadia, or else he probably would've connected with you sooner." Xu shot her a sideways glance as they approached the elevator.

"GALBADIA?" Fujin repeated, as she crossed her arms over her chest and thought of Raijin being alone there. "ANY TROUBLE?"

"I'm not sure. I'm sure he'll fill you in." The elevator arrived and Xu motioned for Fujin to board. As the door closed, she ran her eyes over Fujin. "I'm glad to see you up and well again; you gave us quite a scare. So, did Almasy, frankly. He was—" But Fujin raised a hand to silence her. Raijin only gave her an overview of those days, and Seifer hadn't wanted to talk about it at all. Which meant hearing it from Xu, of all people, was a sacrilege the Posse wouldn't stand for.

"KNOW."

"I'm not sure you do," Her dark eyes narrowed as the elevator zipped by the second floor. "He was out of control. I thought he was going to kill me." Fujin felt the shock flash on her face but she quickly buried it.

"LOOKS LIKE HE DIDN'T." Xu scoffed at her response as the elevator arrived at Cid's floor.

"I'm surprised, Fujin. I thought that you'd have at least a modicum of allegiance to a fellow SeeD who helped save your life, now that you're one of us."

"ALIGNED WITH SEED. Fujin shrugged and agreed as they exited the elevator. "LOYAL TO SEIFER"

"I bet you are," Xu murmured with a judgmental lilt as they approached Cid's office. The doors slid open, revealing an empty chair.

"Have a seat, he'll be with you in a minute." She extended an elegant hand to the leather chairs near Cid's desk—the same chairs Fujin and her friends sat in the day she learned about her heritage. Fujin remembered feeling like the truths she'd learned that day were earth-shattering; the worst thing she'd ever faced. How odd to look back on that moment just a few months later and realize that it was simply the *start* of a journey that had no end in sight.

"I was glad to hear you'd made SeeD. I've always admired your abilities. You're one of the strongest students at Garden," Xu mused as Fujin settled into her chair. "I thought you'd learn a little independence once you got out from under Almasy's boot. But I should've known he'd find a way to keep you under him, one way or another."

"BUSINESS, NOT." The fact that people would judge her for the relationship she'd formed with Seifer wasn't surprising. He wasn't exactly known for his exemplary treatment of women; all the talented and mature ones in Balamb mostly wanted nothing to do with him. But it was curious to Fujin that another woman, who'd experienced a similar sort of shaming, would level that type of criticism at her.

"He'll never truly want you to succeed, you understand that don't you?" Xu folded her arms over her chest and continued to stare Fujin down with heavy disappointment. "It'd mean you could leave him, someday."

"PROJECTING?" Fujin muttered, ruffling Xu's stoic façade. "SURPRISED YOU'RE OUT FROM
UNDER CID KRAMER LONG ENOUGH TO NOTICE US." She would never assume that a
man was responsible for Xu's meteoric rise … but she was willing to trade insults at the implication
that Fujin was allowing Seifer to impede hers.

"Excuse me? That's disgust—" Anger flashed on Xu's face as she prepared to deliver a thorough
dressing-down to her subordinate, but she was stopped by Cid's arrival.

"Fujin!" The Headmaster smiled and approached them, unaware of the discomfort he was walking
into. Fujin smirked and wished Seifer and Raijin had been there to witness Xu's face flushing a
bright red. "I'm glad to see you back on your feet. You had us all worried." The comment echoed
Xu's earlier comments, and Fujin wondered if that was a canned sentiment they repeated to everyone
who came through this door after a near death experience.

"Thank you, Xu. I'll give you a call when I'm finished." He motioned for his assistant to leave but
doubled-back before she could exit. "Can you be a dear and put some coffee on? I had a long trip
back."

"Oh … of course, Sir," Xu replied quickly, the low-level request enhancing her embarrassment. She
scuttled out of the office without another word, and as she departed Cid moved towards his desk and
perched himself on the edge, directly in front of Fujin.

"The last time I saw you, I wasn't sure you were going to make it. Kadowaki really pulled off a
miracle." He scrutinized her face, pausing to inspect the cerulean eye that wasn't covered by her
eyepatch. "Are you feeling alright?"

"Still on the mend, Sir. But feeling much b-better." Fujin stuttered, uncomfortable with the scrutiny
and equally uncomfortable not knowing the agenda for this meeting. She hadn't spoken with Cid
since the early days in Deling, meaning they hadn't broached the looming topic of Sorceress Edea.
Of course, there was also the issue of how the operation she was in control of ended … the failure of
her first mission for SeeD. The debilitating anxiety that had been plaguing her these past couple of
weeks started to build in her stomach again.

"Glad to hear it," his features softened as he abandoned whatever he'd been investigating. "How
about Seifer? He was in rough shape when I left; I hope he's doing better now that you're well."

"I … " She froze, not sure what to say about Seifer to Cid Kramer right now, after everything that
had happened. He'd gone on a killing spree when she was unconscious—one of the victims of
which, apparently, almost included Cid's second in command. "You'd have to ask him, Sir."

"I don't think I need to, actually." Cid smiled and folded his hands in his lap. "I understand all too
well what being on that side of things is like. Which, of course, you now have the unique experience
of understanding the counter to that."

Fujin nodded in affirmation but remained silent as Cid moved behind his desk and bent down to
retrieve two glasses. He poured her a drink and slid one across to her before settling in his chair. It
was the same offering he'd made her when he'd presented her with this harrowing mission, and Fujin
questioned whether it was a kind gesture to settle her frayed nerves or a way to make her more
amiable and pliable. Either way, she threw back the drink quickly, hoping it would help put her at
ease regardless of his motives.

"I'm sorry I couldn't tell you about Edea being my wife. It was stressful enough, being your first
mission. I didn't want to add to the burden." He swirled the liquid in his glass but kept his eyes on
Fujin.
"It's fine, Sir. I understand the sensitivity …" Though Fujin truly didn't understand why Cid Kramer cared so much about his sorceress wife becoming involved in the Galbadian government, or why he couldn't just speak with her himself, even if they were estranged.

"I'm afraid there's more to it than that." Cid ran a hand through his hair and leaned his elbows on his desk, resting his still full glass between his palms. "I've known that Edea was a sorceress for quite some time. She's actually been one since she was a child … but it wasn't always like this." He lifted the glass to his lips and took a sip, wincing at the bitter drink's bite. "She was sweet, once … beautiful and kind."

"What happened?" She asked without thinking, her own memory unable to match the horrible specter she'd encountered with Cid's description. Cid finished his drink, and then hastily refilled his glass with another.

"Something similar to what happened to you, actually. A possession, of sorts. Except a willing one." His words sounded bitter and made Fujin shiver. "Edea encountered a fellow sorceress one day—a dying one, who needed to pass on her powers. To save anyone else from running across her and bearing the burden, Edea took her on willingly. It seems like a lifetime ago … though I suppose it was. It was long before Garden, long before SeeD …" He twisted to his window to gaze at the Balamb plains.

"What Edea didn't know was that this sorceress was a powerful one, whose overarching goal was to become the most powerful, and only, sorceress in the world." He turned back to Fujin, his lips pressed together before continuing. "Over the years, Edea resisted her as best she could. But eventually, the sorceress—Ultimecia—overwhelmed her entirely. She's no longer my Edea, I'm afraid."

Fujin froze, her lungs filling full with pain as she sucked in a breath at the mention of the name Ultimecia, and the chilling feeling of familiarity that it gave her.

"That was who I met when I collapsed in Deling?" Fujin asked aloud, though she wasn't seeking Cid's confirmation.

"Yes. I think so. Edea wouldn't have wanted to harm you." He raked his hand through his greying hair. "And I doubt Ultimecia would risk killing you without being able to take your powers with her. I think that's the only thing that saved you in Deling, truth be told. Pandemona's presence clouded things, maybe. I suppose there's no way of knowing." Fujin nodded as if she understood, even though the information left her reeling and even more confused.

"Then … why did you send me?" Fujin whispered, as she lifted the glass to the desk and her hand clenched around it. All this was beginning to feel like a betrayal, and Seifer's insinuations of conspiracy theories much less far-fetched. "If you knew what she was and how dangerous she was, then why did you send me?"

"I had no clue that she'd be able to do what she did to you, Fujin. You have to believe me." Cid placed his hand over hers, his apologetic eyes reading genuine to her. "It was never my intention for you to be harmed. I'm working with General Caraway and a few Galbadian officials to keep tabs on her; her interest in the government has all the markings of a coup to gain control of the Galbadian military. Which has implications far beyond what I'm authorized to discuss with you, unfortunately."

"But you at least could've told us who she was …" Fujin's eyes snapped away from his to glare down at the desk. "We almost … Seifer and Raijin almost died."

"Seifer couldn't manage his feelings and made a bad situation worse," Cid corrected, and Fujin had
to bite her lip to stop herself from defending him. "Caraway's men were prepared to intervene. They were nearby and would've handled everything accordingly. If Seifer had just waited a moment longer before reacting so irrationally—"

"He had no way of knowing that," Fujin disagreed, unable to stop herself from. "You sent us into that blind. We didn't even know what was happening. Seifer and Raijin didn't even know the sorceress—"

"Fujin, I'm not interested in debating history with you." Cid interrupted her with an exasperated sigh and tugged her glass from her hand so he could pour her another drink. "Everyone owns a share of the blame, myself included. I know you've been through a lot but I'm not going to tolerate insubordination. I apologize for my missteps in this; we'll have to be more careful as we deal with all this moving forward."

"Moving forward?" The anxiety built within her again. "I thought Raijin was in Deling to tie up loose ends?"

"There's one loose end he's been unable to manage, and I'm glad you're feeling better because Raijin won't give me an explanation for anything, Seifer's being uncooperative, and I can't come up with any logical reason as to why this happened." Fujin dragged the drink across the desk and took a deep draught. She knew exactly what this was related to, and it was the last thing she wanted to talk about right now.

"Rinoa Heartilly is threatening to go to the press about Balamb Garden's involvement in the death of those men in Deling unless we follow through on a promise made by Seifer Almasy to assist Timber in gaining its independence. And while I'd be more than happy to hand him over and claim he acted on his own, I can't do that now because I've already worked with General Caraway on a cover-up and my hands are tied. Especially given the fact that Heartilly is his daughter." Cid crossed his arms over his chest and shot her a curious stare. "So, aside from celebrating your good health, I brought you here because I want to know why the hell you never told me about that?"

_Fucking hell_, he was tired.

Seifer took a drag of his cigarette, holding the breath in while he craned to exhale out the cracked window, sending the smoke to disappear in winding curls in the gentle late-summer breeze. He reached beyond the edge of the windowsill to flicked away the smoldering ashes before resting the cigarette between his lips again, allowing his hands to be free while he balanced his laptop on his legs. It was overheating and sluggish, and he was regretting not buying a new one at the start of the summer when they had the money. He hated spending money on that shit though, especially since Garden required them for classes and _should_ be covering the cost.

"Come on, you piece of shit." Seifer muttered and gave the side of the screen a forceful tap with his palm, which he knew wouldn't make an impact but sure as shit felt better than waiting for the mouse on the monitor to stop pinwheeling. When it didn't change, he groaned and leaned back against the wall, and rubbed his eyelids with his forefinger and his thumb.

As if he didn't already feel useless enough, he couldn't even conduct basic research in his spare time without being stonewalled by his own damn computer.

_Banned from the training center; access to the cars in the garage revoked_; needing to beg permission to leave campus unsupervised. He was basically under house arrest and though he was staying pretty entertained with Fujin, he was going a little stir crazy. When Kramer allowed him the choice to not go to Deling, he forgot to mention the fact that he was planning on making Seifer's life...
a living hell if he didn't….

The monitor unfroze just long enough for Seifer to pull up Garden's library database but seized up again as he typed a single 'O' into the search bar.

"Sonofabitch!" he snapped, slamming the cover closed and placing it on the bedside table. The motion knocked over a vase of flowers he'd bought for Fujin the first day she was released from the infirmary, and he cursed as he pulled himself off of her bed clean up the mess. Grabbed the vase off the floor—glad to find it wasn't broken—and placed it back on the table before snagging a towel from Fujin's nearby closet. He knelt on the floor and worked to mop up the water and started to gather the strewn stems in his fingers, wincing when one of the thorns pricked his fingers. Fuuuuuuuck. This was the third time these damn things had gotten the best of him.

Seifer had never bought a girl flowers before, and because of his lack of experience with them, he never realized that roses had thorns. Damn sharp ones. He shook his hand in the air a couple of times to relieve the pain and remembered his cigarette just a few seconds too late as hot ash fell on one of his knuckles. He clenched his teeth together to stifle the curses on the tip of his tongue. If this was a sign of how the rest of the day was going to go …

He remembered thinking that the red flowers probably weren't worth the trouble the first time they'd pricked him—all that effort to sneak off base to Balamb Town just to get some dead plants for a girl who probably didn't even like flowers. Of course, when Fujin walked into her room and realized they were there and touched his wrist in quiet appreciation … well, he supposed he didn't mind the thorns so much.

However, he did mind them when he'd backed up into them bare-assed while getting cozy with Fuu last night. And now THIS. This was the last straw—the damn things were overstaying their welcome. He heaved the stems into the trash bin spitefully, took a final drag from the cigarette before putting it out on in the remaining water on the tiled floor, and tossed the wet towel into a hamper nearby. There … one less thing to worry about.

He flopped back down onto the bed, lacing his fingers together over his stomach and raising a single knee in the air. He groaned as the movement tugged lightly at a pulled muscle in his groin—an affliction he had mixed feelings of anger and pride about.

Seifer figured he wouldn't have a pulled muscle if he were at least allowed to go to the gym and work out. Just because they didn't want him in the Training Center didn't mean they needed to keep him away from all aspects of training. But Cid, knowing Seifer since he was a kid, knew exactly what buttons to push to get under his skin. The headmaster let him roam around Garden freely, but essentially took away all of his freedom. Cid also had the Garden Faculty watching him constantly, wherever he went, and there was nothing Seifer hated more than being babysat. The headmaster was probably hoping that he'd break and beg to be sent to Deling.

On the other hand, Seifer was a little proud of this particular ache because it was inflicted by Fujin. It was the kind of injury he didn't really mind having, because it came from unwitting overextension and stretching in all the wrong ways, that went unnoticed in the moment because everything else felt so fucking good at the time. Cid might've taken away his extracurriculars as punishment, but he'd apparently underestimated how much of a good time Seifer could have holed up in Fujin's SeeD apartment. Frankly, Seifer was afraid he was having too much of a good time … the pulled muscle was proof.

He didn't want to look a gift-horse in the mouth, but Fujin flipped a switch when she got out of that infirmary, and he'd barely had time to leave her bed. He definitely wasn't complaining because it'd been a hell of a couple of weeks. The sweet and gentle thing they had going on before was great, but
this was next level shit. This was loud, sweaty, marathon sex that made him light-headed and almost feel like he was dying when he came. When it first started happening he was pretty enraptured by it, to put it politely … which was hard to do, because frankly, nothing about it was polite.

There was something about it that didn't settle well with him when he recovered from the initial haze of it, though. Something about the timing, and the fierceness and the speed of it, and how it all couldn't really be that much fun for her in spite of all the sounds she was making. It was only a few days ago, after a particularly lengthy and exhausting session, that it dawned on him that all this was probably a response to what happened in Deling. Like when you heard those crazy stories about people having sex at a funeral because they wanted to do the exact opposite of dying. He figured that was what was going on with Fujin … except she was acting like she'd just been fucking resurrected.

Seifer figured it would be a good moral check to mention something to Kadowaki this morning. He'd originally gone in there to see if he could get his hands on something to relieve the pulled muscle, but while he was there he decided to seek a little guidance. Obviously, he didn't go into detail. He just said that Fujin was acting a little … off. A little out of character. He was worried and wondering if there was something he should be doing (aside from being a willing participant). Hyne knows if Dr. K connected the dots and said something to Fuu at her appointment today…he was probably going to be in trouble for that.

As Seifer reflected on Kadowaki’s suggestion that Fujin visit psych (which he knew would never happen, because as much as everyone avoided the topic, visits to psych impacted your SeeD rank), it dawned on him that she hadn't really talked with him about what she'd experienced while she was unconscious much at all … like she was pretending it never happened.

There was also that rambling breakdown the day she left the infirmary, he mused as he settled into the pillow. But that was just because she was overtired and overwhelmed and worried that he would go somewhere, wasn’t it? He'd never leave her, and she couldn't really believe all that shit she’d said about not being meant to lead…

He sighed and reached for the laptop again, pulling himself upward and setting it in his lap. When he opened it the cursor on the screen was finally blinking active, and he was able to type "Odine” into the search bar. Not many results were returned—no surprise there. Cid Kramer probably had mentions to the scientist scrubbed from Garden's archives.

Shit, Fujin was right. He was becoming a bit of a conspiracist.

Seifer scanned through what he could, not entirely sure what he was hoping to find. All he knew was that he wasn't really doing much to help Fujin that he'd consider productive. He was also feeling a little guilty that Raijin was out in Deling dealing with Caraway and his cronies. He wanted to do something to help … he wasn't used to being the one who couldn't save the day.

One of the results that came up didn't mention Odine in the text— an abstract about paramagic research. He opened the attached PDF, the text of which matched the preview text of the abstract verbatim— weird that it was picked up in the search. He was about to chalk it up to poor archiving and move on, but then the letterhead of the abstract caught his eye.

Odine Labs

2227 Industry Parkway

City of Estha—

As he was finishing reading, the bedroom door whipped open, revealing Fujin on the other side. She
was dressed in the same white shirt and dark, slim jeans she'd left in a few hours earlier. Her hair was
disheveled in that relaxed way that he'd always thought looked nice on her—especially at the length
it was at now, grown out slightly past where she'd normally kept it—but the expression on her face
was anything but relaxed.

"Hey ..." His brow furrowed as he snapped the computer shut, feeling the need to hide his research
for some reason. "That was a long time with Kadowaki. Everything okay?"

"I wasn't with Kadowaki for very long," Fujin sighed and tossed her wallet and key card on top of
her dresser, pulling her eyepatch off before dragging her hands down her face and groaning. "Cid's
back, and he brought me in for a meeting."

"What?" Seifer shot upright and the computer fell to the floor. Well shit, there goes that.
They were supposed to give you space until you were better."

"Well, they did. Kadowaki just signed off on all that paperwork. And Xu was right there to
congratulate me." Seifer was readying to spring off the bed and march up to the Headmaster's floor,
but before he could move Fujin advanced and sat next to him on the mattress, and placed a calming
hand on his knee.

"What'd he say? Are you … ?"

"Oh, I'm still in SeeD," she confirmed distantly. "Believe me, I got a dressing down. But I'm still in."

"Good," Seifer replied and pulled at her so that she fell against his chest. He wasn't
actually that happy about her being cleared, but that was a selfish reaction and not a supportive one,
so he kept it close to the vest. "I'm glad. I think spending some time in the training center could do
you some good. Just to do something normal, you know."

"Do you … do you want me to spend more time in the training center?" The hand resting at his
stomach hesitantly slid over him as she looped her arm around him and tugged herself closer.
The origin of the question was obvious. Of course Kadowaki mentioned that he'd stopped by, and
left it just vague enough to leave space for speculation. Seifer rolled his eyes. He wasn't surprised the
doctor blabbered. He was surprised that Fujin wasn't so much mad he'd betrayed her trust as she was
nervous that she'd been irritating him—that spoke pretty loudly to how she was handling all this.
He leaned back at an angle and extended a couple of fingers underneath her chin, tilting her face
upward.

"No, of course not. I just want you to feel alright again," he brushed the hair from her eyes and
smiled down at her, but as she stared back at him unconvinced, he knew he had to come clean to
drive the point home.

"It's probably good timing that you'll have something to keep you busy though. I had to go see Dr. K
this morning." She leaned into his palm as it came to a rest at her cheek.

"Oh, really?" Her reply was a lean one in word count, but Seifer knew her tone well enough to
know that it wasn't a question. Or at least, not the question she meant.

"Yeah … I uh … I have a little injury from what we did last night. I pulled a muscle right here, and it
hurts like hell." He ran his hand along the crease of his thigh. "And it's embarrassing, but I have to
tell you that we're supposed to cool it for a bit. Doctor's orders."

"Yikes," Fujin sat upright and started to turn red. "I'm sorry."
"Well, you should be. You're killing me, Sanada," Seifer leaned back on his elbows and smirked. "But if I could choose how to die, that'd be the way I'd wanna go." She grimaced at his joke and blushed more deeply.

"Oh now you're bashful," he couldn't stop himself from laughing aloud and reached out to pull her against him as he fell back on the mattress. "C'mere, you little hypocrite."

He laid with her in silence for a few minutes, not addressing the matter any further. He didn't know why she was choosing this particular path as a salve, but he supposed it didn't matter. He'd do whatever she needed, be whatever she needed—he was crazy to think he could grow tired of her.

A part of that was this new feeling that surfaced within him after she'd almost died that day; he genuinely felt that he would've died with her...like their souls were interwoven. Hell, he'd even missed her while she'd been gone this morning. When she wasn't near him he was anxious, and when she was close he felt completely at peace.

Maybe her theories about sorceress powers and those stories about 'knighthood' weren't too far off, he thought to himself, but he was interrupted from delving further by Fujin shifting against him.

"Hey, what happened to my flowers?" She looked to the trash can, and then back to Seifer. He was about to hold out his pricked thumb and burned knuckle as an explanation, but the ringing of the telephone on the bedside table waylaid his defense. He extended an arm to press the speakerphone button as Fujin climbed away from him and crouched to fish the stems from the garbage, her pale fingers expertly minding the thorns.

"Afternoon, Fujin Sanada's headquarters," he smirked down at her. "If this is Headmaster Cid, go eat a dick. And if this is Xu: stop eating Cid's dick."

"Seifer!" Fujin slapped his arm him and scrambled up from the floor. "Um … hello?"

"Uh … heya guys," the perplexed voice of Raijin rang out from the phone's base. "Maybe work on that greeting a little, eh?"

"Why? I think it captures our sentiments about Garden pretty well." Seifer reasoned. Fujin slapped his arm again.

"Alright, whatever ya say. I don't think Xu's gonna like it though, if she ever calls. Probably the headmaster won't like it either, ya know?"

"Thanks for the feedback," Seifer's smirk widened and he wiggled his eyebrows at Fujin.

"Raijin," Fujin ignored Seifer and turned her attention to the call. "How's everything going? And hey, by the way, what's taking so long with sending my stuff back?"

"Geez, good to hear from you too," Raijin groaned. "I'll send your shit back when I get some time. Things aren't going so great … Cid might've told you that though." Raijin sighed, as they heard his body moving around loudly in the background and finally settle down into a seat. Seifer quirked an eyebrow at Fujin and mouthed 'what?' She waved him off and started to whisper something along the lines of how she was planning on telling him later, but Raijin's spoke again.

"I think we're gonna have to add Rinoa Heartilly to our enemies list," Raijin groaned, and for some indefinable reason, the hair on the back of Seifer's neck stood on end at the mention of her name. "'Duchess' was a pretty fitting nickname, because she's turned into a royal pain in the ass, ya know?"
"So … are they coming back?" Rinoa asked from the entryway arch, with her hip pressed to the doorframe and arms crossed over her chest. "Because you said you'd get them here."

Raijin wasn’t exactly happy to see Rinoa, but caught himself admiring her arrival nonetheless. Beneath that layer of now ever-present irritation with him, she looked all the part of a girl of her station: clean, perfect, angelic … even as the doorway framed the bustling, abject squalor of Deling’s low-income district behind her.

S’a good thing they’d be getting out of here; a girl like her in a place like this … that was sure to send up red flags.

"Geez, hi to you too." Raijin rolled his eyes, though it was mostly to stop himself from staring at her and only partly out of irritation. He took a step back and pried the door farther ajar, motioning for her to quickly get inside. "Do you ever just chill out? You're giving me a headache, ya know."

"Oh, well I'm sorry," she chirped with a gentle sarcasm as she invited herself in with relative comfort and plopped down on the small bed in Raijin's room, all with a springy buoyancy he wasn't in the mood for. She leaned back on her palms and crossed her legs at the ankle, tilting her head to the side as she watched him pace. "Maybe if Seifer had kept his promise I could 'chill out,' or I don't know, maybe if he bothered to call me back one of these days."

"Well you've at least gotta give me time to get things sorted out. They can't just leave Balamb and get here like that," he snapped his fingers at her. "There's a lot more happening—"

"Come on, it's not that dramatic. I haven't even seen you since yesterday. That should've been plenty of time to make a phone ... say ..." she paused, her head tipping to a steeper angle as she analyzed the attitude he was giving her. "Is something wrong? Because for someone who seems to just want to be 'chill,' you're pretty antsy." Rinoa sat upright on the bed, her eyes growing wide as he stared back at her in similar alarm and waited for a question. "Did something happen to Seifer? Is he okay?"

"Hyne," Raijin groaned, the beating in his chest slowing a tick as he realized she wasn't really going to guess why he was having a rough day. "Seifer's fine. Seifer's always fine, ya know. The rest of the world could be on fire, burn completely to the ground, and Seif would still manage to rise up from the ashes." Raijin threw his hand in the air, his fingers flitting upward to encompass both the movement of flames and rising, and resumed his pacing. "And by the way, ya should give up the ghost on all that—it ain't gonna happen."

"I don't know what you mean," Rinoa abandoned her worry and adjusted to fluff the pillow on his bed, her face twisting in disgust the grungy cotton casing. "This is so gross. Doesn't Garden have money? They could've at least rented you a clean apartment."

"Garden didn't pick this place, ya know," Raijin grumbled, and Rinoa silently mouthed a drawn-out 'Oooohhhhh' as it dawned on her that the accommodations were Caraway's petty way of exacting
vengeance. "And ya know *exactly* what I mean."

"I suppose I do. You just aren't *right,*" she smiled up at him and dusted her hands on her black shorts.

"Did ya not *just* ask me about Seifer?" Raijin quirked an eyebrow as he circled around the room to start collecting his things. "Which, by the way, is really weird 'cuz the only reason I'm still here to begin with is that ya threatened to turn us in."

"How many times do I have to say this? *I didn't threaten to turn you guys in,*" Rinoa's eyes narrowed. "I threatened to turn in Garden—I wasn't going to say *anything* about the three of you."

"And who do ya think they'd throw under the bus? Our headmaster? Don't be so … so…" His voice trailed off as he searched for the word.

"Naïve?" Rinoa glowered.

"Yes! *That.* Naïve." He nodded curtly, placing his hands on his hips.

"I should've known you wouldn't understand." In a concerted effort to demonstrate his opinion didn't bother her, she picked at a scant amount of dirt under one of her nails before fanning all ten fingers out on her thighs to inspect them. "And I'm not being naïve. The Forest Owls are doing important work."

"What *work?*!" Raijin exclaimed with exasperated laughter. "You're all just runnin' around like a buncha kids. I don't know what kinda smoke Seifer blew up your ass but—" he stopped talking as the mention of Seifer captured her attention. Her eyes snapped upward to connect with his and he felt his throat tighten at how *beautiful* she really was. Seifer must really love Fujin and have a resolve of steel to steer clear of her.

"Seifer supported the cause," Rinoa protested, defiantly crossing her arms.

"Well he mighta told ya that, but it wasn't the truth. He thought the whole thing was a joke. And since you're just doing all this," he gestured widely between the two of them and then at the room surrounding him, "and puttin' me through all this extra shit because ya want to get close to him again, I figured ya should know."

"This is about Timber," Rinoa insisted, though her voice warbled with deflated confidence as Raijin, who'd she'd come to know as a gentle giant over the summer, treating her with such callousness.

"Ohhhh, *sure it is,*" Raijin shoved his last few loose items into his duffel bag, and then pulled a box out from under the bed. He rifled through it quickly, taking a quick inventory—Fujin's chakram, her jacket, and Seifer's signature white coat—and closed the flaps indignantly. "I've gotta get back to Garden. *Classes start in a week* and I'm not even close to ready, but I'm stuck here babysittin' because ya can't get over some crush," Raijin wasn't sure which specific element of all this he was mad about: the fact that he was sent here to begin with, the fact that Rinoa threatened to turn him in, or the fact that—*just maybe*—the entire situation was all Seifer's fault. "I hate to be the one to tell ya this Rinoa, but blackmailin' Garden just to get him back here isn't gonna work."

"Stop saying that!" Rinoa sprang off the bed and shouted back at him, her assumed delicateness wilting. "Look, you don't have to believe me, but you don't have to keep being a meanie, either. Timber's independence means more to me than *anything.* Haven't you ever fought for something bigger than yourself?"

*Ya know,* as luck would have it, Raijin knew *exactly* what it was like to fight for something bigger
than himself. The hive mentality of Garden was at the center of everything, and within that there was the Posse, and within that laid his fierce adoration of Seifer and Fujin. His entire fucking life was like one of those damn wooden nesting dolls, with nothing but air in the center where Raijin guessed his own sense of self should probably be.

The point was that Raijin always seemed to be putting the collective over the individual, and on days like this, it made him weary. On days like this, where someone like Rinoa Heartilly—who had no clue what she was talking about—questioned his selflessness, the only thing he really wanted to do was crush someone's face with his knuckles.

But his return to Deling had been violent enough with what he'd done for the collective benefit of Garden, Seifer, and Fujin. He was still grappling with that and it probably wouldn't do him much good to burst out into the street and punch the first guy who looked at him the wrong way.

Aside from the complications with Rinoa, Cid was vague on the specifics of the "loose ends" Raijin was being sent to clean up for General Caraway on that brisk walk they made from the infirmary to the parking garage. After all, Seifer already murdered the six soldiers—and sole witnesses—in a blind rage, so Raijin figured it was safe to assume that these "loose ends" were more along the lines of disposing of physical evidence: collecting the things they'd left behind, helping dispose of any security footage. The basics.

The scene in Deling was probably still a little hot after what happened, so he didn't really put much thought into the instructions to hide out at the train platform on the outskirts of the city. He didn't pay any mind to the dark-tinted windows of the nondescript car that transported him from the station to meet Caraway's car on the border of the city limits. Sure, the location was weird, but there had to be a reason for it. Even though Raijin's brown hair and bronze skin probably wasn't as memorable as Fujin's near translucence and shining silver hair, or Seifer's bold white coat, he was a sizable guy … maybe the Caraway was worried Raijin would be recognizable and needed a brief rendezvous to alter his appearance—kinda like those crazy spy movies he and Seifer used to watch. Raijin wasn't worried much about being recognized … without his two friends drawing all the attention, he figured he was about as noticeable as a ghost.

Raijin hefted himself out of the car, throwing the small bag he'd convinced Cid to allow him to pack before take-off over his shoulder and advancing towards Caraway's waiting entourage. Was it a little weird when the driver got out with him? Sure, maybe a little. But Raijin just figured the guy was in on the job—a driver, coming to pick up instructions with him. When the man climbed into the front passenger seat, Raijin instinctually headed for the back. He was about to reach for the door, when the car jolted forward less than a foot.

Hey! C'mere. The guy in the driver's seat yelled out to him and motioned for him to come back towards the window. Whaddya think you're doing? Don't touch the car. Fingerprints. He removed a gloved hand from the steering wheel and emphasized the point by moving his fingers in a slow wave before lifting a large envelope from his lap. Raijin's former driver, who was now comfortably positioned in the passenger seat, made a light tisking noise and handed the keys for the now unoccupied first car to the man with the envelope in his hand.

The car's yours. Send it over the cliff when you're done. The man handed the envelope and keys to Raijin and jerked his head in the direction of the ocean to clarify. Take a look—you got any questions, now's the time to ask.

Ah ... okay. Raijin's fingers slowly peeled the envelope open, but he kept his eyes firmly fixed on the pair of hurried strangers. Say, where's Caraway?

How the hell should we know? The driver answered, and this comrade in the passenger seat began to
chuckle. Look kid, you're not gonna see him again. At least not for this.

Raijin nodded along like he understood, even though didn't have the slightest idea what was going on. He'd become accustomed to working through embarrassment quickly in these sorts of situations, having played catch-up all of his life with Seifer and Fuu. He let the laughter roll off his back as he rifled through the contents of the envelope—a piece of paper with an address and a key taped to it, a flash drive, and a slim laptop. He may as well have not even bothered...

No questions here, ya know. He gripped the car key in his hand. What happens if I run into trouble?

Trouble? What would we know about trouble? The guy in the driver's seat looked to his companion—who Raijin stopped short of calling a friend because more than likely they didn't know each other either—and then back to Raijin, giving him one final head to toe glance. We've never seen you before.

The pair sped off into the night, and left Raijin alone on the plains with an untraceable car, a mysterious envelope, and the sinking feeling that this was going to be more complicated than Cid let on. He stood there for a moment with the keys loosely gripped in his hand and his eyes fixed in the direction of Garden, wondering if he should send this car over the cliff right now and catch the next train back to Balamb.

As the headlights disappeared in the distance, the clouds shifted in the sky and allowed the full moon to illuminate the Galbadian plains. When the light broke on cresting waves, he realized it was somewhere around this exact spot that he and Seifer labored over Fujin to keep her alive. He swung the key ring around his finger, thinking of his silver friend's face turning a sickly shade of blue and that desperate look in Seifer's eyes … like he'd had one foot in the grave with her and would plunge both in if she'd gone that way. He remembered the ease with which Seifer killed all those men without question, and standing behind his friend in awe with Fuu in his arms … unsure if he would've been able to do the same. Still, he was complicit in some way … it may as well have been both of them holding the blade.

Raijin heaved his head back, let out a dramatic sigh for no one's benefit but his own, and cursed Odin's constellation in the canopy of stars stretched above him so the insult would at least hit something that tangentially deserved it. Then he piled into the car, made note of the address he'd been given, and pointed the wheel toward the city's blazing neon in the distance.

After parking in the street, Raijin set out for the address. He found it with relative simplicity considering how easily he usually got turned around in Deling. The crumbling brick buildings lining the neglected, pot-hole ridden street were littered with peeling posters and graffiti—some symbols he even recognized from classes at Balamb as the insignias of resistance groups that surfaced during the war. There was a liquor store and a small, poorly stocked, convenience store, but most of the shop windows were broken, boarded, and dark. Juxtaposed with the brilliant lights of progress just a few blocks away, the entire district looked like something time forgot. And as someone who understood being forgotten, Raijin felt pretty comfortable there.

He found the building and approached the stoop, casually kicking aside an empty glass bottle from the front door. He quietly himself when it rolled and tapped a dark pile that moved and shouted an obscenity at him. He let himself inside quickly, not so much considering the homeless stranger as a threat as he was worried about being remembered.

Not wasting any time, he made his way into the apartment and laid his things down on the bed. He made a quick circle around the place to figure out what his status as an invisible man earned him. The apartment was a studio—dingy and small, with an odd green-hued light that made everything look sickly. It was definitely nothing like what he saw in those spy movies …
He tugged at the sheets to discover they weren't fresh, and then moved on to test the knobs on the stove, only to find that just one burner was working. The refrigerator was on the warm side and hadn't even been cleaned. *Oh well, that'd be fine enough for just him.* Raijin found that he could live with most anything if he didn't have to take other people's preferences into consideration. Really, the most unsettling thing about it was that it looked recently lived in, like the last invisible man who stayed here didn't bother to clean up after himself … *or hadn't even made it back at all.*

He plopped down on the bed and pulled out the laptop, but after the system booted Raijin found that his hand hesitated. He stared at the blue screen with its single, blinking cursor, and tapped his finger on the spongy space bar with a gentle touch as he *pretended* he still had a choice to back out. The truth was that the choice had already been made for him ages ago, long before invisible men, sorceresses, and safe houses were a reality. There was the Posse, and then there was the rest of the world … and he'd do his part to keep it that way.

He inserted the flash drive and grimaced when two not-so-descriptive video files named "Target_1" and "Target_2" appeared on the file browser. He clicked on the first one and watched in confusion as an old lady conducting some sort of scanning with books flashed on the screen. He watched for a minute more, deducing it was a library a little more slowly than he'd like to admit, and wondered why in Hyne's name Caraway would want him to target a *library* for something. He closed the video, hoping its companion would provide a little more insight.

The second video proved to be confusing too, initially, and contained what seemed to be static, fairly grainy footage of a parking garage. *What in Hyne's name sorta operation is this?* He'd murmured aloud to nothing but the walls. He was about to close the program and try the first video again until he saw a familiar figure moving on the screen …

*Seifer's unmistakable white coat, gliding into the car they'd rented on the day they left for Timber. He was followed by Fujin ... who ...*

*Ugh.*

Raijin grimaced, feeling a mix of anger and embarrassment boil low in his belly even though he'd already assumed they'd done as much. *Even though he knew for a fact they were doing much more.* But the rage only multiplied when an additional figured popped into the corner of the screen. The figure didn't go unnoticed by Seifer, who in a glance saw the man—recognized by Raijin as the guy who'd loaned out the car to them—from a corner of his eye but only placed his hand on the back of Fujin's head … and *didn't bother to stop her.*

The man disappeared after a long, lingering moment—just long enough for Raijin to feel a little like Fujin's privacy had been violated, and that Seifer hadn't been gallant enough to save her from it. Raijin closed the video window and slammed the laptop shut—*he'd hafta deal with the unfortunate, grainy image of Seifer and Fujin in the throes of something he'd hoped to never see another time. There was work to be done ...*

Days later, as he sat alone in the dingy safe house and dealt with the aftermath of the dark deeds Cid and Caraway asked him to complete, Raijin wasn't sure he'd ever be able to get over the fact that the first people he had to kill for SeeD were *completely* innocent. Did that unwitting young voyeur, whose only real crime was lingering just a few moments too long, have a young wife who cared about him? Did that old woman have an entire generation of family who loved her, and would miss her? *Did SeeD recruit orphans just so they'd have fewer of these sympathetic, familial thoughts?*

Raijin wondered if he only thought about it because he'd found a family in Seifer and Fujin. Oddly enough, that same connection is what made him arrive at this cause and effect scenario to begin with. *He should've seen it coming, ya know?* Seifer always made brash choices and *dragged*
them along with him. Seifer killed six people, and because they were a family Raijin's hand was forced to kill two more. *Would this have all turned out differently if he'd grabbed his staff and Seifer had carried Fuu outta that hotel room—would Raijin have been more restrained?*

… *Did the definition of 'innocent' matter if what it was attached to threatened everything he loved?* It made his brain hurt and his stomach flip, and so he chose to stop examining it all so closely.

The suspension of guilt came at right about the same time that Rinoa Heartily showed up at the apartment, bringing all her righteous anger along with her. Raijin was on his way back from the convenience store down the street, having just bought a bottle of bleach and some rags to wipe the apartment down—to stay invisible and *at least* leave the place a little cleaner than he found it. A couple of nights ago he'd taken the time to destroy the flash drive and the laptop, and now all he needed to do was get a courier to ship the evidence they'd left behind home. The last step was dumping the car, and then he was outta there and on his way back to Garden. He'd only been gone four days, but it felt like a *lifetime*—no matter what led him here, no matter who was responsible, Raijin *just wanted to see his friends again.*

Rinoa wasn't one to be underestimated, though, and he shoulda known she'd pop back up while he was here. Apparently, Cid and the higher-ups at Garden had been dodging her calls ever since the Posse made their grand escape, so she'd taken matters into her own hands and listened in on some of the General's conversations, rifled through some of the paperwork in his office, and all that low-grade espionage lead her here to Raijin, who she was *sure* would set things right for her, one way or another.

While Raijin grumbled lowly about Caraway's incredibly lax security protocols, Rinoa followed him inside and demanded an audience with Cid Kramer. She wanted Seifer and Fujin to return to Deling. She half-heartedly threatened to go to the press about Garden's role in the cover-up of the deaths of those men and *whatever* Raijin was here to do unless *someone* listened to her. More importantly, she just wanted what she was promised—Timber's independence from Galbadia.

Raijin wished he could go back in time and amend his choice to clean traces of himself from the apartment; he would've been *long gone* by the time Rinoa showed up.

But, there she stood, forcing her way into the 'safe house,' acting like it was *all about Timber* and not the fact that Seifer, Fujin, and Raijin—*especially Seifer*—abandoned her without so much as a phone call to explain why. Raijin felt a little guilty that she still didn't understand their friendship had been a sham from the start. *He wasn't gonna be the one to tell her that though.* She was pretty tough for a little thing, and after being trained to fight over the summer by Fujin, she was probably pretty lethal, too.

After Rinoa spoke her peace and settled down, Raijin called Xu and explained the situation, hoping that Cid would recall him and put a more skilled person on the job. Much to Raijin's surprise, Cid's all-knowing right-hand man pretended not to know a lick about what he was referencing and ended the conversation abruptly. If not for the presence of a very pretty lady, he might've vomited on the spot; there was no way they could leave him in charge of a choice like this—*some sort've policy decision that could impact Garden's longstanding alliance with Galbadia?* No way, no how. He wouldn't make that kinda choice; that was Seifer's territory, or Fujin's if Seifer wasn't on-hand. *He'd just bring Rinoa back to Garden with him and let them all sort this out or something …*

Before he could fret about it too much, an unknown number called him back and a recently familiar voice on the other end cussed him out for implicating the Headmaster in any mission through an unsecure Garden line. *Wait for us to call you,* she instructed. *Keep Heartilly quiet until then. Whatever it takes.*
Luckily, keeping Rinoa from going to the press was easy because she'd grown fond of the three of them, and didn't really want to see them in trouble. Keeping her quiet on the other hand ... now that was impossible.

"Listen," Raijin replied, feeling anger tingle along his spine as Rinoa haughtily tapped her foot. "Seifer's basically under house arrest and would be risking his neck if he left. Plus, he's not gonna let Fujin anywhere near Deling again, no matter who outranks who." He postured, mirroring her stance as he crossed his arms over his chest and tilted his head in the opposite direction. "They could make Dollet work though."

Rinoa placed her hands on her hips and bent forward, inspecting his face for signs of mistruths or platitudes. Finding nothing she seemed to take issue with, her dark hair began to sway as she nodded in agreement with his suggestion.

"Fine. Dollet it is then. When do we leave?"

"Now," Raijin sighed as he grabbed his bag and stalked towards the door. "And you've gotta pay for the train and the hotel because I'm outta money and I can't ask anyone for more because apparently, I don't exist." He paused and turned back around to face her.

"And just so ya know, I'm always fightin' for something other than myself. So don't talk about things ya know nothin' about, Duchess."

"Geez, so-rry." Rinoa emphasized as chased after him, her blue duster unfurling behind her and almost getting caught in the door as she closed it. "I thought you had a car?"

"Yeah, we've gotta drive it off a cliff first, and then we'll get headed." He heard her pause at the top of the steps.

"We've 'gotta' what now?" She marveled at his simplistic delivery. Raijin turned to face her as he ran a hand through his hair. Right, that probably sounds crazy.

"Trust me, it's better if ya don't know why."

"Uh, kinda hard to trust someone who asks you to drive a car off a cliff," she grumbled as she met him at the bottom of the steps and followed him down the street. "But let's go ... I guess."

Was it that hard? Raijin wondered as Rinoa kept pace with him. He supposed he'd never really thought about it before.
Chapter Summary

"As someone who had a solemn reverence for the threads of fate, Seifer was often surprised by the way she tended to weave him a particularly complicated and cruel tapestry."

Seifer supposed he should relax.

They were en route to Dollet and far away from the reaches of Cid Kramer, and according to Balamb's watchful eyes in Deling, sorceress Edea left the city and the general vicinity of the Galbadian continent over a week ago. There were no remnants of danger trailing the plains to elicit an anxious reaction—certainly not one from him. He was the best cadet that Balamb Garden had ever seen. What could possibly make him worry?

He leaned his head back against the metal cab of the train's SeeD car and peered out the port-hole sized window, his stomach churning as the cars rattled and made their deep descent into the underwater tunnel. Fujin, who was asleep against his chest with her head resting under his chin, stirred at the movement but settled again quickly. He thought about twisting his leg to a less excruciating angle, but it was pinned against the couch behind her, and Seifer hated to wake her for his own comfort. She might be on her feet again, but she was also still on the mend. *Even the easy fights they'd encountered on the journey from Garden to Balamb tired her out.* He closed his eyes to better tolerate the cramp in his quad, and cautiously adjusted his flat back to a curve so he could sink further into the seat. But closed eyes welcomed a wandering mind, which ushered in unwelcome remembrances of the past few months. Seifer shivered, not having the stomach or the general bandwidth to hyperfocus on Fujin's narrowly missed death right now. He shook his head to shake out the thought, and instead focused on the loud grinding sound of wheels on the track as the train drew closer to Dollet.

Taking the transcontinental train to the Galbadian continent always brought to mind first time he'd ever made the journey by rail, and consequently the complete shit-show that was the first girl he ever slept with: Rabia Sharmand, a pretty martial arts student two years his senior, who he only casually dated for a little over a week. The recollection was a little frayed around the edges now, with the natural erosion of memories enhanced by his rare use of Guardian Forces. *Hell, Seifer wasn't even sure he could remember her face*—Rabia transferred to Galbadia Garden not long after it happened, and it's not as if it was love or anything resembling it.

It was the night before Balamb Garden's annual field trip to Deling City's summer carnival. Over the years, the Garden system experienced backlash from advocacy groups and politicians for not allowing its students relief from the strict curriculum, so the journey was part of Balamb Garden's effort to give its students ages fifteen and up some semblance of relief from the daily grind.

What was born out of necessary policy changes morphed into what many students considered a right-of-passage, and even though he, Fujin and Raijin were less than enthusiastic about being cooped up on a train with their moronic classmates, they were thrilled to get off-campus and out from under the thumbs of the Garden Faculty. It was the first year Seifer, Fujin, and Raijin were old enough to go. In fact, they'd only collectively *just barely* met the cut—Fujin turned fifteen the day
the train departed.

Fare for the train was covered, and if students could afford it they were allowed to stay overnight in a block of rooms that Balamb Garden reserved in the city hostel. In the grand gesture of a leader, Seifer used his own money—earned from his new role as head of the Disciplinary Committee—to treat his well-deserving Posse to three beds in a four-bed room in Deling City's hostel. He even bought the fourth bed out so they'd have a little privacy and reprieve from the other Garden lemmings. It was Fujin's fifteenth birthday, after all, and he wanted to do something nice for her. They could come and go as they wanted, say whatever the hell they wanted, and she wouldn't feel like she needed to wear her eyepatch the whole time—Fujin could just be herself. Raijin was usually the hero when it came to birthday planning for Fuu, and just this one-time Seifer wanted to take the reins and do something memorable.

And did he ever make it a memorable one …

The night before they left for the trip, Seifer, Fujin, and Raijin had dinner together in the Disciplinary Committee office and made plans to meet at the directory in the morning—Fujin wanted to get up early so they could get good seats on the train. He and Raijin tried to convince her to ease up on the meeting time on account of the fact that they had a double-date planned with Rabia and one of her friends and might be out late, but it admittedly had a dual purpose for him. Seifer specifically remembered keeping a careful watch of her face for any signs of jealousy at the mention of yet another date with Rabia: the downward slope of disapproval on her lips or the lift of an eyebrow—anything that would even hint at the fact that she might be just a little bit jealous.

Seifer's low-frequency nervousness and inexperience made it harder for him to read Fujin in those days, though, and by all accounts, she seemed like her normal, stoic self as she refused to bend on punctuality. Seifer shrugged it off and resigned himself to just going out and having a good time instead. He couldn't force her to be interested in him. Even if she had hinted at jealousy, he wouldn't even have known what to do about it. His confidence was always unwavering but Fujin had always had a way of disarming him … even back then.

Rabia, on the other hand, wasn't hard to read in the slightest. There was no parsing of words or analysis of subtle facial expressions when she invited herself back to his room that night and initiated everything. He never even planned on it going very far, and to this day he still wasn't sure he'd made a definitive choice—it just sort've started to happen, and Seifer didn't stop it. He'd been loosened up by a couple of beers they snuck down at the harbor pub, and all he could focus on was the warmth of her palms, the insistence of her lips, and that citrus smell in her hair that seemed to be universal among all girls at Garden. All the well-worn thoughts of sharing a moment like that with someone more important faded into nothingness the more of his skin Rabia touched and the resistant part of him that was holding out for something more gave way. He didn't care about Rabia so much. Right or wrong, he was just glad to check the box and get the weight of that right of passage off his back.

From start to finish, the rushed encounter couldn't have lasted more than ten minutes—and that was being generous. But on the whole, the final result was a fuckingamazing feeling unlike anything he'd ever known that left his skin tingling even hours later.

But the thing was … it wasn't at all what he expected.

As Rabia fell asleep beside him—which, by the way, he didn't remember inviting her to do—Seifer replayed the night in his head and realized that overall it was a brief and clumsy process. He always knew that his first time would probably be a little awkward, but not awkward and almost … uncomfortable. The whole thing was wordless and right to the point. Seifer didn't kiss her much,
or even get near her face that much in general … and he didn't have much control over the situation. 
Rabia just climbed on top of him and took the reins. He didn't know where to put his hands, if there 
were other things he should be doing, and he didn't even know her well enough to feel like he 
could ask her. There was a very deep disconnect between their actual closeness and the very intimate 
thing they'd done, leaving him feeling like it was all a shade off from what he should've felt. *Maybe he hadn't been as prepared for it as he thought …* though he always felt ready when Fujin was on 
his mind.

When he thought of Fuu in that way—*which, let's be honest, he thought about her in that way an 
obscene amount back then*—Seifer pictured an entirely different sort of awkwardness; one laced with 
breathy laughter as they figured out where limbs and lips should go, and that eventually subsided as 
they got used to the motions and the sensation of everything. Instead of some frantic encounter that 
left him feeling short-changed, he'd get to take his time, move with a with slow purpose, and would 
get to look into her eyes and touch her face … and the first time he did it, he'd be the first person 
to ever do that. *What a memory that would've been.*

But he wasn't going to let regret weigh him down that night. *He'd just been with a woman—he 
should be proud, right?* He fell asleep convincing himself that if he couldn't have what 
he really wanted, Rabia was a perfectly fine alternative.

Seifer was roused the following morning by a persistent knock on his bedroom door. He groggily 
tugged at the sheet to cover himself but realized with a mild irritation that Rabia—the girl who might 
as well have been anyone—was still twisted up in it. He slipped away from her and searched for his 
clothes in the dim morning light, grumbling quietly when he couldn't find them. Too groggy to sort 
out anything suitable, he opted to cover himself with one of the giant pillows cast aside in last night's 
haste instead. As he made the short journey to the door, he was already concocting tasteful ways to 
get his guest to leave.

Alright, alright, Raijin. I'm up. Fucking hell, he whispered as he pulled the door ajar and hid his 
body behind it. *You're gonna wake up the entire wing.*

He did always feel like Fujin's face was destined to play a role in this scenario, but not like *that*—not 
staring past him at strewn sheets and the naked, tan curve of another woman's back. As someone 
who had a solemn reverence for the threads of fate, Seifer was often surprised by the way she tended 
to weave him a particularly complicated and cruel tapestry. What a wicked trick to see Fujin standing 
on the other side of that door, at that exact moment, on that *exact* morning.

Shit, Fuu. *I thought you were Raijin.* Panic filled his chest as he moved to commandeer the open 

close the scene laid out behind him. *What … uh … what are you doing here?*

HALF AN HOUR LATE … her voice trailed off as she simultaneously tried to ignore the body in his 
bed and his near nakedness, all while being careful not to look him in the eye. *BEEN WAITING.*

Shit, s-sorry. Seifer stuttered as he stepped out of his bedroom and closed the door behind him, 
realizing all too late that evidence of his wild evening was amplified by the fact that he was wearing 
nothing but an oversized pillow. He pressed his back to the door for a little more coverage as words 
started to fall from his mouth in a nervous ramble. *That knucklehead was in charge of the wakeup 
call. Probably not a good idea. It's never a good idea, really. He's never on time. Does he even have 
an alarm clock? I don't know what I was thinking—*

* BOTH DELAYED BY COMPANY, APPARENTLY, she observed stiffly as she blindly took a step 

away from him, paying for it dearly when she ran into the end table next to his sofa with the back of 
hers leg. She pressed her lips together to stave off a yelp.
Shit, you alright? He instinctually outstretched a hand, and almost took a step towards her but stopped when he realized she was waving him off and still inching away. The chill of the morning air on his bare skin made him remember that chasing her across the room probably wasn't the best idea.

Hey, hang on—

I'm fine, Fujin replied with a sharp edge to her voice. We have a train to catch. You should get dressed … I woke Raijin up already. She turned her back on him and continued her retreat towards the door.

Fuu, wait! Seifer didn't have a plan when he called out to her, but the panic lifted to his throat before he could find something adequate enough to bridge the chasm that broke between them.

… Yeah? She stopped, but didn't turn to face him.

Just, uh … Maybe he should tell her that none of this meant anything … but was that too presumptuous? He could say he was sorry—but for what, if he couldn't say how he felt? Should he just get it over with and tell her that he'd pictured the two of them together a thousand times before, and that he wished it was her in his bed this morning? What sort've compliment was that when he'd just done the deed with another girl?

Just …. happy birthday is all. He awkwardly settled on ignorance and immediately wanted to slam his head against the wall to beat the damn stupidity out of it.

Thanks. Her deflated voice echoed across the rift. She abruptly departed, and even though there were thousands of excuses and explanations on the tip of his tongue, he let her go. Anything he said would only make this worse, and words wouldn't be able to capture the magnitude of the regret he felt when he realized that there was, in fact, something between them.

There wasn't any time to dwell on it; he needed to get his shit together fast because Fujin might just kill him if he missed that train. He made speedy work of silently finding an outfit, splashed some water on his face, and rushed Raijin out of the room in record time. As for Rabia … well, he left her behind to fend for herself. She chewed him out for that slight two days later (appropriately so).

There was a palpable tension between them on the walk to the Balamb Town station. Raijin tried and failed to mitigate the awkwardness with small talk about all the things he wanted to eat at the carnival in Deling. Seifer tested the waters and made a general comment about celebrating Fujin's birthday with a drink, but she corrected him with the stiff fact that the drinking age in Deling was sixteen. FINE THOUGH, she replied casually as she kept pace ahead of him. MAYBE HAVE A BETTER TIME WITHOUT ME.

The late arrival meant they wound up in a less desirable cabin than Fujin would've liked, with galley style seats running along the sides of the slim car. Raijin plopped himself down on a side with a plentiful amount of space and Seifer settled directly next to him so Fujin would be forced to sit at his side. But his silver friend dodged the trap, and instead wedged herself across from them between two strangers. She kept her head turned away from him, her jawline straight and taught as she avoided his eyes—the loud resonance of her silence never ceased to amaze him, even back then.

Seifer would've been giddy at the meager confirmation that she must've felt something for him, if he hadn't possibly just blown the whole thing apart with one stupid decision. Could something that felt so insignificant when it happened actually up-end all his plans for the future? Were all adult choices that hard to come back from? He fucking hoped not … he was facing a lot of troubles in the years ahead if that were the case.
Raijin rambled on about rides and the cost of tickets as the engine ignited and set a course for Galbadia. Seifer's brain tuned him out and analyzed Fujin's mood, knowing that at some point he'd need to broker a peace. Settling on it being safer with an audience, he interjected with something casual.

So Fuu ... anything you want to do while we're in Deling? It's kinda your day and all. His words were ill-timed, as the train dipped into the beginning section of the tunnel—he couldn't see her face and had no reading on how words his words settled.

JUST ANOTHER DAY, she responded flatly.

Oh, come on, don't be like that, he countered, sounding more anxious than he'd intended.

Your wish is our command.

The train lurched as it entered the long stretch of tunnel that extended underwater to the Galbadian coast. Oddly enough, this was the first time that Seifer made the trip by train. All other voyages had been by transport boat in the custody of a SeeD instructor, and so he never knew that the engine's deep descent into its famed underwater tunnel would make him queasy. He'd never suffered from motion sickness before—even on choppy waters in little skiffs in Balamb Harbor. Yet the forward propelling motion of the train mixed with the little bit he'd had to drink the night before roiled his gut.

He swallowed, closed his eyes, and took deep breaths to control of the sickly feeling. But the car continued to jostle, and Seifer just felt worse and worse. Raijin was the first to catch a glimpse of him turning white as a sheet and leaned away as he voiced the observation to draw Fujin's attention.

Ya don't look so good, Seif. He inched himself a little farther away.

All that dropping. Seifer made a sweeping downward motion with his hand as he swallowed again, almost bringing last night's dinner back up instead. Motion sickness, maybe. He opened his eyes to look for the nearest bathroom, and he could've sworn he caught Fujin smirking, but another wave of nausea hit him before he could overanalyze it much. Where's the can?

Thataway, Raijin pointed to the left and twisted away from him. Don't puke on me!

Seifer booked it in the general direction of the bathroom and made it just in the nick-of-time. If he'd known that he'd spend two hours dry-heaving on the transcontinental, he wouldn't have eaten fish on his date last night. But, as he was learning on this day of firsts, he couldn't change the past. The only benefit was that Fujin seemed to be pleased, in some capacity, that he was enduring this particularly terrible form of torture.

In the throes of it, he was interrupted by constant knocking and a revolving door of women's voices demanding he vacate the premises—there probably weren't very many bathrooms on the train, but it's not as if he had much choice when he commandeered that one. It was either that or make an entire car full of people gag. He crouched over the toilet for about half-an-hour, his face hanging precariously close to the ring, when a familiar voice—the timbre of which made his skin tingle—called to him.

SEIFER, ALIVE? He weakly reached up to open the door, embarrassed but beyond thankful that she showed up; he hated getting sick, and even more than that he hated getting sick when he was alone—some small part of him always felt like he was dying when it happened. It might be classifiable as a phobia, if he examined it hard enough.

Fuuuuu, he moaned her name dramatically and lifted himself away from the floor to regain some dignity. His stomach flipped again at the movement. Good thing you checked on me. I think I'm on
NOT DYING. She pushed her way into the small room and closed them both in, putting a hand on her hip and rolling her eyes.

AND WASN'T CHECKING ON YOU—HAD TO GO TO THE BATHROOM. Fujin contested his assumption that she cared. BUT HAD TO USE MENS BECAUSE WOMEN'S OCCUPIED BY ROGUE MALE VOMITER. She pointed at the wall and Seifer groaned again when he observed her cited evidence of a tampon dispenser. WOMEN ON TRAIN ARE MAD. MUTINY, MAYBE. WANT YOU TO MOVE.

*I absolutely cannot move right now, I'm still*—he was interrupted by a not-so-dry heave before he could finish his sentence. He wiped his mouth and tried again. *I'm still getting sick.*

Fujin sighed and reached over to lock the door. He heard her shuffling behind him to turn on the faucet, and moments later she was squeezing past him to perch onto a slim ledge that ran along the wall.

*You don't have to stay,* his guilt from this morning protested her kindness. *Really, this is probably the last thing you want to sit through right now. It's your birthday—* 

*QUIET,* she scolded, and her pale hand extended a wet paper towel into his line of sight. *HERE, YOU'VE GOT ... well, you've got puke on your chin.*

*Shit ... sorry,* he felt his skin flush as he grabbed the towel and wiped his face. *What kinda loser SeeD gets motion sickness on a train? What fucking a shitshow that's gonna be.*

*A human one, I guess. They make medicine for it,* Fujin reasoned hesitantly just before he jerked away from her again with a convulsing stomach that pushed out nothing but air and terrible sounds. When it stopped he unthinkingly plopped his head in her lap.

*What would I do without you?* He asked earnestly.

*Be fine, probably,* she let out an annoyed sigh. She pressed a new wet towel to the back of his neck. *Or maybe you'd die alone in a dirty train toilet.* Seifer laughed and was about to reply with a sarcastic comment in turn, but instead battled another wave of nausea. He breathed a sigh of relief when it passed.

*Okay,* Fujin whispered as she shifted underneath him. *Since you're fine and don't have any plans of moving ... I'm gonna go.*

*Don't.* He looped his arm around her calf and dragged himself closer, his head rising higher on her legs. *Who'll fight off all the mutinous women?*

*Seems like you can handle it,* she muttered, and the comment sent a shiver down his spine. He briefly wondered if she knew that what she'd witnessed this morning was a milestone for him, and then he kicked himself for even letting the question cross his mind. Of course, she knew. She knew every single thing about him, even the things he never said. Well ... at least, she knew *most* of the things he never said.

*Are you talking about this morning?* Since it was just the two of them and he essentially had her pinned in place, he figured she couldn't shy away from the topic. He was surprised to find she didn't even try, and instead, she caught him off-guard with an observation that made him ache.

*You and Rabia Sharamand.* He didn't dare look up, but he imagined her staring at her own reflection...
in the mirror, inspecting the angles of her own face in the yellow light and comparing them to the Rabia’s high cheekbones. *I didn’t realize it was that serious.*

*It wasn’t. I mean, it’s not,* he answered immediately, thinking that hesitation would signal he wasn’t sincere. *Hell, I kinda always thought…*

Seifer couldn’t figure out why he couldn’t just *spit it out* back then—all those years waiting and wanting, and all the years that followed—and at no point did he have the courage to commit to the words. He supposed that some part of him always thought she’d be able to read it on him, because they’d been like two kids with tin cans pressed to their temples all their lives, their thoughts passing between them like words through a taut string. Aside from that, he thought he did such a piss-poor job hiding it. Especially in moments like that, when he was down and out or didn’t feel well, and all he wanted was her. Could she really not see it?

*Anyway …* Seifer abandoned the partial confession as his confidence receded under her scrutiny. He thought he was right, but if he was wrong … well, it would ruin everything. *I regret it already.*

*Doubt it,* she replied flatly.

*No, really,* he insisted. *It’s not gonna happen again.* Seifer was sure they were both contemplating why he felt the need to say that at all before his motion sickness commanded their attention again. He craned back over the toilet in sickly suspense and then plopped his head back on Fujin’s lap when it passed. A buzz coursed through his body when her hand rested at his temple to brush what must have been a few beads of sweat aside, and it surged to a jolt when her fingertips stayed there, lightly drumming out that nervous rhythm before raking her fingers slowly through his hair.

Seifer couldn’t think, he couldn’t move … *hell, he was pretty sure he forgot to breathe for a few seconds.* It was a new sort’ve touch from her—simple and understated but also *tender* and loaded with the possibility of something more—and he didn’t know if it was better than he’d imagined because he was sick, or because she was *perfect.* One thing he was certain about, *even back then,* was that he didn’t deserve it.

Every touch from that day forward was compared to the graceful stroke of Fujin’s hand combing his hair from crown to nape, and the fire it sparked low in his belly. It wasn’t *anything* like Rabia, who didn’t *know* him and whose hands were too rough and rushed and only elicited a low hum under his skin … and it was exactly the same as Rabia with all the girls that came after.

When the train finally stopped, the nausea subsided along with it, and their adventure resumed. Fujin didn’t mention Rabia again that day, or ever, but Seifer still spent the rest of that trip sheepishly trying to get back into her good graces. He even wasted half the night playing one of those carnival games to win her that orange stuffed Mamba-thing that she’d casually observed was ‘cute,’ and which she still had to this day.

Looking back on it all now, Seifer supposed it made more of a bittersweet memory than a *bad* one. He hated that he’d missed out on that moment, but all in all, he thought what wound up happening was better. He wasn’t ready for Fujin back then—he was too young, and he *surely* would’ve messed it up.

"*Nauseous?*"

The remembrance halted, and Seifer opened his eyes to find Fujin awake and gazing up at him. A smile crept onto his face and he shook his head as he pulled a bottle of pills out of his pants pocket.

"*No, I remembered them. Just resting my eyes,*" The pills rattled as he gave the bottle a single shake
before relegating the drugs back to their hiding spot.

"Are we almost there?" Fujin pushed herself upright, and Seifer took the opportunity to pull his leg free from her.

"Ten minutes out, give or take," he kneaded his thigh to work life into the now tingling flesh and hesitated before voicing the observation. "...You were out cold."

"Just tired, is all." He apparently wasn't doing a very good job covering up his anxiety about her going out into the field since she felt the need to place a hand on his knee to reassure him. "And the sooner we get it over with, the sooner we can forget all about it."

Seifer would love to wash his hands of all this shit with Rinoa and Sorceress Edea; it was only serving as a distraction from everything going on with Fuu, which no one at Balamb Garden seemed to be concerned about. The most they'd determined was that Fujin should stay far away from Edea—a theory that Seifer, of course, replied to with a sarcastic 'no shit.' Needless to say, it didn't really engender a positive reaction, and one of the stipulations of his house arrest imposed by Cid wound up being banished from any discussions about it.

It only served as proof that the higher-ups at Balamb were too stupid to handle this because obviously, that wasn't going to stop him. While Cid had Kadowaki analyzing lab results and theorizing, Seifer was researching the best way to get into Esthar City. This famed Doctor Odine that everyone kept talking about was the only person who would know more information: he was a leader in the field of Guardian Force studies, and he'd also dabbled in the science of sorcery—which was an oxymoron if Seifer had ever heard one. Odine seemed to be the only one who'd be able to answer any questions about what was going on in Fuu's head, and more importantly would possibly know how to stop it.

On top of that, traces of Odine were woven into Fujin's past, long before Seifer and Raijin came into her life. The scientist designed Lunatic Pandora, where her mother died, and studied Fujin for signs of sorceress powers in his laboratory for years. All signs seemed to be pointing in the man's direction ... it was baffling that Cid wouldn't think to suggest a meeting.

Granted, Esthar sealed itself off from rest of the world after the war to recover from Adel's reign so it wasn't easy to get in. For a regular person without contacts it would be damn near impossible—passage through their security was usually only reserved for heads of state and other government officials, and even that was rare. This was Garden they were talking about though—Cid Kramer had an invisible hand in every political pot. Surely an entrance, Esthari-sanctioned or otherwise, could be sorted out. But as it stood, Seifer opted to keep the idea to himself. The last thing he needed was Garden trying to stop him.

He hadn't even broached the Esthar issue with Fujin yet, but ever since finding the address for Odine's lab on that research abstract, he'd been scheming different ways to cross the border into The Silent Nation. Aside from access to the city, the lab itself was Seifer's main concern—namely if Odine might still harbor some sort've fascination with Fujin and try to keep her there again. After what Seifer did in Deling, he figured a scientist and his research assistants couldn't pose that much of a threat. An Estharian army platoon, on the other hand? Well, that could be a small roadblock.

"Well, if you get tired we'll book a room and stay the night," Seifer reasoned, pushing the issue of Esthar aside for the time being; he had a rough plan for now—he'd bother Fujin with the details later.

"We might have to book one anyway, depending on how this all goes," she pressed the bleariness from her eyes with her fingers.
"Yeah," Seifer scratched his chin and chuckled. "I never would've guessed that Rinoa would keep us involved in all this shit." Fujin's head bobbed in agreement before she collapsed back on the sofa.

"Something tells me it's going to drag out," she mused as she pressed her hand against her neck and twisted to work out a kink. "Maybe her little resistance movement is capable of more than we bargained."

"Doubtful," he brushed her hand aside and pressed his fingertips to the muscle. "Here?"

"Mmmhmm," she simultaneously winced and sighed in gratitude when he pressed into a particularly problematic spot. "Why does this feel so much better when you do it?"

"Doesn't everything?" A sly smile crept onto Seifers face as he leaned in to kiss her ear and she playfully swatted at him. "I have better hands for it—the gunblade."

"Stronger than mine," she agreed, leaning into his touch. "Speaking of gunblades, I'm glad you stopped sulking."

"Whatever. I still don't think anyone would've recognized Hyperion," Seifer frowned. "Sending me out here without my gunblade is like a fucking death sentence; who uses just a gun? And you with your lender weapon. We're basically sitting ducks."

"That's a little dramatic … and I don't agree with you, by the way." Fujin rolled her shoulder to signal a job well done, and Seifer instinctually slid his arm around her to draw her close again. "There aren't many gunblade specialists in the world."

"I think Cid's just trying to get us killed." She groaned against his throat, but Seifer continued anyway. "I'm telling you, he's got it out for us."

"This would be too elaborate for Cid. He doesn't exactly have time to craft a complex revenge plot."

"You weren't awake for it," he disagreed as he tried to mask his agitation that she wasn't taking him seriously. "The way he was pushing me to head back to Deling—it was weird. He either wanted me to go, or he wanted you to be at Garden by yourself."

"Listen, I'm not a fan of Cid right now either. Anyone who can lie about his wife like that for years is a little shady," Fujin slung her arm across his waist. "But I don't think he hates us that much."

"Pretty sure he hates me," Seifer carped. "Pretty sure he'd love to see me dead so Squall Leonhart can take up the mantle."

"If Cid wanted either one of us dead, he would've killed us by now. Something tells me Xu would make a willing assassin. Though I think she might be scared of you, after what you did to her." Seifer scrunched his nose.

"She mentioned that, did she?" Fujin nodded as he shamefully thumbed silky strands of her silver hair. "I know, I need to learn to control myself."

"She's one of us … and she's a woman, Seifer."

"Hey, we're trained to treat women equally in a confrontation," he protested, though he knew this was a losing argument that he didn't even really want to make. "I would've done that to any guy in that situation."

"And what if I piss off some cadet this year and he grabs me by the throat?" She pulled away from
him and quirked an eyebrow.

"Well, I'd fucking kill him," Seifer responded matter-of-factly. "Obviously that's not okay." Fujin continued to stare as she silently waited for the reasonable response he was holding out on.

"Fine, I'll apologize to her," he acquiesced. "Shit, I thought you hated Xu."

"I do … but she helped with the cover-up in Deling," Fujin mused as she analyzed the hard line his jaw had drawn. "I know Kadowaki saved my life, but Xu … she kept quiet and helped protect you from the blowback. So …"

Seifer hated to admit it, but it was true—things would've been a lot worse for Fujin if she'd woken up and found that he'd been thrown into the dregs of D-District.

"I said I'd apologize, okay?" His fingers found her chin and urged her face closer to his own. "Quit while you're ahead." Their lips touched in a chaste kiss, and then he kissed the tip of her nose for good measure. "Not sure why I have to explain myself and you don't. You still haven't told me why I've been living in your bed since you left the infirmary."

"That's an exaggeration," she attempted to scuttled away from him, but he steeled his arms and refused to allow her to retreat.

"Oh really? Because I have some tweaked muscles that say otherwise," Seifer pressed a palm on the now not-as-sore spot on his inner thigh. "Nothing to share on why yet?"

"I don't know … I just feel …" Fujin paused and her brow furrowed in agitation and confusion at a genuine loss for words before she cleared her throat. "I can't explain it."

"It's okay." He looped a hand under her leg and tugged it across him, forcing her to straddle his lap. "Listen, I only wanna know what caused it so I know how to replicate it the second you stop."

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" Her rhetorical question truncated with a breathy sigh when he leaned forward to kiss her collarbone.

"It's the strong hands, isn't it? I'm tellin' you, training with that gunblade was the best decision I ever made." The smirk that snuck onto his face stretched to a wide grin as his fingers moved to tickle her ribs.

"Well, it's not not the hands," Fujin laughed and weakly pushed them away.

"I knew it," Seifer gripped his own wrist behind her back to trap her against him, and she pressed her warm palms to either side of his face. He raised a single hand to her cheek in turn and gazed back at her, thinking of that first memory he'd lamented losing, and realized how wrong he'd been. Fujin was still the first girl he'd ever looked at that way. She was the only one, and she'd be the last, too.

"What are you thinking about?" Her smile widened, the rise in her cheeks narrowing her eyes as she caught him staring at her and drifting off in thought. Seifer bit his bottom lip and shook his head.

"How fucking lucky we are, is all. Even with all this going on."

He could tell Fujin knew there was more to it than that, but she opted not to pry and pressed her lips to his instead. The train pitched as the kiss grew deeper and Seifer groaned, annoyed that they'd arrived already; they were just getting to the good part.
"Come on," she regrettably slid away from him and planted her feet on the floor. "We need to save Raijin—Rinoa's probably driving him crazy."

"Yeah, but the faster we get there, the sooner she'll be driving us crazy. Besides you know Raijin's going to snap you the second you get there, and I'm gonna be left to deal with her." He hoisted himself from the bench and followed when she wordlessly walked to the exit. "Okay, every man for himself, I guess."

Seifer begrudgingly disembarked at her command and they made the short trek to Dollet. When they finally arrived, he was actually happy to see it—the cobblestone streets and aging wood on the salt-brined buildings brought back memories of the final days of their summer trip, before this shit with Pandemona got vastly more complicated. He even forced Fujin to make a short stop at the fountain in the main square, where he'd kissed her just after making an ass out of himself at the bar. *Wanna head to the pub? Maybe that divorcee boyfriend of yours is there,* he teased as she tried to fight her way out of his grasp. Fujin's only reply was a very light kick to the shin.

Despite Seifer's protests and diversions, they finally made their way to the hotel. Fujin entered first and was immediately tackled by Raijin, who was so happy to see her he shed a few tears. It only bothered Seifer for a fraction of a second before he remembered that in all this craziness their bronze friend hadn't seen Fuu since she was unconscious. *He supposed it was alright to condone one much-too-forceful hug.*

"Seifer Almasy." Rinoa's voice chimed from a nearby table and drew his attention away from his friends.

"In the flesh," he spun around and put on his best charming smile. When she came into focus and he found her with a scowl screwed to her face, he knew the charm fell flat.

"Nice to see you finally." Her voice had a pinched, judgmental lilt to it, and he honestly couldn't say he blamed her. *He tricked her into getting attached to him, told her it would never work, continued to lead her on,* and then he dropped her like a hot bag of shit when Fujin got sick. *She was warranted a bad feeling or two.*

"Well, I've been a little busy." He shrugged as she stood up from the table, contemplating whether she should greet him with one of her body smothering hugs or with a handshake. Rinoa awkwardly opted stand stark still instead. "But I hear you know that."

"I did hear something about it." The sweet smile she flashed him was coupled with a narrowed eye. "Looks like everything's working out though."

"Let's cut the bullshit: why don't you just say what you really want to say, Duchess?" Despite the fact that she was owed a little bit of anger, the whole reason he was here was that she'd threatened the Posse in a way that could've ripped them apart. As the leader he couldn't abide by it—it was *unforgivable.*

"I should've known you were a jerk," she finally spoke as she glanced sideways at Fujin and Raijin—the latter of which still had the former locked in a tight grip as he barraged the poor thing with question after question. "The way you treated Fujin that night we met should've told me everything I needed to know."

"Oh come on. Pretty sure you're the one that stuck your tongue down my throat that night," Seifer pulled out a chair and motioned for her to sit back down at the table with him. "And don't play all innocent with me; you've been angling to edge Fujin out this whole time we've known you."
"You lied about being with her," Rinoa protested as she sank back into her chair.

"That doe-eyed act isn't going to work with me Rin—I know you, now. Especially after this recent stunt you pulled. It's actually kinda impressive ... in a shitty sort've way." He chuckled as he cracked his knuckles. "Yet despite that, I still came all the way here to talk to you about Timber, because I thought we were friends."

"You didn't have a choice," Rinoa's crossed her arms on the table and leaned forward to whisper. "Raijin said the Headmaster of Balamb Garden sent you."

"I always have a choice," he shrugged. "No one can make me do anything. I'm my own man."

"A man backed into a corner, maybe," she challenged him. Seifer had to admit that he preferred this feisty version Rinoa Heartilly, with her shiny, perfect veneer stripped away. It reminded him a little bit of the night he first met her. "I think I have a lot of power in this situation, actually."

He twisted to look over his shoulder and check on Fujin and Raijin, who were still about ten feet away at the door, and then returned to the task at hand.

"Listen, I'm not here for Garden—that's Fujin's job. And in a minute she's going to sit down here and give you a rough outline for a plan for your … Forest Owls..." he cringed inwardly at the name as he continued, "that Garden isn't promising continued support for."

"That's what I was expected. Raijin said—" She started, and Seifer held up a hand to silence her.

"I can offer you something better."

"And what is that, exactly?" She asked hesitantly as she ran her finger along the rim of her water glass. It was a telling gesture—her nerves made her do the same thing when she'd invited them all to the mansion for dinner that first time, and introduced Seifer to Caraway. Despite her frustrations with him, she was apparently still very much into him and hanging on to hope that he'd feel the same.

"Continued consultation ... for a nominal fee," he pulled a piece of paper with Odine Labs address scrawled in a fine print. "First, you need to drop this shit with going to the press." Rinoa nodded, seeming agreeable to the idea of having Seifer on-call for help.

"Second ... I want to take Fujin to Esthar, and I either need official documentation or to be snuck in by some seedy underbelly faction in communication with someone on the inside." Rinoa nodded silently as she picked up on his cue for secrecy and slipped the paper into her pocket.

"Are you not telling them?" She looked in Raijin and Fujin's direction.

"Not right now," Seifer admitted. "Raijin's not a factor, and Fuu would just ..." But it wasn't right to talk about her in any way with Rinoa, so he glazed over the explanation. "Just agree with whatever she says, for now, and leave the rest to me."

"Why should I trust you?" She glowered at him as she tilted closer. "You screwed me over once already, remember? Twice, even."

"And I'd do it again," Seifer admitted, which seemed to only make Rinoa her angrier. "But you happen to have a lot of dirt on me, my best friend, and the girl I'm in love with ... so you've got my balls in a vice on this one, to put it mildly. Fucking you over wouldn't be very wise on my part right now." Her face scrunched at the analogy, but she quickly calibrated. "And I need to get Fujin to Esthar, to that address. It's too important for me to risk."
"Consultation until the mission's complete?" Rinoa confirmed again.

"Yes. Until it's complete."

"Okay. I'll talk to Zone and Watts. I'll see if they know anyone in Esthar," she agreed and leaned away from him again. "You're gonna have to take my phone calls though."

"We'll figure it out," he groaned. She ignored his dismay and took a sip of her water before nudging a box out from under the table with her foot.

"You probably shouldn't open it here, but it's your coat and Fujin's weapon, and some other stuff. My father's security recovered all this from the hotel and got it to Raijin, somehow. I still have no clue how all that worked out." Seifer bent down and slid the box towards himself with the tips of fingers, feeling a little more at ease with his coat back in his possession.

"I suppose this will work out better, in the long run. With a plan from Balamb Garden and help from you, the Forest Owls should be able to pull it off," she continued, as Seifer pried the flaps open to confirm he beloved coat was, in fact, there. "We'll need all the help we can get if we want to kidnap President Deling." Seifer snapped upright.

"Wait, you're going to what?" But Rinoa's eyes darted behind him, signaling Raijin and Fujin's approach.

"We'll talk later," she whispered, winked, and waved to Seifer's approaching friends.

Rinoa was telling Fujin she was glad she was better and might've even stood up to give her a hug. On any other normal day, he would've done something to intercept it. But today, Seifer was too busy wondering what the fuck he'd just signed himself up for, and how the hell he was going to get himself out of it.
Beyond the Genius of the Sea

Chapter Summary

It felt a shade godlike when they were together now: untouchable, immutable, omniscient, ever since she'd woken up.

*Note: So I'm not the biggest fan of this chapter, but I needed to update and needed something transitional to jump-start the next phase of the story. So it is what it is! I'm going to tweak this in the next couple of weeks, but again I'm happy with the direction it went. Enjoy!**

Fujin wasn't sure she'd fully come back yet.

Physically she was here: bone, blood, skin—body, and with it taste, sight, and smell. There was no doubt that the grass roasting in the late summer heat was so pungent that it was bittersweet on her tongue. And her eyes weren't deceiving as the sun relinquished the sky to the waxing moon every evening, only to circle back and reclaim its rightful place in the cosmos with a triumphant glow the morning after. But after that brief stint of stark deprivation, her senses weren't really a trusted barometer anymore. The natural order of things—of day and night, and time and life—marched on uninterrupted, but Fujin still felt a world removed from it. If not for the feeling of her own heart knocking in her breast, she might've been convinced she was a ghost.

But then, there was touch: the warm confirmation of connectedness from the firm grip of Seifer's hands.

It didn't make sense, and Fujin understood that it didn't make sense. She'd been with Seifer for a few months now and even though everything about it felt singular to her, the truth was that people had been falling in love for ages—they weren't pioneers by any measure. Initially, Fujin chalked it up to recovering from a near-death experience: she'd needed to keep Seifer close because she'd almost died, right? What was more natural than to cling to the one person in her world who had the brightest spark?

But even her steadfast pragmatism couldn't deny that something deeper stirred after she awoke from that coma and Seifer's fingers traced her skin; she swore the act forged a bridge between her physical self and the stranded fragment of her soul. Wherever she was, whatever she'd lost … whatever piece of her died when she almost left the world, Seifer made her feel like she was whole and alive again. And last night, as he ignored doctors' orders for rest and inevitably wound up burying his face against her neck to stifle the gravelly moan of a climax, Fujin felt the ache of something divine passing between them … and not even passing between them so much as trying to break through and perpetuate.

It felt a shade godlike when they were together now: untouchable, immutable, omniscient, ever since she'd woken up.

She supposed faltering confidence could've been as much of a culprit as anything else—she'd fucked Deling up pretty badly, and as a result, had fucked their lives up even worse. Retreating to Seifer and
licking her wounds was a logical reaction, given the dynamic of their Posse. It only made sense that she'd interpret his ready acceptance of her shame as providence.

But that feeling … was it possible she'd broached some otherworldly barrier of consciousness?

Fujin stood alone on the hotel balcony, with her back pressed to a glass door closed snugly behind her. An unreasonable corner of her mind was convinced her weight would keep the world at bay and promised solitude if she would just stay. Even though travel and the general stress of the day left her feeling like shit, she wasn't ready to head back into that room and resume this life she'd been living —the lack of control, the constant frayed feeling, and being so unsure of herself.

The late summer brought a sharp evening chill along with it, and she defiantly tugged the collar of her coat up around her ears to stave off the cold blowing off the Dollet seawater.

She shivered, and a grimace surfaced along with it. A sound-minded person would've gone inside by now—the cold was an unpleasant brand of damp that permeated the skin and settled deep into her bones. But Fujin wouldn't necessarily describe herself as a person of sound mind right now, and aside from that she was a sucker for a good twilight view; with the clear sky a striking shade of blue and the stars burning bright against it, she couldn't bear the thought of walking away from it. So, she took another drag of the first cigarette she'd ever smoked, kept her back pressed against the only barrier between her and the drumming call to a future she wasn't sure she was ready to face, and hoped the solitude would help her find some balance. Time was a salve and could heal most anything if given long enough.

The isolation only bred more space for her thoughts to wander, and Seifer and all the nightmares of him she'd been having as of late flashed in her mind and made her head swirl. It was too much to unpack, and aside from that it was pointless to tackle it right now, when they were back in Dollet and she too was distracted and a little too blind with jealousy—of all things—to concentrate. She took another drag and coughed as the thick smoke filled her lungs. She cursed Seifer lowly at the lie that these things 'mellowed him out'—they only left her feeling thick-tongued and more edgy.

Fujin supposed she might feel better if she could stop creating fictitious issues when there weren't any obvious problems on the horizon. By all accounts, things were looking up. She and Seifer made it to Dollet without a hitch, only to find that Raijin did great—practically thrived—without them around, and would probably be inducted into SeeD the second they got back to Garden. There were no signs of Pandemona or the sorceress since her episode. She had her weapon and her coat back, so the anxiety that came with feeling like a piece of her was missing had dissipated. Seifer was being considerate and manageable, and he had his beloved trench back now so there was less to complain about (of course, without Hyperion back in his hands the complaints would never stop). Even the meeting with Rinoa went more smoothly than expected. Pending a document hand-off from Garden to the Forest Owls—which would be handled by Raijin—the Posse was just a single check-mark away from leaving the entire mess of Fujin's first mission and the Deling incident behind.

Staying overnight in Dollet wasn't even all that bad, considering how exhausted she was. With all of the bad things in her life seeming to jumpstart in Galbadia, she'd been hell-bent on leaving the continent and firmly insisted she and Seifer make the hike to the train platform as planned. Fujin was thankful when chivalrous Seifer, in a rare showing of self-deprecation, feigned a sore back and his own exhaustion from 'a long day,' and proposed heading back to town and staying overnight. It went unsaid, but her recovery had been a steep climb and they both knew she'd pushed herself too far today.

But despite all the good news, Fujin couldn't shake the nagging question that kept clawing its way to the forefront of her mind, past the tiredness, the fear of staying on Galbadian soil too long, and past
the embarrassment that she was too weak to kill a grat right now:

Why did Seifer pull Rinoa aside like that? And what exactly did they talk about?

Seifer was a cool liar, and it was challenging to parse his truthfulness through the hulking physical barricade of Raijin's excitement that she was alive. But once Fujin made if through the gauntlet of celebration and joined Seifer and Rinoa at the meeting table, something felt off. Seifer's body language was casual; the lacing of his fingers in his lap and the slant of his shoulders typical of Seifer in a situation like this. But she'd been on the receiving end of his shiftiness enough times to suspect that he was keeping his back turned at just the right angle to hide his face for a reason. But maybe she'd read too much into it. Maybe the 'anxiety induced' (Kadowaki's term, not her own) dreams she'd been having were making her paranoid. Maybe she should have more faith in him ...

And if not for Rinoa, she would've let it go.

But the second Fujin and Raijin joined the table, the raven-haired beauty shifted and squirmed in her seat and agreed all too quickly with Cid's plan for putting this whole mess to bed. He'd sent Fujin to the meeting with an incredibly insulting offer: the release of heavily redacted documents of past tactics used for liberation operations. No assistance. No on-site consultations. Just the sharing of plans from mission's past, which Rinoa could honestly cobble together on her own from the military tactics textbooks in her father's home library.

It wasn't a generous offer, and it was obvious that it wasn't generous … but Rinoa accepted it without even batting one of her perfectly curled eyelashes. I think we can work with that, she'd said as her gaze darted to Seifer's face and then back to Fujin's to confirm. She didn't ask a single question about what the agreement really entailed.

Well, you'd probably want to know that there aren't any cases specifically like Timber's, right? Fujin couldn't stop her eyes from narrowing as her suspicion peaked.

Right, because Garden is still in its infancy, technically, and there haven't been any larger scale liberation movements since the war. Seifer interjected as his hand moved above the table, his palm lying flat compliment the explanation he was offering. But a few smaller factions have needed help deposing authoritarian leaders, and strategies for that will be included, right Fuu?

Right … She paused and quirked an eyebrow at his gesticulating hand; a classic tell that his nerves were on edge, in one way or another. We'll also provide you with intel on propaganda campaigns that have proven to be effective in a variety of missions.

Propaganda? Rinoa's chestnut-colored eyes widened as she leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms over her chest, throwing a furtive glance at Seifer. I didn't realize you did all that.

We do a lot of things, Fujin replied flatly as she watched a muscle along Seifer's jaw twitch under her and Rinoa's joint scrutiny. We avoid bloodshed when we can.

And so, if this were a real mission, say with … or a consultant on hand, Rinoa looked around the table pointedly before letting her eyes fall on Seifer's again, or something like that. Would we still get all of these things?

Yes, Seifer leaned forward as he chimed in with an answer before Fujin had a chance to open her mouth to respond. The move masked his face from view again, forcing Fujin to rely on the lowered pitch of his voice for a hidden meaning. All of that would be included still, if you had a point person.

If this were a real mission we'd be doing it all for you, she grimaced in irritation at Seifer's inaccuracy
and at whatever subtle subtext was passing between the two of them. *What's happening here? Are you thinking of reaching out to Cid and offering money for this to continue as a regular operation? Because if you are, let me save you some time; there's no way in he'd—*

*No, no, no,* Rinoa waved off the accusation, but the squeaky edge to her voice gave away the fact that she wasn't oblivious to Fujin's sharp tone. *Not at all. I was just … curious … about how it all works. For the future, maybe.*

*Geez, maybe just plan one rebellion at a time, ya know?* Raijin grumbled as he searched the table for a menu. The Duchess only dignified his comment with a roll of her eyes.

*I think I need to clarify.* Fujin usually did a better job keeping her emotions in check, but she couldn't keep the shock from sneaking into her voice. It was ludicrous for Rinoa to assume Balamb Garden would want to work with someone who'd expressed interest—consciously or not—in tearing the institution down. *Garden personnel won't be engaging with the Forest Owls again. The Galbadian government and General Caraway are important stakeholders in Garden's future. I don't think I need to explain the magnitude of the risk we're taking agreeing to help you, of all people, even in this small capacity.*

*You don't.* Rinoa straightened her back and folded her hands in her lap daintily as she tried to convey an air of confidence. *But don't … don't think that I don't understand just how much of favor I'm doing for you all. I didn't have to be this nice about it, you know.*

*Wow. Rinoa, ya gotta be kiddin'me …* Raijin groaned but didn't bother to take his eyes off the menu splayed out in front of him.

*A favor?* Fujin scoffed with him simultaneously and leveled a sharp gaze at the girl who sat across from her defiantly and dared to call this unnecessary mess she'd created—for her own selfish benefit—a 'favor.' *Do you think we have to be this 'nice' either? Of all the stupid—*

*Alright, alright. Enough,* Seifer scolded them all with a gentle firmness before Fujin could finish her thought, and before things got too heated. He snagged the remaining stack of menus from the center of the table and distributed one to each of them.

*Let's just drop it and order something. All of us just sitting here pissed off and staring at each other looks really fucking suspicious.*

*Fine,* Rinoa sighed begrudgingly as she pulled the menu from his hand. *Raijin ate all the food I bought for the trip here so I'm literally starving right now, anyway.*

*Hey, I'd been livin' off sauce-less spaghetti for two days. A man's gotta eat, ya know.* Raijin scanned the menu with renewed interest.

*No. We don't need to be here long.* Fujin grumbled as she pushed the menu Seifer attempted to shove into her hands aside. She'd be damned if this was going to drag out on her account.

*Fujin, you haven't eaten all day. Just order something.* Seifer flipped the menu open in front of her and then placed his hand on her thigh. *I know there's no use trying to spin shit into gold, but we're here and the food's good, and you need a meal.*

*Haven't eaten all day, huh?* Rinoa queried, her brow furrowing with curiosity as she coyly ran her finger along the edge of her water glass. *Come to think of it, you do look a little run down. You feeling alright?*

*Hey, mind your own business.* Seifer replied with a measured snap. Fujin could've sworn she saw the corner of Rinoa's mouth curl into a smirk. He exhaled sharply through his nose before pivoting back
to Fujin. *Let's at least split something.*

Whatever you want, Fujin sighed, setting aside her own lack of hunger and allowing Seifer's opinion to overrule. He'd already somehow covertly asserted his dominance throughout the meeting—she may as well let him take this trivial thing, too. She'd relinquished any claims she had on a leadership role when she woke up from that coma, anyway. She wouldn't have even bothered taking point on this mission at all if Cid hadn't threatened to hand it over to Xu (Fujin was pretty sure Seifer wouldn't live through that after what he did to her). At any rate, they'd all be in SeeD soon enough—some later than others, but soon enough—and she could slip back into the comfort of Seifer's ever-stretching shadow again.

Say, Rinoa interjected to overrule the awkward silence that settled over them after the waiter made a pass to collect their order. *Is Cid Kramer a sort've short, stocky guy with glasses? And brown hair? And a look that's …* She waved a hand in front of her face as she sought the right word and failed … the exact opposite of what you'd think the headmaster of a mercenary school would look like?

Yup, Raijin sighed as he glanced over his shoulder in unreasonable expectance of his just-ordered food. *Kinda exactly like that.*

Did you see him or something? He was in Galbadia a few days ago. Seifer's easily revealed intel was reprimanded by the back of Fujin's hand slapping his shoulder. *Ouch! Fucking hell Fuu, it's not like his schedule's to secret or anything.* She grumbled a disagreement under her breath, but Seifer ignored it. So, did you?

I think so, maybe. Rinoa mused and paused to take a sip of her water. *I mean, I saw some guy in a sweater vest come to meet with Caraway and Galbadia Garden's headmaster, Martine, and heard some of the staff calling him Mr. Kramer.*

Sounds like a meeting Kramer'd be at. Seifer turned to Fujin with a raised eyebrow—the arch of which was somehow annoyingly triumphant and suspicious at the same time. *Did he tell you he was meeting with Caraway?*

No … Xu only mentioned he went to Galbadia. She hated to stoke the flames of Seifer's conspiracy theories, but if Cid met with General Caraway, there was a good chance it was related to the Deling mission, Sorceress Edea, or Fujin's affliction in general.

Well, I only noticed them because Caraway just hired a bunch of new security detail and put tons of new protocols in place. They didn't show up with a meeting on the schedule or any sort've IDs, and they almost didn't get through the gate. Martine made a big stink about it, and sweater vest was trying to calm him down. I totally get where they're coming from though. Rinoa looked to Seifer and motioned to him with her delicate palm facing upward to illustrate the unfairness of it all. *It's such a pain. It'd be impossible to sneak out to see you like I used to.*

Fujin rolled her eyes, and suddenly shared Raijin's impatience for the food to show up.

Geez, life just isn't fair, is it Rin? Seifer grinned as he placed his elbows on the table and crossed his arms to lean into the conversation. His feigned investment was a tact to gather intel, and the rational part of Fujin's brain understood that … but all the same, she found herself wondering when he'd decided to give Rinoa a nickname that wasn't meant to mock, and how many times he'd used it. *Any clue why they were there?*

Nope. They went straight to his office. Martine looked like he might've been mad at your headmaster, maybe. I don't know, it's a little fuzzy. Rinoa scooped up her glass to get it out of the way as she caught the waiter arriving with a tray of food. *I'd just come back from a date and I'd had
a few drinks. You know how I get. She scrunched her nose at Seifer and whispered a quiet thank you to the waiter as he placed a plate in front of her.

The whole time they'd been in Deling, Fujin was too distracted by the mission and consumed by her own issues with Pandemona to realize Rinoa had all the hallmarks of an intentionally threatening presence. But here it was now, displayed right in front of her abashedly, without remorse. What'd seemed fairly innocuous within the greater dangers of her world suddenly felt more vicious when Fujin's mind was void of the restless wind, her confidence had been shaken, and Seifer was the only thing that made her feel alive. Fujin the warrior was falling victim to the basest form of feminine jealousy, and she was more embarrassed of that than she was of almost collapsing during a bite-bug attack back in Balamb.

These 'anxiety induced' dreams she'd been having weren't exactly helping matters, either. Fujin wasn't one to dream all that much before Pandemona came around, but sharing her head with a Guardian Force-Sorceress combo gave her little choice in the matter. Every night since she'd recovered, she'd been having haunting nightmares that made her shoot awake in a panicked, cold sweat. Kadowaki tried every treatment in the book—homeopathic, allopathic, ancient Centran—but none them seemed to touch the anxiety in Fujin's mind that was manifesting into … well, Hyne knows what this was.

Flashes. Flashes of Seifer kneeling down before a raven-haired woman and rising up a knight. Seifer, standing in front of an army with hollow yellow-green eyes and a deep gash across his face. Seifer, with that woman's hands on either side of his face as she pulled him in for a kiss and Fujin's heart broke a million times over. A raven-haired woman. Rinoa …?

"Hey, what are you doing out here?" The door at her back bowed forward with a gentle persistence and pushed the weight she'd leveled against it aside. Seifer's head emerged a foot above her own through the new space he'd forced open. "I thought you were gonna rest …" His voice trailed off as his nostrils flared.

"Are you smoking?" His eyes popped open wide as he nudged his way through the partially open door to join her on the balcony. He was wearing nothing but a plush hotel towel draped loosely around his waist, and the reveal of skin provided just enough distraction that Fujin didn't notice his hand shooting out to pluck the cigarette from her mouth without warning.

"Hey," she protested weakly, but his narrowed eyes silenced her as he tossed the butt onto the concrete patio. He snuffed the lit end with the bare heel of his foot before pressing the door closed behind him.

"Save it," he scolded as he leaned against the door. "What the hell are you doing? You know those are terrible for you,"

"Doesn't' stop you." Fujin muttered as she settled beside him. If anyone else had dared to do that to her, she would've given them a swift kick to the shin. But this was Seifer—beyond her low-grade irritation, the only thing Fujin could focus on right now was how the smooth skin of his muscular arms dimpled as the chill of the glass made contact with his bare spine.

"Yeah and if someone tried to stop me, maybe I never would've started smoking them," he countered, arching an eyebrow as he slipped an arm around her waist and drew her close. "So maybe be grateful that I don't want you to get cancer instead of being salty about it, eh?"

"For the record, I've tried to get you to stop thousands of times. I hate the mess. Hate the smell. And that awful taste …" Fujin groaned as she leaned her head back against the glass. "I may as well get used to it. Why not join you?"
"Wait, the taste?" Seifer queried, conveniently choosing to ignore the fact that Fujin was calling him on his shit.

"Mhmmm," she murmured in acknowledgment and crossed her arms over her chest. "I can tell when you smoke them. It's gross."

"Well shit. Tell me how you really feel, Fuu," Seifer chuckled lowly and slipped his fingers under her chin to force her gaze to meet his own. "In my defense, I started smoking long before we started tasting each other. But if it bothers you that much—"

"It doesn't anymore," she defiantly jerked her chin from his grip and took a few steps away from him. "It's not like me caring would make a difference anyway." His feet scuffled and stutter-stopped behind her as he weighed whether or not to follow her across the balcony.

"You caring makes all the difference …" He corrected her, and the rare mystified lilt in his voice made her the slightest bit regretful. "What's going on with you? You've been quiet since dinner."

"Sorry," she whispered, irritated with herself now for even bringing this up to begin with wishing she hadn't bothered to say anything at all—she'd given herself away. "I didn't purposely come out here to bait you into quitting. I'm just tired. All the travel, and being back in Deling," she lied with a heavy sigh as she swirled back around to face him. "You always say smoking settles your nerves, so I figured I'd give it a whirl."

"… I'm tired too," Seifer commiserated after an awkward silence, and glazed over her excuse for being irritable. They both knew she wasn't being forthright and that the truth was embarrassing for her, in one way or another—Seifer was gracious enough to let it lie. "I think it's all the fucking hotels. It's nice at first, but then the toilet doesn't flush, the shower's never hot enough, and you just have to keep packing and unpacking your shit over and over again."

"Mmmm, a pain," Fujin agreed distractedly, her mind still fixed on the interaction between Seifer and Rinoa at that table earlier in the day, and that coy smirk that graced Rinoa's lips when she successfully got under Fujin's skin.

"I'm mostly sick of these run-down Galbadian shit-holes," He hesitantly stepped closer to her and slipped an arm around her waist. "One of these days we should go somewhere more modern."

"Mmmm, maybe," Fujin agreed and leaned into him gratefully, find his damp, bare skin to still be warm despite cold evening air. "Where would that be, exactly?"

"I dunno … F-H? The architecture there is interesting at least. Or Esthar if we could swing it."

"Esthar?" Fujin raised an eyebrow. "Were you elected Mayor of Balamb recently?"

"Such a wise-ass. tonight" He grumbled, before roughly mussing her hair. "No, but … Rinoa told me she'd been there once. She might know some people who could get us through."

Rinoa …

Fujin remained silent and fidgeted awkwardly under his watchful eye, minding the strain the morning's brief workout put on her muscles.

"Or who knows, maybe Cid would pull some strings for you if you asked. Or the General, even. He seemed pretty fucking enthralled by what's happening with you—"

"And Rinoa is pretty enthralled with you, so …" Her whisper had a slight bite to it. A petty bite. A
jealous one, too. A stark reminder that no matter how close to otherworldly she felt—god-like, death-like, or some amalgamation of the two—she was still human.

It was a mistake to reveal jealousy now, after all the events of the summer had passed. Seifer used to complain so much about all the other women who came before her being jealous, and she hated to be lumped in with them. But it was too late to retract now. The error was made, and the gears were turning behind Seifer's eyes as he started to synthesize the events of the day and her sudden shift in mood. Fujin twisted away from him in a futile attempt to avoid the inevitable, but Seifer's hand and rose to her face again and forced her gaze to his; the tips of his calloused fingers pressed firmly to her jawline.

"Don't do that," his thumb began to draw a slow circle on her cheek, and Fujin felt her face turning red. "Don't make that into something it isn't."

"But she was being—"

"I know," Seifer agreed with a sigh and moved his free hand to tighten the towel at his waist. "But I can't control what she does. It's got nothing to do with me. I love you, remember?"

"What were you two talking about, then? Before Raijin and I came over?" Undeterred by his silver tongue, her eyes challenged his.

"She was just … just …" Seifer sputtered through the start of an explanation—his golden lids blinking over wide pupils a few too many times; enough times, for her. "She was just saying how she missed me and stuff. You know, all that crap I'd rather you and I not waste our time on." He let his hand drift from her face to scratch the back of his neck. "Shit Fuu, Rinoa's a blip on the radar right now. What's it matter what she talked about? You know I love you."

And Fujin did know it, but she also knew Seifer before all this. She witnessed him manage a revolving schedule of lovers, and saw him lie convincingly to so many of them—many who were far prettier and more interesting than she could ever dream of being.

The main difference between Fujin and those girls though was that they'd survived Seifer. But Fujin? She was invested; it'd been that way even before all of the sex, and love, and closeness that'd grown between the two of them over these short few months. All those other girls lived through the lies and experienced only a brief broken heart in the end. But to Fujin, Seifer was everything—she was inextricably tethered to him, and if this thing they had fell apart she'd be shattered.

Fujin just didn't realize how fragile this new world with Seifer made her now; not until the wind in her mind quieted and left her adrift with her own thoughts. Her desperation to keep him close was existential then, wasn't it? He was her lifeline—a mooring she'd be an apparition without.

"There's nothing else you want to tell me?" She quirked a pleading eyebrow, and Seifer drew his lips together and shook his head. Fujin so desperately didn't want to see signs of it … but she couldn't understand why he was lying to her about this. If it wasn't Rinoa, then what else could it be …

"Nope. Nothing other than I'm sorry it bothered you. But on the upside, you'll probably never see her again. So one less thing to worry about." He slipped his hand into hers and tugged her back towards the door. "C'mon, let's get back inside and go to sleep. I'm freezing."

Fujin hoped she'd never see Rinoa again, and more than anything she hoped this was the first time she got it wrong about Seifer. But realistically, with the way everything in her life seemed to be going, Fujin supposed it was probably time to stop hoping for the best, and start preparing for the worst.
Martine definitely looked older, Cid convinced himself, as his eyes rubbered around the room to follow the Galbadian headmaster's pacing. Even in motion, Cid could spot signs of age on Martine's face—a few wrinkles furrowing deep around the younger man's viridescent eyes, gray hairs speckling his temples. He supposed that the idea of their world careening towards an apocalypse was enough to sprout a worried gray hair on anyone's head—he might look a decade older himself, too, if he didn't have an insider's perspective on this mess they were wrapped up in.

But having the advantage of foresight from Edea, Cid thought he actually faired pretty well in the aging department. All the heft and softness he'd accumulated through decades of indulging himself with plates of red meat (and glass upon glass of whiskey) actually made him look more youthful than poor, rigid Martine. Maybe even more youthful than Fury Caraway, too. No small feat, considering both men were almost nine years his junior.

How was it possible that someone who was always so fit could look so much older? That militaristic health regimen he followed was making him look more feeble than formidable, Cid mocked the man inside the safety of his own skull as he nursed his glass of brandy—clearly Caraway's choice of drink, not his own. He tensed irrationally when Martine jerked to a standstill at the window and relaxed again when he realized it was impossible his thoughts were witnessed. Even still, Cid kept careful watch as the epaulets on the larger man's broad shoulders rose and fell with the release of an annoyed sigh.

He always did have a terrible time masking his irritation; a trait from his younger years he that never outgrew.

Cid usually tried not to let himself think on Martine's younger years much. But sometimes when the man would make a movement or a gesture that mimed his younger self, it triggered a response that Cid couldn't fight—anxiety; a knotted stomach; a remembrance of failure. He was thankful it dulled over the years, but its phantom sharpness still pierced through the calm veneer he'd carefully cultivated. No matter how much time passed, Martine's mere presence in Cid's life only served as a reminder of the abject failure of losing Galbadia Garden, control of his future with Edea in tandem, and subsequently becoming a slave to the struggle of keeping Balamb and Galbadia on a collision course with what she'd prophesized.

The merging of Edea and Ultimecia was impossible to adjust to those first few years—she'd served as his guiding light and his confidant in this whole mess for so long. Cid wasn't sure how he could operate without her. It's not as if he had a play-by-play of the events that would set everything into motion; Edea saw most of the outcome but she didn't see every single detail—oh, the minutiae that no one romanticizes when talking of destiny and fates foretold. Cid often felt like he was shooting into the dark, and back then, every decision felt like it was of mortal consequence, and every failure felt like the beginning of the end of everything he'd been working for.

So much of his plan to get his cottage by the sea back, his wife back—his entire life back—came
down to instinct and the ability to control the world around him, including managing the relationship between SeeD and Galbadia. It was the whole reason he'd worked tirelessly with Fury Caraway to get the Galbadian government to subsidize Galbadia Garden. It was quite the undertaking, and Cid was hopeful that NORG and the other council members would reward him with a position leading the entire Garden System. Nothing would be more perfect—whatever the role each institution needed to play in this theater, Cid would be directing the show.

Imagine his surprise when NORG had the audacity to call a surprise council convening and parade G-Garden's hot-shot new leader right in front of his face: the one and only Cylas Martine. The blue-blooded darling of the Galbadian army. A young, handsome hero of the Great Sorceress War, still fresh with the scent of victorious campaigns in Centra.

Cid thought it was more of a stink, really. A thick, malodorous smog that settled over all of his well-laid plans.

It wasn't all that troublesome when, initially, the other members of the council nodded along emphatically in agreement with Martine's authoritative presentation about the future of SeeD. Cid was just reminded that the average person wasn't all that perceptive. Sure, the man had the presence of warrior and the likeness of a god, but Cid's experience managing Balamb Garden surely overshadowed that.

Furthermore, he and Caraway had a deal. Using SeeD resources to kill the man who made Caraway a widower was no small task—the courts had already jailed the lush, and SeeD took a risk when taking the law into its own hands … not to mention that breaking into D-District to get the job done wasn't exactly a walk in the park. Caraway certainly owed him very large a favor, and the well-revered Lieutenant throwing his support behind Galbadia Garden, and Cid's managing of it, was the payment Cid was due.

But when Fury Caraway joined in the emphatic nodding? Well, it took every ounce of resolve Cid had to stiffen the dumfounded slackness of his jaw and keep it from dropping to the table.

Cid struggled solemnly through a claustral rage as the conversation continued around him. He wracked his brain for an explanation while Martine's voice echoed distantly through the heat of indignance that filled his head. Why would Caraway go against him like this, and how could the Council and NORG deviate from the vision Cid worked up with that bastard Shumi, all those years ago? Hell, Martine's stance on preferring natural abilities over Guardian Forces and paramagic enhancement directly contradicted the curriculum Cid had in place in Balamb and Trabia. Martine was entirely wrong for the position.

There were so many horrific comments on the tip of his tongue—the awful secrets about each council member that he'd made a point to collect threatening to come out. What could they do, fire him? It'd never happen. He was too important to lose. But when his anger hit a plateau the voices around him rose a decibel or so higher, Cid pivoted. Anger unchecked was an enemy, but anger with a direction and a purpose was the best weapon he'd ever wield.

So instead of speaking all his rage, Cid listened instead. He listened and heard the heavy-handed talk of Martine's heroism in the Great War, and how his close ties to Galbadia's military—and their deep coffers—could potentially 'revolutionize' the way Garden trained their cadets. He listened and identified the warble of insecurity when Garden's future without sustainable funding was referenced, and if he listened closely enough, he thought he even heard hope of a promotion to General in Caraway's future. Everyone at the table was motivated by profit or personal gain—Cid included.

With only a vote—and an already decided vote at that—standing between him and abject failure, there was no time for negotiation. The was only room for compromise with himself. Not getting his
hands on Galbadia Garden was a giant blow to his ego, but Cid didn't want to put his autonomy with Balamb and Trabia at risk. The last thing he needed was some silver-spooned ingrate rolling out a fucking five-year plan and taking over the entire Garden System, and everything Cid fought to earn.

At a glance, some might say that Cid Kramer was outmatched by Martine with this fight. After all, Cid was merely a portly Headmaster with no valor or glory trailing him. When measuring their obvious qualities side by side, Cid virtually had nothing to offer. He certainly didn't have a pedigree, medals to flash, or battle wounds to tell stretched truths about.

But when it came to money and the fear of not having it, Cid was more than well versed. So much of the man Cid became was shaped by his lack of money and his adaptation to it over the years—he was sure he could turn that unparalleled experience and his resourcefulness outward. When Martine brought his revolution before the Garden System council, Cid vetoed it mercilessly, and he made it All. About. Money.

He could see the gears in NORG's brain twisting predictably as he soaked in the idea of an overhaul costing billions of dollars. He implored NORG to make Galbadia a pilot program before rolling it out Garden-wide. His grand plan was to push moderate change in the face of a bold revolution. He played to his fellow council members basest fears—feckless financial ruin.

Cid won the game in the end, much to Martine's chagrin. The committee deemed that Garden would be comprised of three independent institutions for the foreseeable future—Galbadia prime for Martine's experimentation, and Balamb and Trabia safely nestled in the old ways. Cid would serve as acting Headmaster of Trabia until a fitting leader was found, while also heading the search committee in tandem. Pity that no one ever seemed to measure up to his high standards.

Even though Galbadia Garden wasn't in Cid's grasp, at least his footing in Balamb and Trabia was secure and a Garden System didn't exist for anyone to control.

Just because it was successful doesn't mean it wasn't stressful—those 90 minutes of Cid's life were some of the most stressful fucking minutes he'd ever endured. He swore to never let this thing get that out-of-hand again. Not that he had any control over it to begin with … or that he had control of anything, really. Should he have been so worried about the outcome? Wasn't it already fated, anyway?

"At what point should we consider this insulting?" Martine seethed as he stormed to the bar cart with heavy strides and rifled through the liquor that Cid already helped himself to. Luckily Martine didn't seem to notice his companion was lost in thought. "Called on at a late hour, harassed by those fucking morons at the gate—" he paused his grumbling briefly to follow Cid's lead and fill a small glass—"and then to make us wait."

"Fury's commanding an army. He has more important things to than be on time for us." Cid ratcheted down the smile that was attempting to sneak to his lips as he watched the man bristle at the thought of Caraway's time being more important than his own—the alpha male ego was such a fragile thing.

"He could've at least left us a decent whiskey," Martine grumbled as he plugged the bottle. "I thought he would've moved past this brandy stage by now."

"Since when has Caraway moved past anything?" Cid asked honestly, his eyes following the man as he continued to walk the perimeter with the glass already pressed to his lips.

"Good point," the Galbadian conceded as he twisted the butt of the glass against his palm. "But he might move on if people stopped encouraging him. I mean, someone needs to put a stop to this, right? This is a coup d' etat. It's … it's madness." The tone intended to spark debate, but Cid let the words filter through one ear and out the other. Now was not the time to start an argument—there
were more important things at hand.

"Nobody's calling it that—"

"Because it sounds even crazier when you say it out loud!" Martine spun around and motioned wildly with his glass, spilling a few drops of Caraway's fine brandy on the hardwood floor. The well-worn boards creaked under his feet, leaving Cid imagining the sheer number of times Caraway must have traced that very same path under the duress of command, or at the news of his dead wife. What was it like, he wondered, as Martine began to shake his head disapprovingly along with his pacing, to know for a fact he'd never see her again? The thought of understanding haunted him.

"Come on Kramer, where's that irritating sensibility you're always crushing everyone's soul with? I mean … treason? And as if that's not enough, assassinating a sorceress—your wife," Martine paused for emphasis there before taking a swig of his drink again. "It won't exactly be a walk in the park. What a time for you to grow a set of balls."

"Cylas, stress is no excuse to lose your civility," Cid snapped, unnerved momentarily by Martine's flagrant roasting of him. He'd always suspected that was what the younger man thought of him: meek, ball-less old Cid Kramer. "And thank you for the insight. Rest assured I'm well aware of the personal toll. Though I thought you, of all people, would know better than to mention it."

Martine bristled as he considered a response. The muscles on his cheek twitched when a sharp reply got stuck in his throat and he struggled to mask the anger that surfaced with a reference to personal tolls and past version of himself.

So, at least something about the rumors held a semblance of truth …

Watching the hulking, god-like frame of Martine, swimming in remembrance of tragedy in that ostentatious gilded blue coat didn't elicit any pity from Cid Kramer, though—even if the stories were true. After suffering through years of the man's arrogance, it was a welcome sight to find him looking a little gaunt and gray, haunted by ghosts of the past as he shuffled his feet along the perimeter of Fury Caraway's library and worked up a shameful, nervous sweat.

Cid had no clue what specific nerve he'd struck: memories of a dead family, or of a boyhood trauma? It could've been anything, honestly. There were so many mysteries surrounding Martine's role in the war, and it's not as if they'd ever been close and traded gossip over beer. The only truth Cid knew was that the man came back from the Sorceress War utterly transformed—the Headmaster Martine he knew now striking such a stark contrast to the adolescent Cylas Martine that Cid taught at the prep school in Esthar all those years ago—long before that fated Garden Council meeting.

The memory was still vivid in his mind, and still made his chest pinch with anxiety. Small-town Cid—fresh out of college and off to his first teaching gig—got lost on the Big City's new transportation system and wound up running 30 minutes late. There were too many stops, so many nauseatingly bright colors—it was a lot of overstimulation for someone who used to be a bundle of nerves.

When he finally reached campus, he raced to his classroom and arrived panting, with mussed hair and sweat stains under his arms. He frantically jiggled the locked handle of the classroom door, eliciting the arrival of a blond beast of a boy who merely smirked at him smugly through the glass. Professors here always locked the door if someone's late, he quipped. You understand sir, that we need to hold you to the same standard; we'd lose respect for you if we didn't, sir. The tone was earnest, but his shit-eating grin caused a rolling wave of laughter from the other students. Cid didn't bother telling the tale of how he'd gotten lost on the much-too-foreign Estharian transportation system—he'd encountered enough arrogant assholes in his time to know that he was being made a fool.
Fetching a senior-level administrator to let him into his own classroom was an embarrassing way to start his first day of teaching, and it made for an even rougher semester with the students in his class. Inevitably, Martine’s antics only continued, and the other kids eagerly encouraged him and followed suit.

There wasn’t even much Cid could do to discipline Cylas Martine. There wasn’t a great number of years between them, so Cid’s seniority didn’t exactly earn him much respect. Aside from that, the money his family brought in to the school made Cylas beyond reproach. Cid could only sit back, take the ridicule, and only *fantasize* about taking a swing at the little shit and putting a permanent crook in the boy’s pretty, aristocratic nose.

It was a hellish time in Cid’s life that he didn’t like to reflect on much—*everything before Edea was a wash*. Back then he’d spend his days getting emasculated by *children*, and would go home to his dingy studio apartment, tired and lonely, and do nothing but stare at the static on the television screen and wonder if all his uphill clawing for a place in the affluent world was worth it.

He was practically giddy when he heard that 18-year-old Cylas decided to return to Galbadia before the year was out to nobly follow in his father’s footsteps and enlist in the military. And when news of the Great War came not too many years later? Martine was the first thing Cid thought about, and he looked back on the boy’s enlistment fondly. *Maybe there would be no need to exact vengeance—fate would likely do that for him.*

Unfortunately, Martine survived the war, but Cid heard that he’d had a tough time of it and that gave him some comfort. Fury told him once that Cylas was a difficult cadet until the then-Major Caraway took him under his wing. From there he rose up in the ranks quickly, and during the war he was assigned to highly classified missions, saw dark things, and was forced to make difficult choices. Rumor had it that the man’s wife and child languished in a bombing of a Galbadian satellite base in Centra after it fell into enemy hands, and that Martine had given the order *himself*. Crueler critics (who Cid admittedly gravitated towards) said that Martine stepped outside of his marriage long before the bombing, and that he made the decision *easily*—the stories ran that gamut.

Cid, for his part, hadn’t heard a thing about Martine between that year in Esthar and the day the man showed up to claim the helm of Galbadia Garden. On the surface, it didn’t seem like the stories could be true. Martine was the picture of ambition and when he was selected to lead G-Garden and oversee its coordination with the Galbadian Government. But when Cid looked deeper … well, he understood what it felt like to lack something you wanted so desperately, and he also understood more than anyone what it was like to *love*. And when he looked at Martine, he *swore* he could sense a close cousin of the hurt that rested within his own chest over Edea.

*That lingering pain—that aching lack—being in your heart forever?* Cid hoped all the rumors surrounding his counterpart were true. *What perfect vengeance.*

"That was out of line. I … I shouldn't have said it," Martine conceded with great difficulty. "But even I'll admit that you're a smart man Cid. I'd do almost anything Caraway asks, but this is going too far. We should talk some sense into him; try to persuade him to follow appropriate channels."

"There's no time for that." A baritone voice echoed behind them, and Cid twisted in his chair to find that Fury had finally shown up. "There's too much bureaucracy to cut through, and by the time the senators agree to take action, the sorceress will be readying the second Lunar Cry." He continued to walk towards Martine as he spoke, loosening his cufflinks and necktie as he made the journey. "Don't tell me, old friend, that the years made you forget just how quickly these things unfold."

"No. But I'm not sure it should be up to the three of us to decide, if the fate of the free world's at stake," Martine attempted to speak confidently, though it was obvious he regretted being caught
questioning the man who'd practically handed him the life he lived now. "Especially since one of us apparently can't even read a watch."

"Touché," Fury chuckled as he shrugged off his coat, the labored motion signaling that he'd had a long day already, and that he knew Cid and Cylas were about to make it even longer. "I'd like to say I have an official excuse, but truth be told my daughter's been putting me through the wringer lately. She's gotten even more unruly since she met that cadet of yours, Kramer. Filling her head with notions of freedom and rebellion," Caraway grumbled as he plopped down in his chair. "Which she's choosing to exercise by dating an even more terrible boy than the last one."

"I'll admit that I'm not proud of how that happened. But once she was involved, the scope of the mission had to adjust." Cid politely folded his hands in his lap and leaned back in his chair. "She was always safe. The boy was professional and kept his distance."

"Boy?" Caraway scoffed as he motioned for Martine to fetch him a drink. Apparently, they all understood that being a little buzzed was the only way to get through this. "I don't know. Over six feet tall. Some scruff on his face. He looked like a man to me, Kramer. A man you sicked on my child."

"'Sicked' on her?" Cid shook his head doubtfully and locked his eyes with Caraway's as his lips curled into a small smirk. "Being a father even gives pragmatic men like you a blind spot, eh? Remind me to never show you the reports. Your little girl isn't so—"

"Uh …let's just skip the small talk," Cylas interrupted, knowing there was nothing but disaster on the other end of that sentence. From the corner of his eye, Cid saw their companion's hand slowly drop a drink beside Fury and pause for a moment, as if he anticipated the General would launch across his desk and murder his fellow Headmaster. From the look on Fury's face, Cid couldn't say whether Martine was right or not.

But when Caraway didn't make any movement, and Cid still had a pulse, Martine breathed a sigh of relief and edged the glass closer to the General with the tip of his finger. When it was reluctantly accepted, Martine finally moved to sit beside Cid.

"Don't be a fucking asshole, Kramer," Martine whispered through his teeth as he settled into the empty chair. The three of them sat in an awkward silence for a few moments as Fury took a few swigs from his glass to catch up with them. At a loss for what to do next, Martine immediately transitioned the conversation to some common ground—the assassination of Edea.

"So … If we're doing this—and again, I just have to stress how not on-board with this I am," he looked back and forth between them, making eye-contact with them both to emphasize his objection. "But if we are doing this, I need more time to work with my sharpshooter."

"How's he doing?" Cid asked, his eyes still fixed on Caraway, who he'd learned to never take his eye off after that entire Galbadia Garden debacle—if he got stabbed in the back twice, it'd be his own fault.

"Yes. Irvine Kinneas. He's … well, you were right about him all along, Kramer. He's got a good eye. It'd be quick. Painless." Martine struggled to be delicate, and Cid's concentration on Caraway broke. Even though Edea insisted things would work out … on the slim chance that they weren't … he wouldn't want her to feel anything. "He's the best, but I just need a few more months to see if I can't work the nerves out of him."

"That's actually why I wanted to see you both tonight. Some more intel came through, and we finally have a timeline. The sorceress' delegation is preparing for a visit in the late spring—a little less than
eight months from now," Caraway cleared his throat and relaxed in his chair. "This *is* happening, so get your sharpshooter ready, Cylas. There's no room for error in any capacity."

"Eight months …" Cid whispered, his voice cracking a little despite his best effort to appear unfazed. "Alright … well, I'll work on getting a SeeD team together."

"Wouldn't it be better to use Galbadia Garden's forces? Kinneas knows them. Trusts them," Martine asked, leaning forward on his knees and lacing his fingers together. "Plus, I think prepping a team is a lot to ask of you, Kramer. Under the circumstances."

"No, no. I'll manage." Cid crossed his arms and shook his head. "If Kinneas misses there needs to be a team capable of taking the sorceress down."

"I'm with Kramer. Sending SeeD in without paramagic or Guardian Forces is like bringing a knife to a gun fight," Caraway stated plainly as he riffl ed through his desk and pulled out a box of cigars. He offered one to Cid and Cylas, who both declined. He shrugged at their refusal before lighting a cigar for himself and delving back into the conversation. "Speaking of guns and knives, how's it going with your gunblader? The one I haven't had the pleasure of meeting yet?"

"He's ready," Cid said distantly as he swirled the liquid in his glass and cast his gaze downward. There was no need for them to know that Squall Leonhart hadn't passed his SeeD exams yet, or any need for them to know that the only person truly qualified to be on the team was the young instructor Quistis Trepe. All of that could be sorted out later, when it was too late for either Martine or Caraway to do anything about it. "It's just a matter of finalizing the others. We have a lot of options."

"Is it still the plan to send them in blind?" Martine queried, and Cid recognized the precursor of an opinion along with it. A thorn in Cid's side until the very end. "Because I'd like to tell my man in advance."

"You know the protocol," Fury admonished, though it came without flair or even a degree of aggression—obeying the chain of command was so deeply ingrained in Martine that it wasn't necessary. He nodded and bit his tongue as if he wholly understood how idiotic his own question had been. Now, if *Cid* had tried to tell him that advancing details on a mission of this gravity was against every rule in their joint rulebook? *Well, Martine probably would've proposed rewriting the whole damn thing.* "And I've already started making moves, so for purely selfish reasons, I'd rather my fate not be attached to whether or not a young SeeD can keep his mouth shut. A general who commits treason is pretty likely to lose his head if he's caught."

"Treason," Martine repeated before biting his lower lip, as the gravity of their situation sank in. Despite all of his bad qualities, Martine was, at the very least, a loyal man. The only thing that trumped his love of country was his allegiance to General Caraway. Overthrowing the president and seizing control of the government was a difficult pill to swallow. If any of the lore surrounding his time in the war was true, the man had already lost so much keeping Galbadia intact.

"Treason from one angle, saving the republic from another," Caraway shrugged in an uncharacteristically cavalier fashion. "I used to see the world in black and white, but the older I get and the more I see … well, it's just a hell of a lot of gray." He emptied his glass and stared at the remnant drops gathered at the bottom, and Martine fell deeper into silence.

In that calm moment on the precipice of change, some walled off part of Cid's heart tinged with sadness at the possibility of what would happen to everyone else in the days to come. To Caraway and Martine. To the kids back in Balamb Garden, or to Caraway's young daughter. But like much of Cid's empathy for anyone but Edea, the concern was fleeting.
The next years of Cid's life would probably be the worst he ever endured—there'd be stress, second-guessing, mistakes; the world itself would be on the brink of destruction and might even pass the threshold. He had no fucking idea what the future truly held. The only thing he was certain of was that Edea would return to him, one way or another. They'd either be together again by the sea, together in another life … or they'd all be nothing but dust on a barren planet.

"So … the end is finally near," Cid said the sentence aloud unintentionally and his companions nodded in solemn reply. Both mistook his disbelief that the wait was finally over for the sadness of a man who was about to lose everything he held dear.
Chapter Summary

The great Cid Kramer, the man responsible for her entire universe—Balamb, SeeD, even her friendships—knew all of his pushing was no match for Seifer’s pull. Cid might’ve created them, but Seifer was a planet, and the gravity that he spun out kept her in his orbit. Kramer couldn’t compete with that.

Three months later …

The cafeteria was buzzing today, but that the white noise of activity never bothered her, one way or another. If anything, the chaotic sound helped her focus—more than likely another side-effect of Garden’s training. A battle was loud, and you’d need to be able to think through the sound to survive. Balamb Garden always had music filtering through every room in the building, conditioning them without even realizing it.

Shrugging and biting her cheek, she thumbed through the paperwork in front of her and proofed her own short-hand for errors. Reading through the droll text was about as exciting as writing it the first time, and only slightly less exciting than living it the time before that. But she didn’t have much of a right to complain—she’d done this to herself.

The coffee she’d bought earlier had gone cold, but she snagged it off the table took a swig anyway. Something had to keep her awake and stave off the boredom. Grimacing as the bitter tang spread across her tongue she continued working on her report.

3 blue bite bugs killed. Dropped 2 potions—unclear if method of defeat played a factor in items dropped. No injuries incurred. One additional bite bug with red wing killed. No items dropped bt could potentially be a new mutation. 4 bite bugs total—a 50% decrease from the previous day. Delivered new specimen to Dr. Kadowaki’s lab for preservation and study …

Ugh … this is the worst.

Her head surged, and Fujin pressed her fingertips to her temple in a futile attempt to settle Pandemona down. It’d become commonplace for the GF’s energy to roll around languidly in there, readjusting within her as a slumbering cat might laze and stretch on a sunlight-flooded veranda. Fujin was glad she was getting comfortable and all, but since her houseguest played a pivotal role in her near untimely demise over the summer, she thought she might at least get a chance to ask the Guardian Force a few questions. It was maddening to know that Pandemona was holed up inside of her, refusing to talk. She wouldn’t come when summoned—nothing new there, really—and with a nudging command would only purr, stare back at her mind’s eye, roll over, and drift away to sleep again.

It was fine, in the grand scheme of things. Fujin wasn’t in any pain lately and hadn’t been since that episode a few months back. She was alive, and she and Seifer and Raijin were together again, and things were relatively normal. She should be happy with that, all things considered.

So then why in the hell did she miss hearing the wind?
It was crazy to so desperately miss something that played a part in nearly killing her, and Fujin fully understood that. But it left a strange void in her, all the same. Fujin thought about it all the time: on patrol in the Balamb woods, when she was lecturing students, and whenever she was with Seifer and Raijin and their banter provided her enough space to slip away into the confines of her own mind.

She’d never had a mother, so it took a few weeks for Fujin to realize that what she was really missing was the idea of finally having her, and fear that what happened in Deling meant she’d never hear her voice again. For all the pains that came with Pandemona’s blustering, the raging wind between Fujin’s ears was bearable because it meant that, somehow, there was a bond between them.

She drew her hand away from her face, and instead pressed her fingertips to the silver band on her hand, twisting the ring in a circle to feel the blue stones gliding against her skin. With each raised bump, she wondered what would happen—really—if she took it off: would Pandemona and her mother return, or would Sorceress Edea … or Ultimecia … find her?

Compelled by some force outside of reason, Fujin slid the ring towards the tip of her finger for a moment, thinking it was possible that she’d misinterpreted what Pandemona told her, or at the very least that she should do the opposite of it since the unexpected seemed to be the theme of her life lately. Besides, she wasn’t someone who placed much value in vagueness; wouldn’t it be better to know, now, what this thing was? Who was she to deny an opportunity for a controlled experiment? After all, Kadowaki brought her back from the brink once before, and right now she was at least safe within the walls of Balamb Garden with all of SeeD at her back, and Raijin and Seifer at her side.

Seifer … if something went wrong, she couldn’t put him through all that again. Fujin swiftly shoved the band back in place.

She still hadn’t told Seifer about the ring and Pandemona’s warning about taking it off, and she rationalized it by classifying it as more of an omission than a lie. If he came up to her one day and specifically asked if the ring on her hand cast some sort’ve magical veil that kept her safe, then sure—Fujin would tell him immediately: Funny you mention that, Seif—this ring here does exactly that. There’d been a few moments when she’d almost come clean, but Pandemona’s warning against telling anyone about the bewitched bauble echoed through the bones of her skull whenever the thought traveled closer to her lips. It was as if the slumbering Guardian Force jolted awake only to remind Fujin of danger.

It was just as well, she supposed. It wasn’t like he was being honest with her about everything, either. And on top of that, Seifer was worried enough with Fujin as an active member of SeeD; there wasn’t any need to add to the burden.

Fujin had essentially been on fully active SeeD duty ever since they returned from their meeting in Dollet with Rinoa Heartilly a few months back. She was surprised that Cid wanted her in the field so soon. Sure, Fujin had been itching to get her training privileges back, but that didn’t mean that there weren’t still some real concerns—namely the fact that there was a benevolent sorceress in her head and another malicious sorceress wanted it, or her, or some mixture of the two.

Maybe you should just go on monster patrol for a while. Missions, Seifer pointed out the day the Headmaster’s office summoned her for a briefing on an upcoming operation especially what you’re trained for, require concentration, reliability, and stamina; you can’t guarantee any of those right now. He’d kissed her forehead to soften the blow. You’re not ready.

A few short months ago Fujin would’ve called that an insult, but after gassing out in Dollet and—of course—the disastrous conclusion she’d led them to in Deling, it seemed like an astute assessment.
... Deling ... It made her throat feel tight and dry to even think about it. *She still hadn’t forgiven herself for that yet.*

The pragmatic parts of her brain understood that there was nothing she could've done to stop that day, but in the pit of her stomach she still felt responsible for the entire timeline of events that led them there; from making the choice to keep her symptoms of the wind secret, to getting them involved in the entire thing—*maybe even hailing all the way back to the day she was born to an apparent sorceress.* It was impossible to determine where the fault began, really … all Fujin knew was that she felt like it was solely hers.

Regardless of her own feelings on the Deling mission, Cid was pleased with how quickly and neatly she’d tied up the Rinoa Heartilly issue and pitched the idea of sending Fujin on a high-paying covert operation in Centra as a “reward” (Cid barely tried to hide the fact that it was more of a way to rub salt in Seifer’s wounded pride). Along with it he made the rare offer of a permanent mission partner in Raijin. Despite Cid’s initial stance on Raijin not starting his appointment until the following year to keep a low profile, their bronze friend was inducted into SeeD immediately after his successful solo clean-up mission in Deling. There was a small ceremony in Cid’s office, with Seifer and Fujin serving as the only witnesses to his life’s crowning achievement. Raijin wouldn’t have had it any other way—Fujin and Seifer were all he cared about. Fujin was just thankful that she wouldn’t have to deal with the fallout of Seifer having to stand on the periphery of a crowded room, brimming with shame and resentment as she pinned the stripes on Raijin’s uniform. The privacy at least softened the blow.

*You’re not the sort of SeeD I like to start out small with,* Cid explained as he tucked the details of the mission she’d refused away in his desk. *You have a lot of skill and talent. I know there’s a factor of the unknown with your health, but until we sort out what’s going on, you’ll be living with that for the foreseeable future. It might be a good idea to truly learn how to *live* with it.*

Sir, I’d be putting other people at risk. NOT RELIABLE … I … I can’t guarantee that I’m ready. Seifer’s words permeated her thoughts, spilling from her mouth in reworked, anxious sentences. *I’d like to be put on patrol here on the continent.*

Patrol, eh? *Is that Almasy’s idea?* The headmaster paused and leaned onto the desk with his elbows to draw himself closer. He stared her squarely in the eye and looked as if he was readying some strong words, but thought better of it, and took a measured breath instead. The great Cid Kramer, the man responsible for her entire universe—Balamb, SeeD, even her friendships—knew all of his pushing was no match for Seifer’s pull. Cid might’ve created them, but Seifer was a *planet,* and the gravity that he spun out kept her in his orbit. Kramer couldn’t compete with that.

Alright, patrol it is then. *But know that I’ll never give you this sort’ve opportunity again.* He gave her a dismissive scan before waving her off towards the door and turning his attention back to the paperwork on his desk. *You can report to Xu at the Directory tomorrow morning. We’re short-handed on teaching assistants, so you’ll be joining a classroom as well—she’ll have the details for you then.*

*Thank you, Sir.* Fujin nodded in understanding at the thinly veiled threat to her career and stood from her chair.

*Oh, and tell Kazeno to report with you.* Cid added and Fujin’s eye snapped back to his.

*Headmaster, Raijin’s overqualified. He deserves more —*

*I told you he was a permanent team member. Wherever you go, he goes.* Unphased by her alarm, Cid moved to thumb through a stack of paperwork on his desk. *Choices have consequences.*
“Heya Fuu-sama!” Raijin bounded up to her table and sat down across from her. Whatever slop he was eating for breakfast somehow spilled and migrated its way from his tray to the stack of papers she’d bee judiciously buttoning up.

“COME ON. JUST FINISHED THIS REPORT … The only thing more boring than writing it once is rewriting it.” It came out a little more snipey than she’d intended, and it wasn’t lost on her bronze friend.

“Geez, sor-ry. It was a mistake, ya know.” He dabbed his napkin on what Fujin could only assume was maple syrup, given the massive stack of buttery pancakes on his tray. “Cid could use a little more sweetenin’ these days anyway.” He chuckled at his own joke and flashed her a toothy grin, but Fujin was less than amused.

“I’ll let you tell him that,” she grumbled as she wiped the spot with her own hand. “Hyne, these are supposed to be spotless, Raijin. Error proof. They go in the permanent record.”

“Geez, I’ll re-write ‘em. Chill out a little.” His sticky fingers pulled the papers out from under her hand, and he ignored her exasperated sigh as he shuffled them into a haphazard stack and laid them in the seat beside him. “Why don’t you go get some food? I think you’re hangry, ya know.”

“ALREADY ATE,” Fujin grumbled through her teeth.

“Well, maybe ya need to grab some more protein or somethin’. Didn’t seem to help much.”

“I can’t with you today,” she slapped her palm to her forehead and sighed. “SPENDING TOO MUCH TIME TOGETHER.”

“Aww, really?” He stretched his arm in front of her to stab the tines of his fork into a hash brown left on her plate. “I was just thinkin’ I was gonna miss ya while I’m out on patrol today,” he winked as he popped the bit of potato into his mouth. “Can’t ya just go to Kadowaki and get a note? Tell her you’re sick or somethin’.”

“C’monnnnnnnnnnn,” he moaned as he spread a hand across the back of her neck and shook her lightly. “Ya can too. Seifer says ya don’t even hafta do much, so they can’t need ya that bad. I can’t go out there by myself one more time. Just bite bug, after bite bug, after—”

“SEIFER SAID WHAT?” She pressed him again, and Raijin snapped out of his temporary existential crisis to reach for a foil-wrapped breakfast sandwich on his plate.

“Oh, ya—he’s not gonna make it. He wanted to know if you’d bring this to him.” He ran a hand over his face and sighed.

Fujin would like to say he was being dramatic, but it was a little like traveling back in time and reliving the exact same day over and over again. It was sad when the most interesting thing about a SeeD report was a potential new bite bug species.

“SEIFER?” She pressed him again, and Raijin snapped out of his temporary existential crisis to reach for a foil-wrapped breakfast sandwich on his plate.

“Oh, ya—he’s not gonna make it. He wanted to know if you’d bring this to him.”
says ‘sorry he can’t make it and he won’t do it again,’” he put air-quotes around what must have been Seifer’s words, “Or whatever.”

“REASON?” Raijin paused mid-bite and tried to work out whether or not her tone meant he’d just gotten his friend in trouble somehow.

“How should I know? I heard him crawl in early this morning, so he must’ve been at your place last night I’m guessin’ … ” He awkwardly began shoveling food in his mouth again to make the between-the-lines reality of that statement easier to swallow. Poor Raijin didn’t even have the luxury of getting his own SeeD apartment yet—a late graduation meant the rooms were booked up, which meant he still had to be an eyewitness to all of Seifer’s late-night comings and goings between Fujin’s room and their own. “I didn’t really talk to him much. He was on the phone. He just asked me to have ya bring him breakfast.”

“The phone again …” Her face scrunched in confusion as she tried to make sense of it. “Who the hell is he talking to before 8 a.m.?”

“I dunno. Anyone,” Raijin suggested with a casual shrug.

“EVERYONE SEIFER KNOWS, HERE.” Fujin splayed her fingers out along the smooth tabletop to emphasize their location.

“… Naaaah, there’s plenty of other people he could call.” His lips pulled into a momentary disapproving frown when he lifted his coffee cup to his lips and felt its new lightness.

“GIRLS, MAYBE.” Fujin concurred with an irritated huff.

“Wha? Oh, Oh, ya right,” Raijin sputtered sarcastically between a few more mouthfuls of pancakes, practically finishing off the full-plate in those few short minutes. “I can’t even get him to train with me lately because the two of ya are …” He paused and rolled his eyes as his hand disappeared to shuffle with the papers that he’d just stolen from Fujin. “Trust me, he ain’t got the time for that.”

“He’d find time if he wanted to.” Fujin sighed, twisting her mug in her hands and staring off towards the cafeteria entrance; habitually keeping watch for Seifer despite knowing he wasn’t coming.

“Things … OK with you guys?” Raijin asked the question because he was her loyal friend, and not because he really wanted to talk about any of it. The three of them already set an unhealthy precedent of ignoring that Seifer and Fujin were a pair now.

“He’s being secretive. Or distant, maybe. I don’t know,” she shrugged, and fixed her gaze on the lukewarm liquid in her coffee cup. “It’s probably nothing.”

Raijin grew quiet on his side of the table, cautiously gathering Fujin’s stack of papers up from the chair he’d moved them to as he ruminated on what to say next. He took a moment to wipe the sticky syrup he’d spilled on the otherwise neat pages with the edge of his hand—a sad attempt at fixing the problem he’d created—cleared his throat, and paused a moment longer before trying to ease her worry.

“Listen, everyone’s got secrets,” he admitted, “but I know Seif, and I know he’d never do that to ya.” He lightly shoved her shoulder to force her attention to him. “So whatever it is you’re pickin’ up on, it can’t be that.” Fujin nodded and gave him a wry smile.

“It’s not like ya to worry about stuff like that,” he observed as he glanced at the watch on his arm. Noting the time, he jerked his head at the exit to signal they both needed to head out. “I think this whole dynamic is messin’ with ya both.” Raijin stood up, and Fujin stood along with him,
relinquishing the remaining papers she’d been keeping far away from his messy breakfast.

“‘You’re probably right,’” she agreed, knowing that Raijin truly was right. Both of them knew Seifer better than he knew himself, and as a spectator in Seifer’s life for so many years, there’s no way she’d miss the signs of him straying. She knew exactly what that looked like. Seifer feeling emasculated because she was assisting in a class he was taking, and being weird about it as a result? That sounded more realistic. Still not entirely the root of whatever was going on … but at least more realistic.

“I don’t envy ya,” Raijin chuckled as he stuffed the papers into his bag, and then stacked both of their trays together before strolling towards the exit with Fujin in tow. “I don’t know which of us he’d rather hafta go through this with.”

“When Cid said there were consequences, he wasn’t kidding,” she sighed. “At least the semester’s almost over, and then everything can get back to normal. Relatively normal, anyway.” An agreeable murmur emitted from Raijin as they made their way down the corridor. Things wouldn’t truly be normal for them until Pandemona retracted her claws.

“Well, I’ll get this paperwork taken care of later. I’m headin’ to the garage now and gettin’ a move on. Those bite bugs won’t kill themselves, ya know.” He slung his back over his shoulder and paused to look at her again in earnest. “Are ya alright?”

“FINE.” If that concentrated, concerned look of his kept boring into her she might let more feelings loose, so she attempted a smile. “EVERYTHING FINE. JUST AN OFF DAY.”

“Still, do ya want me to stop and give Seif a kick in the ass?”

“ALWAYS.” She rolled her eyes at Seifer’s inability to be punctual for anything, and Raijin let out a deep laugh.

“One ass-kickin’ comin’ up. See ya in the DC office later.” Fujin nodded, and Raijin signed-off with a mock-salute before turning to greet the torture of his mundane day.

A mundane day that was entirely her fault.

As she made her way towards the second-floor classroom, Fujin was grateful that Raijin didn’t seem to hold his plight against her. He had an enviable, graceful way of accepting the hand he was dealt and didn’t wallow in anger or self-pity—he was too busy caring about everyone else.

Seifer, on the other hand, was having a harder time with acceptance. He felt like they’d been deceived and betrayed, and Fujin could empathize with that—even though she wasn’t sure she agreed with him fully.

All three members of the Posse were altered by the events of the summer, but Seifer seemed to be grappling with it on a deeper, philosophical level. Which, come to think of it, wasn’t all that surprising. Seifer assessed everything through the lens of his own world-view—why should this be any different? In a few short months, his criticism of Cid Kramer as a hypocrite was forever sharpened, and he’d developed a deep disdain for SeeD’s core mission—possibly a permanent one.

When Fujin reached the classroom with a mere five minutes to spare, and Seifer was nowhere to be seen, she settled against the wall and waited, mentally chiding his tardiness. It wasn’t unlike Seifer to take issue with all the formalities and bureaucracy of SeeD, but this utter defiance of Garden norms — being late for class, backtalking to instructors — was taking things to a whole new level. Fujin didn’t even know that an exceptional cadet like Seifer could physically act like this without short-
circuiting. The basics were *routine* for them—a reflex; trained into them day in and day out. *Was he purposefully trying to reprogram himself and undo everything they’d worked for before even getting a chance to retake the exam?*

To make matters worse, Raijin’s SeeD induction wasn’t exactly easy on Seifer. After the pitiful ceremony in Cid’s office, Seifer did a good job masking his jealousy and even suggested the three of them hit up the pub in Balamb afterward to celebrate. But he was pensive the whole night; he chimed in occasionally when Raijin and Fujin talked about what their futures in SeeD might look like, but he didn’t engage in his normal impassioned way. That intensity— *that fire* —that came over him when he dreamed about the future was missing … *like he wasn’t sure that he’d get to be a part of it.*

It was hard for him to feel like the other in their trio. Fujin and Raijin experienced otherness in the Posse in different ways over the years—mainly along the gender divide: Fujin being excluded because she wasn’t one of the guys, and Raijin being excluded because Seifer didn’t want to sleep with him (and vice versa). But Seifer … he was always the leader: the rubric for what his two friends wanted to be a part of.

Regardless of all that, Seifer’s aggravation with Garden and envy of SeeD was making him nearly impossible to manage. Inside of the classroom, outside of the classroom… he was a bit of a loose cannon lately. *Definitely hard to keep tabs on …*

“Hey, *watch it,* you little shithead.”

*Speak of the devil …*

Seifer appeared at the end of the corridor; his head a foot above the crowd and his white coat marking a stark contrast to the other cadets clad in their dreary gray— *and for the record, institutionally appropriate* —SeeD uniforms. He’d been rounding the corner when a poor junior classman made the unfortunate mistake of taking an uninformed backward step and colliding into Seifer’s chest. The scrawny little kid cowered as Seifer glowered down at him.

“S-Sorry man. I wasn’t paying attention,” the boy stuttered and scrambled to create a few steps of much-needed distance.

“You *weren’t paying attention* ?” Seifer mocked as he slowly continued his walk towards Fujin. “You don’t pay attention out in the field and BOOM,” he clapped the back of his hand against his palm. “One day you’re just dead weight everyone else has to carry. You may as well save everyone the trouble and jump into a body bag right now.” The boy blanched and Seifer smirked as he marched forward into the crowd, parting the bodies from his path with his wide stride and broad shoulders.

“MEAN.” Fujin shook her head in disapproval as he approached her. “TRAUMATIZE.” Seifer chuckled and only shrugged.

“What? It’s true. Eagle-eyes over there will thank me someday,” he palmed her elbow and gave it a light squeeze when he finally reached her. “Sorry about breakfast. I had some stuff to take care of.” Fujin quirked an eyebrow, but Seifer either pretended not to notice, or didn’t care. “What’d I miss?”

“RAIJIN. SULKING ABOUT PATROL. NOTHING NEW.” She shrugged, keeping her eyes fixed on his. Seifer pivoted to lean against the wall beside her. He bent down to attempt to kiss her, but Fujin held up the foil-wrapped sandwich between them.

“Not here. Class is about to start,” she admonished, and he smirked as he tugged the sandwich from her hand.
“Raijin said you were on the phone.” She tried not to let it sound like an accusation.

“Oh …. yeah. I had to call the registrar. It was the stupidest thing,” he peeled the foil back with deft fingers as he offered an explanation. “They had me on the roster for 201, and they kept leaving messages telling me I was missing class. I had to call and tell ’em I was in 301, again, before I flunked something I wasn’t even taking,” he paused to take a bite, and chewing and swallowing before finishing his story. “No big deal. It’s all sorted out now.”

“Big enough of a deal for you to bail on us.” She may as well permanently affix her eyebrow in this arched position—she was consistently quizzical about Seifer’s whereabouts lately. This wasn’t the first time he’d been late or ducked out early on something to vaguely ‘run errands’ or ‘take care of some stuff.’

“What, you mad I didn’t bring you breakfast this morning?” He snaked his arm around her waist and tugged her farther down the corridor to hide at the more secluded end of the hall. He positioned her back against an emergency exit and shielded her from prying eyes. “I guess that’s fair. I kept you up late.”

“STOP … You’re not as cute as you think you are,” she chided, but he settled his shoulder against the wall and pulled her closer anyway. He chuckled and leaned towards her, his lips just a slight lean away from hers.

“ Really?” He bit his approaching lower lip for a second as he stared into her eyes. “Because my tiny, adorable girlfriend’s red face kinda makes me think that I am, in fact, as cute as I think I am.” Fujin grimaced and Seifer smirked and pressed a deft fingertip to a button on her uniform and corrected himself. “My tiny, adorable, badass girlfriend.”

“Better.” She agreed, deciding not to seize this moment to press him about this morning’s absence. Class was about to start, and she didn’t have the bandwidth to manage Seifer’s righteous anger at Garden, SeeD, and her. Better to wait until tonight when the external irritants were gone, and it was just the two of them.

“I knew you’d be easy to break, Sanada,” he chuckled lowly as he retreated to respectfully press his lips to her forehead, only for a moment so as not to push his luck. Seifer didn’t care about much lately, but he at least he seemed to care about keeping Fujin’s reputation as a hard-ass intact. Making out with a student in the hallway softened the image and wasn’t exactly appropriate ‘assistant instructor’ etiquette.

“So, what’s on the docket today …” He pivoted against the wall next to her and crossed his arms over his chest. “Some shit that I already know, or some other shit that I already know?”

“FIRST ONE,” she replied as a small smile snuck onto her own lips. Seifer exhaled with a whining groan and leaned his head against the wall in exasperation.

“I can’t be the only person who’s ever needed to repeat advanced paramagic field training for no reason. Someone else had to give feedback on how redundant and fucking boring it is.”

“It wouldn’t be much of a punishment if it was fun,” Fujin reasoned.

“Alright, wise-guy,” Seifer scowled and reached over to playfully tousle her hair. “Whose side are you on, eh?”

“Whatever side gets you here on time,” she glanced at her watch and then back to him. “Which you shockingly managed to do today.”
“Didn’t want to keep all my fans waiting,” he moved to crack his knuckles. “Especially Leonhart.”

“Here we go again …” Fujin groaned as she pushed away from the wall and took a step towards the classroom door, where other students—including the aforementioned Squall Leonhart—were beginning to trail in. “You realize you’re going to be with him all year, right?”

“So?” Seifer’s shoulders rose up in a defensive half-shrug as he tightened his crossed arms over his chest.

“So, leave it be.” She took another step backward, coaxing him away from the wall as the last few students filtered past them into the room. “At least under my watch.”

“S’not my fault the guy’s generally irritating,” Seifer stared at the open doorframe, his countenance shifting to reflect a fit of low, seething anger. “The way he sits. The way he breathes. Hyne, everywhere I go there he is. Like another fucking shadow I never asked for.”

“A temporary shadow. It’s only for the rest of the year,” Fujin reasoned, moving again and causing Seifer to reluctantly follow. “Once you pass your exam and you’re in the clear, we’ll add him to the top of ‘The List.’”

“Right,” Seifer rolled his eyes. “Once Cid lets me pass. That’ll be a cold day in Ifrit’s hell …”

“COME,” Fujin commanded with flitting fingers as she motioned him towards her. “INSTRUCTOR HERE SOON.” He groaned again and placed a hand low on her back as they made their way towards the classroom.

“This fucking sucks,” he exhaled as they edged closer. “Being with you is the only thing that makes it bearable.”

She was relieved to hear him say she brought him some comfort since his absences as of late paired with his touchy mood made her worry she’d been doing something wrong: that she’d embarrassed him in class somehow, wasn’t relinquishing control when she was back in the role of a subordinate on the Disciplinary Committee, or that there were still underlying issues with Raijin that hadn’t dissipated.

While they were still out of the line-of-sight, Fujin tugged Seifer’s arm to bring him to a halt and stretched upward on the tips of her toes to kiss him. She wouldn’t normally be so public with her private affection … but she understood how hard this was for him: being stuck with the burden of someone—or something—while you were just trying to go about your day and keep your head above water.

Seifer beamed with a triumphant, goofy smile and walked ahead of her into the room to keep up Fujin’s ruse of a low-profile. Everyone at Garden obviously knew that Seifer and the female member of the Posse were suddenly something of an item—most people speculated that they’d been together for years. But Fujin needed to compartmentalize things into neat, manageable boxes: her personal life kept separate from the professional. Seifer hated it, but wasn’t that what a good soldier should do?

“Good morning, Instructor Sanada,” an aged, gravelly voice interrupted Fujin’s thoughts.

“OH. MORNING, INSTRUCTOR AKI.” Fujin gave the old man a formal salute as he merely waved and meandered towards the classroom.

“Ready for another day of practice?” He paused to examine her raised hand, the length of his long white beard rising as his lips pursed curiously. “I see you healed up well from yesterday’s errant Fira spell.” The old instructor winced as he began to walk again. “We’ll let you train a more experienced
cadet today … give you a break from burning.”

“FAVORABLE SOLUTION,” Fujin nodded, dropping her salute and resisting the urge to lend an arm to the man as he feebly made his way past her. Aki was a well-respected instructor at Balamb Garden, but battles and time had worn down his joints so much that every movement seemed to pain him. He wasn’t in fit condition to train students in any physical capacity, and that was the very reason Fujin was assigned to his classroom. Aki was the brain, who lectured the class on all things elemental, and Fujin was the muscle who brought students to the training center to practice what they’d learned one-on-one. It was a tolerable arrangement—whenever Fujin pictured herself in SeeD, she didn’t imagine sitting behind a desk and pontificating about status effects and elemental junctions to a room of bored teenagers … at least she got to be outside.

“Ah … wait a moment,” Aki paused again, pivoting towards her slowly with one foot in the classroom. Fujin could see over his shoulder that the students were awkwardly sitting at attention waiting for him to enter … all but Seifer, who was ignoring Aki’s presence altogether typing something into his terminal. “Are you sure you aren’t too tired? I heard about some trouble last night. Something to do with a theft?”

“MINIMAL ISSUE, INSTRUCTOR. CAFETERIA FREEZER BANDIT,” Fujin confirmed. “DISCIPLINARY COMMITTEE ON THE CASE. WON’T INTERFERE WITH SCHEDULE.”

“Well, that’s good. Hope you, and ah … ah …” with his memory coming up short on the name, he motioned at Seifer instead as he ambled into the classroom, “well, I hope you and your team solve the case. Hmpf … thievery … the student responsible should be expelled.”

“Don’t worry, Aki—we’ll catch the guy. We found some evidence at the scene. A pair of men’s gloves,” Seifer piped up from the back of the room with a lilt of mischievousness in his voice. “A bunch of hot dogs were missing, and the gloves clearly belong to a martial arts cadet. We at least know the crime was poorly thought out, and that it was homoerotic in nature.” A low mummer of laughter erupted in the classroom.

“Homo—eh—what do you say, now?” The instructor half-repeated distractedly as he unpacked his briefcase and flipped through a notepad. “Yes, yes, very well.” Seifer shrugged innocently at Fujin and looked around to gauge how many of his peers were stifling giggles.

“Alright, quiet down now,” he instructed sternly, unsure of what the impetus of the laughter was and not caring in the slightest. “Today we’re going to revisit junctioning water elementals. Open your terminals to the junction index and we’ll get started.” Fujin surveyed the room, observing the slumping of many students’ shoulders. Seifer, on the other hand, threw his head back dramatically and glared at the ceiling.

“And ah … let’s see,” Aki’s hand fished for the attendance sheet. He pressed the bridge of his glasses up on his nose as he ran through the names. “Favell went yesterday, and ah … nearly started a forest fire … Mueller has the flu …” he muttered as his eyes ran down the list. “Leonhart. Squall Leonhart?” The instructor’s gaze lifted to survey his waiting pupils.

In the far back corner of the classroom, Squall perked upright ever so slightly at the calling of his name.

“Ah—there you are. Get your things. You’ll be training with instructor Sanada today.”

Squall looked to Fujin reluctantly and quirked a chestnut eyebrow, and then turned towards Seifer to do the same. Fujin—deeming all of her gut reactions inappropriate—only stared back and blinked.
The days since they’d returned to Garden weren’t exactly the best days Fujin ever lived. Menial patrols along the Balamb territory weren’t the grand adventures she’d been promised when she’d been told about the glory of SeeD. The Posse was also still living with the fact—and trying to live around the fact—that the silver member of the trio had an unstable force inside of her head. But Fujin would take a thousand boring patrols and would rather get burned a thousand times by one shitty student, over spending the day with Squall Leonhart. Not because she couldn’t tolerate him, but because she wasn’t sure she’d be able to tolerate Seifer in the aftermath. As it stood now, he was staring forward, his eyes unfocused, with the tendons along his jaw flexing from an angry clench. The shadow he never wanted, indeed …

Nothing to be done about it now—Fujin knew she’d have to train with Squall, eventually. Better to get him out of here before Seifer lost all self-control.

“GET THINGS,” she echoed Aki’s command hurriedly. “MEET ME AT TRAINING CENTER ENTRANCE IN 10 MINUTES.”

“… Sure, whatever.” Squall shrugged in the direction of Seifer’s reddening face, but not at anything in particular, and pressed his palms against his knees as he foisted himself from his chair. “See you in 10,” he blandly confirmed, as he strolled by her and out the door.

Fujin didn’t bother looking at Seifer again before she followed Squall out the door. There was no point—there’d be hell to pay one way or another, even though this wasn’t her choice. He’d act wounded, salty, or a little coarser towards her in general because she didn’t protest Aki’s demand in the slightest. It highlighted a difference between the old Cadet Fujin and the new SeeD Fujin that she wasn’t sure Seifer liked all that much—the need to be obedient to someone besides him.

Blinded by awkwardness and dread, she didn’t realize that she was directly on Squall’s tail until her footsteps fell apace with his. That eyebrow of his stayed quirked as the rounded the corner and headed to the elevator.

“… Do you need 10 minutes,” he inquired coolly as he pressed the button for the first floor, “or should we just head there together now.”

“A-AFFIRMATIVE,” Fujin stuttered and nodded too emphatically as the elevator doors opened. Squall’s brow lifted in surprise, but instead of commenting he only nodded in return and stepped into the elevator and settled against the back wall in silence. Fujin followed suit, equally as silent, the two of them only blinking as the buttons lit up with the passing floors.

Well, this was certainly going to be a riveting experience for the both of them.